

ODE TO BROOKLYN

> Text and Photos by
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Montreal travel writer Dominick Merle usually files reports on far-off exotic locations for Islamic Tourism Magazine. This time he stays a little closer to home, literally walking across a bridge to visit his old neighborhood.



View inside Brooklyn Bridge

جسر بروكلين من الداخل

Brooklyn: In returning to one's roots, there is often a single defining moment that lets you know your journey is complete, and mine came at the intersection of Montague and Clinton in Brooklyn Heights when I heard a heartwarming shout that almost brought tears to my eyes: "Hey! Get off the streets—you bum!" That greeting came from a passing motorist

to a pedestrian, and with a friendly wave and a smile to one another they were off on their separate ways.

For those not born here or familiar with Brooklynese, being called a bum is a term of endearment reserved for close friends, and sometimes even relatives qualify unless, of course, there has been some bad blood. Obviously, using it to greet

someone you do not know could cause some serious problems.

The exact origin of this tricky exchange is unclear, but back in the early 20th Century the beloved Brooklyn Dodgers were unofficially known as "Dem Wonderful Bums" with the nickname later shortened to simply "Dem Bums." They were and still are Brooklyn's all-time favorite bums. And to ▶

this day the very mention of the name Walter O'Malley, the owner who in 1957 moved the baseball team from Ebbets Field to greener pastures in Los Angeles, is ranked right down there with the likes of Hitler and Josef Stalin.

So in Brooklyn, one must earn the right and respect to be called a bum. That's what real friends are all about here. And for the first time in more years than I care to remember, I felt like a true bum again.

There are numerous statistics claiming that one of every seven Americans can trace their roots to Brooklyn. This was the first stop for the boatloads of immigrants arriving from Europe, simply because of the fact that there was plenty of land here—including farmland—whereas Manhattan real estate was already scarce and pricey. Brooklyn farmers fed the five boroughs at the time. Today the words Brooklyn and farmer seem like a mismatch.

I made my return here in grand style with my wife Susan, who was making her maiden voyage, by walking across the Brooklyn Bridge from Lower Manhattan, roughly a 45-minute stroll. Our agenda was arranged by Vintage New York Tours, and our guides, Mark Levy and his son, Matt, peppered their descriptions with eye-opening remarks like: "The East River is not a river." Mark went on to explain that it was actually a tidal strait and a part of the Hudson River, but of course that would ruin all those gangster movies about bodies being dumped in the East River.

The next big line came from Matt: "The first part of Brooklyn we will set foot on was originally called South Brooklyn, although it's actually North Brooklyn, but it's south of Manhattan and Manhattan always wanted to be the center of the universe and still does, so even today some people living in North Brooklyn think they're in South Brooklyn." That was clear enough.

But in fact, the first area under the bridge is known as DUMBO, an acronym for Down Under the Manhattan and Brooklyn Overpasses, and its real estate prices are fast approaching Manhattan numbers. Old abandoned warehouses and industries have been transformed into million dollar-a-bedroom condos. Brooklyn has become the in-place to live these days, and DUMBO is its most prestigious location.

After a stop at the newly-opened Brooklyn Tourist Office to pick up some maps and brochures, we began our walking tour and within a few minutes I heard that "Get off



Brooklyn Museum of Art

متحف بروكلين للفنون

the streets—you bum!" welcome home shout. Brooklyn doesn't pussy-foot around. Sometimes it whacks you right in the face, just like Cher did to Nicolas Cage in the movie Moonstruck which was filmed right here in Brooklyn Heights.

We walked to a park area between 4th and 5th avenues where Mark pointed to an old stone house in the distance and delivered another attention-grabber: "If it wasn't for what happened there back in 1776 during the Battle of Brooklyn, we'd probably all be speaking Canadian today."

"We're from Montreal, Mark," I responded. "Right, then you probably already know about it," he responded.

Up until then, had someone mentioned the Battle of Brooklyn to me I would have equated it with a showdown between mob families or rival street gangs over turf. But as Mark explained, an important battle did take place here between George Washington's troops and the British Army, and while the Brits won the battle primarily because of their superior manpower (roughly 30,000 troops against 3,000), the heroism shown by some 400 members of a Maryland Brigade hardened the resolve of the American Army.

The British troops had occupied the old stone house when the Marylanders kept attacking against insurmountable odds. Half the Marylanders lost their lives in the

battle, but their valor was like a victory call for the rest of Washington's army.

The stone house was demolished in 1890, and then rebuilt with many of the original stones in 1930. It is open to the public today and is officially known as The Old Stone House, highlighting Brooklyn's largely unknown contribution to the Revolutionary War. We caught a bus to the Park Slope area, Brooklyn's most scenic neighborhood with rows of beautifully preserved brownstones. This is also the home of Prospect Park and its Grand Army Plaza featuring the magnificent Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Arch built in 1902 to honor Civil War heroes. The arch looks every bit as impressive as any of the imposing gates and arches in Europe. Within the park area itself are the Brooklyn Museum, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Prospect Park Zoo, all first-rate attractions.

Then we headed south (the real south), using both subways or buses, passing through a number of other districts on our way to Coney Island, the last train stop. We stopped in East Flatbush, known as Little Caribbean because of its immigrant island population, and then Flatbush itself, made famous by all those movies over the years. Borough Park is home to the largest Orthodox Jewish population in the United States, and Bensonhurst, the next stop, is Brooklyn's Little Italy. ▶

Coney Island was our final subway stop, and while the amusement park is merely a shell of its glory years, the district itself is alive and well. We took a bus to nearby Brighton Beach, commonly referred to as Little Odessa since it is the largest Russian community in the United States. There are shopping areas there where you will find no English signs or hear any English spoken.

Another short bus ride brought us to Sheepshead Bay, where my grandparents first settled after arriving from Italy at the turn of the 20th Century. After a fish dinner, we bused back to Coney Island for our subway ride back to Manhattan, and said our goodbyes to the Levys.

On the subway, I kept thinking about that famous car scene between Marlon Brando and Rod Steiger in "On the Waterfront" when Brando said, "I could have been a contender, instead of a bum, which is what I am." I turned to my wife out of the blue and said, "I could have been a bum, instead of a travel writer, which is what I am." I'm sure she had no idea what I was talking about.

We spent our final two days in the Central Park area at Le Parker Meridien Hotel on W. 57th St. The hotel had a formidable triple-treat going for it: The view from our room overlooked Central Park. The lobby restaurant, Norma's, has suddenly become known as the city's hottest and best

breakfast spot. The French bistro Seppi's on the 56th Street side of the hotel, is quietly gaining its own reputation because of the innovativeness and techniques of its chef-owner Claude A. Solliard.

The hotel itself has just undergone a \$60-million facelift, including free high-speed internet access in each of the 730 rooms, and was at total occupancy while we were there, a large number of the guests European.

The Norma's success story has been spectacular, thanks largely to a few rave reviews in some of the city newspapers. The restaurant is now in such demand for breakfast that it serves it until 3 p.m. Last night; time to splurge. We made reservations at San Domenico, one of the city's finest Italian restaurants at one of the city's best locations, Central Park South, with a window view of both the park and the magnificent Time-Warner Building, where some condos go for about \$20 million.

The owner Tony May and his daughter Marisa are at the restaurant most evenings, chatting with the guests in the elegant but warm dining area. Chef Odette Fada has been making kitchen music there for about eight years. Appetizers ranged from \$15 to \$25 with main meals from about \$25 to \$40, and all dishes we sampled were delicious. Some of the main courses

seemed a bit overpriced, but those window views are expensive backdrops. Dinner for two can run from \$200 up. It being our last night, I left a \$30 tip. I wouldn't want them thinking I was a bum, would I? ■

(Dominick A. Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal, and a self-confessed Bum for life.)

SEVEN THINGS TO DO (OR NOT) IN BROOKLYN

1. Have a slice of traditional New York pizza, so thin you can eat three.
2. Complain about the people moving in from Manhattan who are driving up housing prices.
3. Go to Coney Island and talk about how fantastic it used to be.
4. Eat a Nathan's Famous Hot Dog and pretend it's still great.
5. Exaggerate about the number of famous people born here. Toss in anyone you want.
6. Don't act hoity-toity or put on airs. People will think you're daffy.
7. Never, ever go to New Jersey, except to visit close relatives you haven't seen in at least 3 years.



The boardwalk at Brighton Beach, known as «Little Odessa».

«أوديسيا الصغيرة» في شاطئ برابتون