



## A Walk on the wild side of Manhattan

### Up hills, over rocks to unique views of Big Apple

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I re-read the e-mail again:

*I'm leading a Manhattan Bushwhack up and down the hills of northern Manhattan Saturday. Proper hiking books and gear is essential. Bring food and water. Be prepared for some serious rock scrambling. - **Graeme, Your AMC hiking leader***

Yeah, sure, I thought - hiking boots and rock scrambling in Manhattan? No way. And bushwhacking? It had to be a joke.

Yet maybe not, because the AMC - the Appalachian Mountain Club - has about 20 hikes each weekend on terrain ranging from solid pavement to boulder fields. And among its many volunteer hiking leaders, there is no one wackier than Graeme Birchall, who would be just the kind of person to lead a bushwhack.

So I pulled on my hiking boots and took the subway to the A train's last stop in Manhattan, Inwood. This is the most northern neighborhood on the island and a place I'd never been to.

I ascended the subway steps at 207th Street and Broadway, where a group of hikers were waiting on the corner, most wearing bulging backpacks. What were they carrying? Tents?

I had only a sandwich and water bottle in my small fanny pack.

Graeme is a New Zealand transplant who, ever since he arrived here a decade ago, has led some of the toughest hikes the club offers, including the Manhattan Bushwhack, which he does only once a year.

Fair-skinned with flyaway reddish hair, he's 6 feet tall and looks much younger than his 48 years. He reminds me of a tall elf.

"Ready for the bushwhack?" he asked. There were 20 of us.

"Of course," he added, "these days you have to be politically correct. So we won't whack bushes; we'll shuffle our way through northern Manhattan."

He turned and loped along the sidewalk like a gazelle. We trudged behind him in our heavy hiking boots.

#### **Hill, caves, boulders**

At 204th Street, he stopped in front of a two-story white clapboard house. "This is the Dyckman House," he said. "It was built in 1783 and is the only Dutch Colonial farmhouse remaining in Manhattan. William Dyckman's family sold it and moved to a more fashionable mansion on

Broadway."

I moved toward the entrance and stared at the farmhouse, amazed I'd never even heard of it after 32 years of living in the city.

"OK, let's move on. We've got a full schedule," Graeme announced.

"How come you know so much American history?" I asked, racing to keep up with him.

"When you come from a small country, you have to steal other people's history," he said, grinning.

We walked another couple of blocks, then turned the corner to a tree-covered hill, at least five stories high. A paved path ran up its center.

"This is Inwood Hill Park, the last natural forest in Manhattan," Graeme said. With his Kiwi accent, he pronounced park more like pack. "Here's our first bushwhack. Don't take the path or you're off the hike."

I made my own route up the steep hill, stepping over fallen tree trunks and around large stones. At the summit was a perfect view of a salt marsh, the George Washington Bridge and the Palisades of New Jersey. I had just sat down on a rock to admire the unexpected panorama when Graeme called out: "Let's go. Look for the Indian caves on the way down. The Lenape Indians used to live in them."

I've hiked down some pretty nasty hills, and this rated right up there with the worst. Midway down were two caves that looked as though they could hold, at most, a couple of washing machines.

"You call these caves?" someone asked.

"What do you want?" Graeme replied. "This is Manhattan."

At the bottom of the hill was a large boulder. "This is Shorakapok Rock," Graeme said. "Shorakapok means the edge of the river." He pointed to a metal plaque in the stone. "This says that in 1626, Peter Minuet purchased Manhattan from the Indians. But did it really happen here? Probably not."

He shrugged. "I find that Americans constantly package history in a neat, patriotic way."

He led us down two more hills to a dirt footpath that ran parallel to the Hudson River. We passed a small wooden building with a sign: The Inwood Canoe Club.

"This is the only private canoe club left in Manhattan," Graeme said. "There used to be dozens of these exclusive social clubs in the '30s, then they were wiped out in a hurricane, and Robert Moses wouldn't let them be rebuilt because he didn't feel that was a good use for public land."

Moses was the legendary head of the city's Parks Department, who, from the 1930s through the 1950s transformed the urban landscape of New York City.

The path ended abruptly in a boulder field that ran along the edge of the river. "OK, this is the hardest part," Graeme said. "We have to walk on these rocks for about 500 feet. Be grateful it's low tide."

"Isn't there an easier route?" came a quivering voice.

"Sorry," said Graeme. "This is the only way to get to the George Washington Bridge on foot."

The rocks were huge and slippery. I gingerly picked my way from one to the next, looking for safe footings.

After what seemed like a mile, we arrived above the George Washington Bridge. Below was the Little Red Lighthouse.

"Now this lighthouse is totally unnecessary," said Graeme. "They put it there just before the bridge went up, but there's a rather nice children's book about it, *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge*."

Onward we walked, climbing up to Bennett Park, at 265 feet the highest natural point in Manhattan.

### **Grand views of river**

We made our way north again. At 190th Street and Fort Washington Avenue, Graeme led us toward the St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Shrine, a building so secular-looking it could have been a school. We were able to go inside the chapel to see the remains of Mother Cabrini, the first American woman to achieve sainthood. But a few minutes later, Graeme hustled us off to nearby Fort Tryon Park.

"Tryon was the last English Colonial governor of New York during the Revolutionary War," Graeme noted.

We sat on benches eating lunch in the beautiful gardens of Fort Tryon and enjoyed drop-dead views overlooking the Hudson. That's when I saw what all the big backpacks were about: These hikers were serious eaters and had brought large thermoses full of coffee, an assortment of sandwiches, snacks and huge packages of cookies.

But it wasn't long before Graeme shoved the remains of his lunch into his fanny pack and said, "We're out of here." And we were off again, hustling to put our food away, bushwhacking down more rocks to Dyckman Street.

We weren't on concrete for long. Up we went again, this time to Highbridge Park, whose summit offered sweeping views of the Harlem River. We walked along the old Croton Aqueduct, which once carried water down to 42nd Street.

The trail was unkempt and littered with garbage, and a number of people were living in makeshift shelters just off the trail. But no one bothered us.

At 162nd Street and Edgecombe Avenue, we headed back on the street to Sylvan Terrace, a single block of wooden rowhouses built in 1765 and set on a picturesque cobblestone street.

"This particular block hasn't changed in 100 years," Graeme said. It was so beautiful, it almost looked like a movie set.

Half a block away was the Morris-Jumel Mansion, a large white Colonial house that is Manhattan's oldest remaining residential structure.

"At one time, it was even George Washington's headquarters," Graeme explained.

We entered the mansion and were given a tour of the rooms, which were filled with original furniture, rugs and drapes. The dining room table and chairs sat on a cloth, which was called a "crumb cloth," whose purpose was to catch the food crumbs. It had been painted with many layers of paint and linseed oil, and we were told it was the world's first linoleum.

I could have easily stayed at Morris-Jumel another hour, but Graeme was already charging toward the exit.

### **History right at home**

At the bottom of Highbridge Park across from 155th Street and Broadway, Graeme pointed out a museum - the Hispanic Society of America.

None of us had ever heard of this museum, and we were amazed to find that inside it was filled with El Grecos, Goyas, priceless sculptures, ceramics and ancient maps. This time it wasn't Graeme who hustled us out - the museum was closing.

Next stop: Hamilton Grange on Convent Street, the home of Alexander Hamilton.

"Hamilton was an early suburbanite," Graeme said, explaining that Hamilton was not only aide-de-camp to George Washington but was the first secretary of the Treasury in 1789, a lawyer and the founder of the New York Post. He died in 1804 after a duel with Aaron Burr.

"This was the only home Hamilton ever owned," Graeme added. But the house isn't at its original location - it was moved here. And it's going to be moved again to a park, he said, when funding is available. "They just keep moving it."

It was dark by the time we left Hamilton Grange and made our way to the end of the "trailhead": Columbia University on 120th Street where, Graeme pointed out, the Battle of Harlem Heights was fought in 1776. I'd transferred to Columbia for my senior year of college, yet I was clueless about this battle.

Later, on the subway home, I thought about all the history of Manhattan that was right in front of me, squeezed between the high-rises and skyscrapers. I had never taken the time to look. There was the brownstone on West 10th Street where Mark Twain lived, the 200-year-old Ear Inn in Soho, the bar on the lower east side where Harry Houdini's handcuffs hung, and the Washington Square Park Mews with its carriage houses set in a cobblestone courtyard.

All I had to do was get off the concrete path and I could bushwhack everywhere in Manhattan.

### **WHEN YOU GO**

Getting There: Amtrak (800-872-7245; [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)) offers service from Baltimore to Penn Station in New York City. Otherwise, it's about a three-hour drive to Manhattan.

Manhattan Bushwhack: This Appalachian Mountain Club hike is offered only once a year, by reservation only. But if you want to try it yourself, take the A train subway to the last stop, Inwood/207th Street. Then follow the itinerary in the article. For more information about AMC's Manhattan Bushwhack, call AMC's New York-North Jersey chapter: 212-986-1430; [www.amc-ny.org](http://www.amc-ny.org).

Other AMC Hikes: There are about 20 AMC hikes each weekend, all rated by pace, terrain and mileage. While non-AMC members from novice to experienced hikers are welcome, all participants are expected to be in good shape physically. Hike distances range from 2 miles to more than 12 miles, on terrain from sidewalks to extremely steep and rocky terrain.

For more information about the hiking group and a schedule of its activities, visit the Web site [www.amc-ny.org](http://www.amc-ny.org).

For more information on some of the sites listed in the story:

- Saint Cabrini Chapel, 701 Fort Washington Ave., Fort Washington Heights: 212-923-3536; [www.cabrinishrineny.org](http://www.cabrinishrineny.org)
- Morris-Jumel Mansion, 65 Jumel Terrace, 160th Street and Nicholas Avenue: 212-923-8008; [www.morrisjumel.org](http://www.morrisjumel.org)
- Hispanic Society of America, 613 W. 155th St.: 212-926-2234; [www.hispanicsociety.org](http://www.hispanicsociety.org)
- Hamilton Grange National Memorial, 287 Convent St.: 212-283-5154; [www.nps.gov/hagr](http://www.nps.gov/hagr)

#### Information

For general information about attractions, dining and lodging in Manhattan, contact the New York Visitor's Bureau: 800-692-8474: [www.nycvisit.com](http://www.nycvisit.com).

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