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# New York City

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## Hidden Midtown Manhattan

Explore these little-known gems in New York City

by Mark Orwoll, **AARP** | [Comments: 1](#)



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Broadway, Herald Square, Rockefeller Center. No parcel of real estate on earth is more paved over, built up or trampled down. Yet despite its skyscrapers and broad avenues, Midtown Manhattan has scores of hidden corners unknown even to most New Yorkers. With a little sleuthing, even a casual visitor can find these little-known oddities in the heart of New York City.

### Mysteries of Grand Central Terminal

Grand Central is far more than a mere transportation hub. Take the Whispering Gallery. On the lower level is a vaulted tile ceiling that allows one person, facing a corner, to speak to another person standing in the opposite corner, while someone standing between them hears nothing.

The thump of a tennis ball coming from the fourth floor leads to what may be the most unusual athletic venue anywhere: the Vanderbilt Tennis Club, hidden from view of the terminal's thousands of daily commuters, but with massive windows looking on to 42nd Street.

In the northwest corner of the main concourse's ceiling is a black smudge (almost no one notices it) left there purposely during the terminal's comprehensive restoration in the 1990s to show how filthy the ceiling had been. Oh, and that celestial mural of the zodiac overhead? It's painted backward. No one knows why.

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### Manhattan, naturally

Three blocks east of Grand Central, the Ford Foundation boasts a full-height 12-story atrium filled with a lush — and wholly unexpected — semitropical garden and meditative pool that's open to the public but unseen by millions of passersby. (The building reopens in fall 2018 following renovations.)

As you meander, look for jewel-like "vest pocket" green spaces, like Greenacre Park, at 217 East 51st St. Unnoticed by most people except neighbors and nearby office workers, the oasis is full of climbing vines, flowers and a 25-foot-tall waterfall.

Rarely will you find anything like the waterfall in another pocket park, behind Sixth Avenue's McGraw-Hill Building. Via a clear plastic tunnel, visitors can walk "through" a crashing torrent without getting wet, as thousands of Midtown visitors go about their business nearby, unaware of what they're missing.

### Stroll from here to there

Between Sixth and Seventh avenues and running from West 51st Street to West 57th Street, an obscure pedestrian walkway throws the area's naming conventions out the window. It's called 6½ Avenue (yes, it's official, complete with a Department of Transportation street sign, but not a Potter wizard in sight).

Not far away is a little-known underground passage running between 1251 Sixth Ave. and 745 Seventh Ave., a contemplative modernist-minimalist corridor with multicolored backlit wall panels, connecting Times Square with Rockefeller Center. It's an insider's way to avoid bad weather while walking crosstown.

There are 40 Broadway theaters scattered among 20 Times Square blocks. Where's yours? A 28-foot-long map of theater locations is hidden in plain sight, embedded in a pedestrian plaza at Broadway and West 46th Street, all but overlooked by the hordes standing in line at the adjacent TKTS ticket booth.

[Greenacre Park](#)  
RICHARD LEVINE/ALAMY

### Magic in the air

In the shadow of Macy's is Tannen's, New York's oldest magic shop, dating to 1925. Amateur and professional magicians venture to the sixth floor of an otherwise unremarkable office building for coin magic, dice tricks, rope effects and more.

Nearby, tucked into the fourth floor of a loft building in Midtown's Garment District, is a one-room museum dedicated to Houdini, the celebrated illusionist and escape artist. Not only can you see some of the great man's possessions, such as handcuffs and a straitjacket, but you also can buy magic tricks at the counter.

### Little known and unclassifiable

Another oddity is on the second floor of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Building on West 44th Street: the Mossman Lock Collection. With more than 370 rare and strangely beautiful locks, keys and related tools, the collection forms one of the largest holdings of bank and vault locks anywhere. And hardly anyone knows it's there.

Checkmate! A three-story-tall chessboard that's said to be the world's largest is mounted to a wall in an out-of-the-way plaza at 767 Third Ave., out of sight of the traffic on the avenue. A worker moves the pieces weekly, following memorable chess matches of the past, and a flag indicates which side has the next move.

### Wait — is that a restaurant?

If you're feeling peckish while scouring Midtown's hidden treasures, you can order a lunch of *pollo guisado* at El Sabroso, a Central American cafe concealed inside a loading dock on West 37th Street.

Who said dining and shopping don't go together? Unlike most New Yorkers, the ladies who lunch know all about the upscale BG Restaurant on the seventh floor of Bergdorf Goodman, with views of Central Park. Skip the resort wear on the ground floor and head upstairs for ahi tuna tacos and coconut-crusted crab cakes. Or go below decks to the basement level of the renowned Macy's, where venturesome guests of the Chef Street food hall dine among racks of discount clothing.

While at Macy's, there's one more Midtown obscurity to note: the old wooden escalators. While most shoppers prefer the elevators, nostalgists head to the sixth floor to ride the ancient oak-and-ash escalators. The rolling, clattering, old-fashioned noise they make is music to fans of hidden Manhattan.

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