

Historical Walking Tours of New York City: The Good, Bad, and Amazing!

By Nomadic Matt | Published June 16th, 2014



New York City has many walking tour companies—from free tours to food tours to neighborhood tours to expensive private walking tours. This place has it all, and with so much history and culture and so many nationalities represented here, it's not really that surprising. New York seems to have a walking tour for everyone's needs.

Now, I love walking tours. I think they're a wonderful way to see a city, get your bearings, and learn about where you are from a local expert's point of view. After all, why visit a place if you don't want to learn about it?

Over the last month, I decided to learn about [my new home](#) and took tours with most of the big historical walking tour companies (food tours are for another post) in order to find the best. My feet still hurt, but I learned a lot about NYC history.

Here's a review of them all:

Free Tours by Foot

These free tours are offered throughout the city by volunteer guides, with multiple tours offered each day. You can find a wide range of tours (historical, food, cultural) that take you all over the city. The company really shines in its diverse catalog—there's a neighborhood or

tour type for everyone. Most of the guides are actors and other long-time locals. They add a bit of quirky history to each tour, and since there's no set script, each tour differs based on your guide. (My SoHo tour guide waxed poetically on gentrification.) I've taken a number of their tours and wouldn't hesitate to take more. You're required to sign up for tours in advance, but unless it's a major holiday, the tours are rarely full and you can just show up.

Context Travel



One of my favorite walking tour companies, Context runs tours throughout the world, and I mention them on this website often. They offer a lot of tours in NYC, and I've taken three of them. Most recently, I took the Brooklyn walk, which taught me a lot about Brooklyn and the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. I'm also a big fan of their lower Manhattan historical walk. If you want really intellectual and educational tours, this is the company to choose.

They aren't the cheapest tour company in the city (tours run \$70 per person), but luckily, you can use the code "nomadicmatt" to get 10% off.

Walks of New York



The folks who brought you Walks of Italy now run NYC tours and use NYC-based guides. I love both their Italy tours and their NYC tours. I went on their Met tour (amazing), which was hours of educational fun. They're just starting up in NYC and, as a result, have limited offerings, but their tours provide access that others can't. They're developing tours with super chef Mario Batali and backstage Broadway tours. I highly recommend all their offerings—the folks behind them really know what they're doing.

Tours range \$35–50 per person, and you can get 10% off with the code “NOMADIC10.”

Big Apple Greeter

Big Apple Greeter was founded in 1992 and connects visitors with local residents who show them around their neighborhood for a day. These aren't professional guides, just locals showing you their favorite spots. I haven't taken a tour with this company in many years, but the concept is still spot on and it's something I highly recommend first-time visitors do. Demand is high, so it's best to fill out the request form at least four weeks before your arrival.

Grand Central Neighborhood Tour



This is a free tour of Grand Central Terminal highlighting the architectural history of the building and surrounding area. It's offered Friday at 12:30 and lasts for 90 minutes. Grand Central has such an important presence in NYC history that I highly recommend taking this tour. And when you're finished, head to the swanky Campbell Apartment for a drink (dress nice, though!).

Central Park Conservancy Tour

Ever wanted to know about the flora and fauna of Central Park? Well, now you can. Several free tours highlight the various features of the park. Not only do you get to walk around the park on a beautiful day, but you learn about what you're looking at too! The tours are free—you just need to show up—and last under two hours.

The Village Alliance



Every Saturday in the summer, the Village Alliance offers free walking tours of Greenwich Village. The guides focus on the history and social culture of the area, so you get a lot of information on the bohemian art scene, food, and gentrification. It lasts only 90 minutes, and all you have to do is show up. It's a unique and very informative tour.

Big Onion Walking Tours

This is one of the biggest walking tour companies in New York. Using Ph.D. candidates as tour guides, this company runs about 30 tours on varying days each month. I took the Prohibition walking tour. I liked my guide, and she provided a lot of historical information, but much of it wasn't directly related to prohibition. While that was a personal bummer ([I'm a sucker for anything Jazz Age!](#)), I still really liked the tour and would recommend the company. Tours are only \$20, making them one of the cheaper companies in the city.

The Wall Street Experience

Started by former brokers, this Wall Street tour is dubbed one of the best in the city... and I'm not sure why. I was really excited to take their famed Wall Street Crisis tour but found it just awful. I mean, wow, was it bad! They bill this as an insider's tour on the financial crisis (guides are ex-stockbrokers), but in reality, it's just poorly explained recent history that could be run better by anyone who's spent a few minutes reading a book on the topic or watching CNN.