NEW YORK - She pouts, and looks into the distance. The photographer clicks away. Behind her, the colourful wall mural showcases the cultural smorgasbord of Harlem.

Above her, the tickertape display streams: "Black Lives Matter."

"You are such a pro. Can I take a shot too?" I ask, using my well-honed icebreaker. She answers with a broad smile.

New York is about its people. Yes, its skyscrapers offer jaw-dropping views, its Broadway shows are legendary and its multiple art galleries make me wonder why, despite being left-handed and supposedly creative, my sketches stop at Batman and Ultraman.

New York's heady brew of culture and its huge diversity make it one of the world's greatest cities. After five visits, I am still exploring and discovering it afresh.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought the city to a halt, but it has reinvented and reawakened with a bang. Here are the new, quintessential things to do on your Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL) trip to the Big Apple.

1. Life at the top

Most tourists make the pilgrimage to amazing skyscrapers - The Edge, Top of the Rock, One World Observatory and more - for that all-important selfie and to admire Manhattan's incomparable panorama.

But the Summit One Vanderbilt, which opened on Oct 21, is a stunner that takes it to another level.

I am invited for a media preview in early September and zoom up 300m - Marina Bay Sands is about 200m - to its observation lounge in 40 seconds.

As a three-part surreal spectacle, the first stage starts with fully mirrored floors, walls and glass ceilings that play tricks on the eyes, creating an "Alice in Wonderland" sensation. The cocoon of reflections conveys a bewildering infinite vision of space.

Next, visitors "float on air" by standing on glass boxes that protrude from the sides of the building.

Peering down, I see the Manhattan traffic weaving around like tiny ants. And I am enveloped by endless towers that seemingly jostle for space like pencils in a holder.

At the final stage, visitors transfer to another glass-box lift sliding up the edge of the building. Gasps and cold sweat are guaranteed.

Pro tip: For women, this is the last place in the world to wear a skirt. The mirrors will not respect modesty. No heels are allowed and visitors wear soft slip-ons over their shoes.

Also, take along a jacket as the winds are chilly at the top.

Check its website for details and book the sunset time slot. I wager my last dollar that this attraction will be a big hit.

2. Visit boroughs for the real New York

Harlem has a storied past with a rich heritage. Gentrification of the area has bought changes but it remains the epitome of Afro-American culture. PHOTO: JOHN TAN

Harlem, a melting pot of culture, has a big personality and is New York's most-storied neighbourhood.

I decide to up the ante by taking the subway there and wander through its busy sidewalks, lined with African and Caribbean traders selling aphrodisiac drinks in plastic bottles, Jamaican knitted hats, metre-tall carved wooden giraffes, fashion knock-offs and exotic oils.

"I got the lotion for people in motion," coos a peddler who sells shea butter, an African skin lotion.

This is the centre of African-American culture and I head to the landmark Apollo Theatre "where stars are born and legends made".

Its legendary Amateur Night was the precursor of American Idol. When the crowd hisses during the act, a man appears with a broom to sweep the performer off the stage.

But many world-famous artistes got their lucky break here, including Michael Jackson, James Brown, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross, Sammy Davis Junior and Aretha Franklin.

Pro tip: Alight at 125th Street Station and walk east along the 125th, the most important commercial street of Harlem. Enjoy the wall murals, sneak photos of the locals and savour street food.

And do stop by the Apollo Theatre. You cannot miss the creamy neo-classical building.

Then, turn right at Malcolm X Boulevard, head south and hop into the nearest subway station if you are tired. You will be in the downtown hub of Columbus Circle and Central Park within 20 minutes.

Note that most vendors pack up for the day by sunset and that is when you should be on your way.

3. Brooklyn's yummy bites

New York is a culinary capital with 64 Michelin-starred restaurants (Singapore has 48).

"My wife and I spend our weekends exploring parks and, more importantly, places to eat," says Mr David Tan, the Singapore Airlines station manager based in New York.

He eggs me on to try his favourite Zimbabwe restaurant. He has a wide repertoire of favourites for sure, from the three-Michelin-starred Eleven Madison Park to Mexican franchise chain Chipotle.

Not wanting to dine solo over a two-hour degustation meal, I go for local comfort food instead.

For three days, I check out the top New York-style pizzas, trying to rekindle my memories of Naples - the birthplace of pizza, where I had queued for three hours for heavenly bites of a margherita, bathed in fresh mozzarella cheese and San Marzano tomatoes.

Sadly, I have to return to Naples.

But I find a foodie haven in Williamsburg, a Brooklyn neighbourhood.

Previously filled with derelict warehouses and factories, the drug-dealer hangout has transformed into a vibrant hipster-hood, with energetic art and music scenes framed by blocks of eateries.

Even Apple has a cavernous industrial-chic store there - a nod to its cool, hip neighbourhood.

Pro tip: Head to Sweet Chick for its soulful Nashville fried chicken. Crunchy on the outside but juicy inside, it comes with vanilla-glazed waffles. And save space for the superlative cakes at Martha's Country Bakery.

Again, I take a 20-minute subway ride from downtown Manhattan to Bedford Station - the heart of Williamsburg.

Undeterred by the movies I have watched, I even take a late-night subway train back - though I am on high alert and keep a safe distance from seemingly unsavoury characters.

If you are in the area early, combine it with a visit to the Instagram hot spot at the corner of Washington Street and Water Street.

Here, the Manhattan Bridge rises dramatically before your eyes, playing peekaboo through red-bricked buildings. So quintessentially New York.

In Brooklyn's neighbourhood, the Manhattan Bridge looms gigantically in the background, slicing through the red bricked buildings. PHOTO: JOHN TAN

4. A bird's eye view

If you have only one helicopter sightseeing tour in your life, it has to be the copter ride over Manhattan. Absolutely stunning, the ride takes you over an endless stretch of glittering buildings, waterways, parks and, of course, the Statue of Liberty.

Watch out for special events such as the New Year's Eve Countdown. I choose the special annual 9/11 ride - costing about US$400 (S$540) - which showcases the Tribute In Light memorial. This illuminated memorial projects 88 vertical searchlights into the night sky. For more information, go to the flyNYON website.

Pro tip: Go for the 30-minute ride during the popular sunset-hours and opt for the doors-off experience to eliminate photos with smudged windows.

Better still, pay extra to secure a side seat, as a sandwiched middle seat is a let-down. Check the weather before booking and pray it does not change on your flight day.

5. Luxe stay for pampering

The first overseas stay after a 18-month travel hiatus calls for a classy, celebratory splash at the Park Hyatt New York. PHOTO: JOHN TAN

With the reopening of New York, tourists are returning in droves.

Times Square, with its theatres, nightlife and throngs of mask-less people, buzzes non-stop.

For a quieter respite, choose a hotel two or three blocks northwards from Times Square or a block away from busy 7th Avenue.

After 11 pandemic staycations in Singapore, I want a celebratory first night outside Singapore. So, I check into the classy Park Hyatt New York, a block away from Central Park, and take an afternoon run to burn off the jet lag.

I redeem a free stay worth $1,500 at the luxury property. And the icing on the cake: I get a double upgrade to a larger suite, due to my membership status. Throw in the butler trolley breakfast service, Italian marbled bathrooms, cult-status Peloton bikes - and I do not want to check out.

Pro tip: In pandemic times, global hotel brands are keen to retain their loyal members. Tier membership requirements are reduced, making it much easier to attain top status. And given that business travel has not returned in force, leisure travellers get the rapt attention of hotel staff.

Focus on a few global brands, boost your membership status and take advantage of generous offers. Redeem your awards especially if the rates are jacked up.

6. Outdoorsy side trips

When you tire of Manhattan's neon lights, rent a car and, in two hours, you can be traipsing around the 55 vineyards of Long Island.

Gawk at the stately summer beach homes of the wealthy in The Hamptons - where old-money families of the Hearst, Rothschild and Rockefeller empires mingle with newly minted Wall Street traders who ride a helicopter to downtown Manhattan for work.

Indulge in delicious, soft crab cakes that are each sized like a steak. And do not forget the cocktail people must sip once in their lives - the Long Island Ice Tea - which was first crafted there.

Pro tip: I pick the newly renovated Hyatt Place Long Island, East End for quick access to the vineyards of the North Fork, the charming port towns of South Fork and the romantic, wind-swept Atlantic Ocean hamlet of Montauk.

In wealthy Long Island, diners take a boat ride out to a hip Caribbean-style restaurant. PHOTO: JOHN TAN

Ask for the higher floors with a marina view when booking your room. I spend a few mornings just gazing out the window, losing track of time. Free hot breakfast and complimentary parking are a plus as well.

For shopaholics, the hotel is a 10-minute drive from the popular Tanger Outlets Riverhead, which has some 110 big-brand stores.

A stealth-looking super yacht berthed next to the old moneyed yachts in Long Island's Hampton. PHOTO: JOHN TAN

Do top up your fuel before you enter Long Island, where the heavily taxed petrol can cost 40 per cent higher than in New York City.

New York, a global business hub, is never cheap. It costs US$30 an hour for off-street parking - that is six times Singapore's top rate at Marina Bay Sands. A 20-minute taxi ride from Williamsburg back to downtown Manhattan, plus tips and toll charges, will cost more than a decent dinner.

That is why I happily swipe my subway card for a flat US$2.75 fare and learn to deal with the smell of one of the world's largest rapid transit systems. And divert the money towards a hotel stay with butler service.

Travel tips

For travellers from Singapore venturing into the United States soon, here is what you need to know:

A pre-departure Covid-19 test with a negative result is a must. The test must be taken within a 72-hour window prior to the flight departure. The less expensive, 10-minute Rapid Antigen Test (ART) is accepted.

All travellers flying into the US must fill up a Health Attestation Form, with a hard copy to be submitted to the airline during the check-in process. Go to this website.

Upon arrival in the US, I am not asked for my Covid-19 vaccination status and test results, but am grilled with great interest about my eight-month trip.

Print all travel bookings - such as return tickets, tours, hotels and car rentals - to verify that you are a bona-fide traveller. A respectable hotel address and contact details are useful.

Covid-19 management mandates vary among the different states in America. In New York, vaccinated status is supposedly required for dining and entry to public events, but people are not checked zealously.

Mask-on mandates are required indoors, such as shops and buildings, and also on public transportation.

If you become unwell during the trip, do a Covid-19 test and self-isolate. The US system provides leeway on self-recovery, but policies vary among the states. For more information, go to this website.

For the return leg to Singapore, only Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL) flights will exempt passengers from quarantine upon arrival (more information at this website).

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

A negative result from a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test or ART performed by a trained professional overseas is required for returning passengers as part of the homecoming check-in. Such tests - which cost up to US$250 - can be done at the departing airport, even on a walk-in basis. Results are out within an hour.

If you test positive for Covid-19 during the pre-departure test, you will not be allowed to take the flight and must adhere to the guidelines of the local health authorities.