

Central Park: Oasis in the City

In the center of New York City's exciting buzz, Central Park is a quiet island, comprised of an area of natural woods, ponds, lakes, wildlife, and stretching 843 acres through Manhattan. The park's many appearances in movies and television have made it among the most visited and famous city parks in the world. Whether seeking a quiet spot to reflect or participate in one of the park's many activities, student group travelers will want to tour Central Park on their next visit to New York City.

Though much of the park looks natural, it has in fact been almost entirely landscaped, making it the first landscaped public park in the United States. Its construction was begun in 1857 by landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted and architect Calvert Vaux. The park has been a National Historic Landmark since 1963. In addition to its woody environment, Central Park features a zoo, Conservatory Garden, a wildlife sanctuary, outdoor amphitheater, and extensive walking tracks. The park is also an oasis for migrating birds, making it popular with bird watchers.

At the Central Park Zoo, just a few yards from 5th Avenue, 130 different species of animals are housed. A walk through the zoo's five-plus acres takes students through a variety of habitats that have been designed to recreate the natural environment of the animals. In the Polar Zone, students can visit with two of the zoo's most popular guests – polar bears Ida and Gus. A brilliant collection of tropical birds can be found in the Tropic Zone, as well as squirmy lizards and toads. Monkeys and Tamarins represent the primates of the tropics. California sea lions, pandas, otters, and swan geese are housed in the Temperate Territory.

A secluded oasis, the Conservatory Garden offers a fragrant respite from the hectic city. Students will find a myriad of plant life, from cultivated heirloom roses to Korean holly. The garden is divided into three sections: the North, or French Garden; the Central, or Italian Garden; and the South, or English Garden.

The summer home of the annual Shakespeare in the Park production is held at Delacorte Theater. During performances, audiences are treated to views of the lovely landscape that forms the backdrop to the stage, including Turtle Pond and the Belvedere Castle. The annual festival draws thousands to the open-air theater in the heart of the park.

One of the park's most popular attractions, the Carousel has been a fixture since 1871. The current carousel was discovered abandoned in an old trolley terminal on Coney Island. One of the country's largest merry-go-rounds, it features 58 hand-carved horses and two ornate chariots. Almost 250,000 visitors ride it annually.

The park's rich historical connections can be discovered around nearly every corner. On the east side of the park is The Obelisk, or Cleopatra's Needle, the oldest public monument in North America. At the northern end of the park is the Blockhouse, a fort from the War of 1812. In addition, the Great Lawn has been the site of famous events and performers. Pope John Paul II held mass on the lawn in 1995 and musical artists like Paul Simon, Elton John, and Bruce Springsteen have performed for thousands of admiring fans.

Dedicated in the memory of the famous Beatle, John Lennon, Strawberry Fields was created after he was fatally shot in 1980. The tear-shaped knoll, located on the west side of the park, was named after one of the Beatles' best-known songs, Strawberry Fields Forever. The memorial was opened in 1985 on Lennon's birthday. At the western apex of the garden, artisans have crafted a circular black and white mosaic emblem into the pavement, containing a starburst pattern and the word, "Imagine," the title of one of Lennon's most famous songs. The garden continues to be a pilgrimage site for students visiting New York City.

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About the Author

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