

The Running Life: Home Again

Making Transitions on the Run

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Though Maine will always be my home, I've recently begun to spend more time in New York City. My newly acquired dual citizenship provides some head-spinning contrasts, especially in my running life. In Maine I have an almost endless choice of nearby scenic routes that make my daily runs effortless. I have a longstanding posse of running buddies and a decade's worth of history in my town to support my habit and help me stay focused and committed to my training.

As much as I enjoy running in new places, figuring out when, where, and how to run in New York has been a challenge, wreaking havoc with my established routine. For a newcomer, navigating the city can be a major undertaking. Early forays from my apartment made me feel like I'd just fallen off the turnip truck. In the most familiar circumstances my sense of direction leaves much to be desired. Trying to suss the lay of the land in my Greenwich Village neighborhood, where Manhattan's orderly grid system of numbered streets and avenues goes horribly awry, has, more often than not, resulted in my getting hopelessly lost. Happily, the effect of this confusion has dispelled a time-honored cliché about New Yorkers. Don't let anyone tell you they're cold or unfriendly. When faced with a runner desperately consulting first street signs then a pocket-sized map, most locals I've encountered have been eager to offer directions, advice, and an occasional indulgent smile.

In an effort to ease my transition from country runner to city runner, I called Michael Gazaleh, founder of NYC Runs, a company that offers guided running tours through New York. Michael has an impressive knowledge of Manhattan's streets and parks from Harlem to the South Street Seaport, as well as an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the history and lore of the city. We chose a Sunday morning for our run, a time when traffic would have a minimal impact on our enjoyment of the day and my ability to take it all in.

Many of the streets in downtown Manhattan, especially in the Village, were originally established over cow paths, winding and meandering with little or no regard for order or logic. There are alleys, mews, courts, and lanes as well as roads and avenues to negotiate. Michael had a story or a bit of history to offer around every corner. I learned that Washington Square Park, just two blocks from my apartment, was once a potter's field where more than 15,000 people were buried. We ran past the White Horse Tavern, where Dylan Thomas, after a night of heavy drinking, collapsed and later died.

As compelling as his stories were, on that day I was more concerned about geography than history. The run with Michael gave me a feel, not only for my neighborhood, but also an idea of how I could put together challenging long runs. Less than a half mile from my apartment I found I could connect to a paved path that runs through the Hudson River Park along the West Side Highway. The path is uninterrupted by traffic from 72nd Street to Battery Park. I can find it without getting lost and enjoy incredible scenery, including Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

Though Michael and I stayed downtown, we talked about great places to run in Central Park and even farther uptown. I learned that a short ride on the subway will put me in a runner's paradise and will offer the hills conspicuously lacking from runs in my neighborhood.

Armed with a new confidence in my ability to negotiate my 'hood, I woke up early last Sunday, eager to set out on a long run. The day was mild and though the city streets were almost deserted, the path along the Hudson River was beginning to fill with bikers, runners, roller bladers, and walkers. After a couple of miles I found myself running at the same pace as a woman wearing a Grandma's Marathon shirt. She was one of the few runners who wasn't plugged into an MP3 player. Not certain of unofficial running etiquette in the city, I risked a cautious greeting, which started a long, animated chat.

I asked her about her T-shirt and we found out that we had run Grandma's the same year. It was her first and only marathon and my most recent one. It turned out that we stayed in the same hotel in rooms almost next door to each other. Even our bodies seemed to be in compatible states of disrepair, both of us nursing chronic back problems. She, too, was a new New Yorker, having moved to the city last year.

When we had finished, we met up with a group of runners in Battery Park. As the newbie, I was grilled about my running bona fides and sized up by my racing history. I was given suggestions for races and routes, the names of the closest running specialty store, local bakeries, and the best orthopedist, as well as the phone numbers of potential training partners. As we sat in the sun with the Statue of Liberty in the distance, I marveled at how one run could change my attitude about running in the city.

Running has a unique way of creating community; helping me find solid connections in the time it takes to run a few miles. It gives me a foundation on which to build relationships and the fuel to keep those relationships alive. And recently it has helped me find one more place to live the running life.

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