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WEEKEND IN NEW YORK | THE EAST RIVER

In Brooklyn, Sharing a River but Not Much Else



Robert Caplin for The New York Times

Brooklyn Bridge Park on the East River offers stretches of grass and views of the Manhattan skyline.

By SETH KUGEL

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THREE distinct and distinctly walkable neighborhoods line the Brooklyn waterfront under the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. But though they share the East River and the York Street stop on the F train, they couldn't be more different — Fulton Ferry is a tourist standard, Dumbo is an industrial area gentrified into low-key hipness, and Vinegar Hill is a quirkily decrepit charmer.

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At Fulton Ferry, a sliver of a neighborhood, double-decker sightseeing buses swing through, the New York Water Taxi stops, and the celebrated River Café (with two six-year-old stars from The Times's William Grimes) continues to attract crowds. The area is worth a visit, if for no other reason than to admire one of the best views of Manhattan from practically under the Brooklyn Bridge, and for a unique angle on the coolest of the New York City Waterfalls, four installations created by the artist Olafur Eliasson (up through Oct. 13).

Another curious sight is the perpetually endless line for Grimaldi's Pizzeria. On weekend evenings it can stretch down the block and around the corner into Fantasyland, the place you'd have to be to think any pizza is worth waiting this long for. There's a shorter line, also possibly not worth it, at the Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory, an old-fashioned shop housed in the old fireboat house, with traditional flavors that stress creaminess, not blow-you-away flavor. And of course, there's Weekend in New York favorite, the chamber music concerts at Bargemusic.

For food and ice cream (in the form of \$5 ice cream sandwiches from Jacques Torres Chocolate), walk a few blocks east into Dumbo, which stands for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass. It's a former industrial area turned artists' haven and is now manicured into a hangout for 30-somethings (and often their young children), supplemented by art galleries, design stores and art-and-design-focused bookstores. Then you've got your restaurants and bars with self-consciously quirky microbrew-and-

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Belgian beer lists, pleasant but edge-free dining, and exposed-brick interiors galore.

It has something like the vibe of the artificially resuscitated downtown of a small Rust Belt city, but the highlight is the setting: beautiful old factories (including the former home of Eskimo Pies), the uneasy-but-cool feeling of having a bridge towering over you, and quaint stretches of pristine park on the water.

A popular spot with a distinct neighborhood feel is the organic bar, restaurant and brunch spot Superfine. The Sunday brunch is a bargain, with breakfast items (French toast, omelets and the like), most under \$10, and live music thrown in free. Other good neighborhood choices include an outpost of the pan-Asian restaurant Rice, which has a huge outdoor space, and a sort of unmarked Mexican spot, Hecho en Dumbo. (During the day it's the Dumbo General Store; in the evening they stick a chalkboard sign out front to show that sausage sopes and tamarind margaritas are being served.)

Dumbo is home to some quirky shops, like Prague Kolektiv, which specializes in Czech modern furniture largely from the 1920s and 30s. Even if you prefer, say, Bavarian furniture from the 1870s, it's still worth passing by, if only to read the dozens of media raves posted outside that reveal just how uncreative headline writers can become when presented with the word "Czech." And along with the art galleries, you can't miss the 1922 merry-go-round that Jane Walentas and other Dumbo artists restored, now on display in a warehouse at 56 Water Street, which is open on weekends from noon to 6 p.m. Ms. Walentas is working to have the carousel placed in Brooklyn Bridge Park.

The park, part of which is officially the state-run Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park, offers stretches of grass, a playground with fountain, rocky beach (no swimming) and arresting views of the two bridges and the Manhattan skyline that attracts a phalanx of photographers at sunset. Through Sept. 7, the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition's annual sculpture exhibition dots the park. The big annual Art Under the Bridge Festival, run by the Dumbo Arts Center, takes over the whole neighborhood the weekend of Sept. 26 through 28.

If you walk east on Front or Water Street out of Dumbo, you'll find Vinegar Hill, about as tiny and quirky a neighborhood as New York gets. Nineteenth-century row houses with Greek Revival and Italianate elements, protected by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, mix with former factories, your friendly neighborhood power substation, and the edge of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. It's like a hodgepodge of pieces from different jigsaw puzzles that just happen to fit together.

The principle Vinegar Hill activity is walking around. The protected town houses are in three chunks: along Front Street between Bridge and Gold, Hudson between Front and Plymouth, and on Gold between Water and Front. (A complete map can be found at nyc.gov/landmarks.) Other neighborhood attractions: feral cats, a creepy overgrown lot and a view (from the end of Evans Street) of the grand Federal-style house built in the early 19th century for the commander of the Navy Yard. A few sailors were occasionally thirsty, it appears: according to the Landmarks Commission's report, one-quarter of Vinegar Hill heads of household in 1822 were tavern proprietors, and in those days they weren't serving fancy Belgian beers.

ALONG THE WATERFRONT

River Café, 1 Water Street; (718) 522-5200; www.rivercafe.com.

Grimaldi's Pizzeria, 19 Old Fulton Street; (718) 858-4300; www.grimaldis.com.

Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory, 1 Water Street; (718) 246-3963.

Jacques Torres Chocolate, 66 Water Street; (718) 875-9772; www.mrchocolate.com.

Superfine, 126 Front Street, (718) 243-9005.

Rice, 81 Washington Street, (718) 222-9880; www.riceny.com.

Hecho en Dumbo at the Brooklyn General Store, 111 Front Street, (718) 855-5288; www.hechoendumbo.com.

Prague Kolektiv, 143 Front Street, (718) 260-8013; www.praguekolektiv.com.

Dumbo Arts Center, 30 Washington Street; (718) 694-0831; www.dumboartscenter.org.