

North America

Central Park by bike

- Briar Jensen
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It's fine to take a break from peddling around the 341ha of Central Park



The most dangerous people you have to watch out for are mothers with strollers. Picture: Ed Yourdon from Flickr

STRAWBERRY Fields, Sheep Meadow, North Woods, Turtle Pond.

It sounds like I've stepped into a children's story book; it looks like it too, with squirrels in the grass, toy sailboats on the pond and a statue of Alice in Wonderland.

I'm cycling New York's **Central Park** (<http://www.centralpark.com>) in an attempt to see as much of its 341ha as possible. Our group of five is taking a tour with **Bike and Roll** (<http://www.bikeandroll.com>), and our affable guide Steve is living up to the company's motto of "fun delivery".

After making sure we're comfortable on our bikes he leads the way with a warning.

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"The park attracts all sorts," he says, "but the most dangerous people you have to watch out for are mothers with strollers."

It's Sunday and the park is buzzing with walkers, joggers, cyclists (from novice wobblers to competitive speedsters), pedicabs, horse-drawn carriages and, yes, mothers on a mission with strollers.

We're grateful for Steve's knowledge of the park and its idiosyncrasies, such as riding in an anticlockwise direction and only on the 10km of park drives, not the 93km of pedestrian paths.

While the rules – from "music-free zones" to "no barbecuing" – seem a bit over-the-top to us Aussies, they're meant to ensure every one of the more than 25 million visitors a year enjoys themselves, so we try to abide.

The heart of the park

Opened in 1859, Central Park was America's first public park. Completely man-made, it took 15 years to build and cost roughly \$US200 million at today's rate.

Designed by Frederick Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the park covers 51 city blocks.

The statistics are mind-boggling. There are 101ha of lawns, 55ha of woodlands and seven bodies of water totalling 60ha.

There's something for everyone here, from birdwatching to ball games, children's playgrounds to chess, even fishing, swimming, skating and a zoo.

We start at The Mall, a 12m-wide "grand promenade" flanked by American elms that arch majestically overhead. It's cooler here in the dappled sunlight and we take our time, admiring the statues of Shakespeare, Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott in the Literary Walk.

The Mall leads to Bethesda Terrace, the most formal part of the park. This split-level, paved terrace, featuring elaborate balustrades and ornate tiling, overlooks the majestic Bethesda Fountain, with its Angel of Waters statue, to the lake beyond.

Considered the "heart of the park", it's one of the most photographed places and features in many of the 260 movies filmed in Central Park.

It's a great place for people-watching, too; a jazz band, sax soloist, choral-singing kids and people with dogs.

At Conservatory Water we see the model boat pond used for the sailboat scenes in the movie *Stuart Little*. This area is a haven for kids, with a giant, climbable bronze sculpture of Alice in Wonderland with the Mad Hatter and Cheshire Cat, and summer storytelling around the Hans Christian Andersen statue.

We continue past Cleopatra's Needle, an imposing 21m-high obelisk dating back to 1500 BC, that was gifted (though some suggest otherwise) to New York from Egypt in the late 1880s.

We cycle past North Woods before turning south to Shakespeare Garden, which features flowers mentioned in Shakespeare's works. We walk through the profusion of fragrant bee-covered blooms to Belvedere Castle and climb the turret for panoramic views over Turtle Pond (yes, there are lots of turtles) to the Great Lawn.

Enjoy a chic picnic

Sheep Meadow is another expansive lawn, a quiet zone for relaxing and picnicking.

So we unpack the "chic picnic" from our hotel, the Sofitel New York, kindly delivered by a friend who dodged cycling for shopping.

There are gourmet sandwiches, cheese and crackers, biscuits and crisps and, of course, French champagne. I bet the sheep that grazed here until 1934 never had it this good.

We toast a fabulous outing in Central Park, and my birthday.

Last stop Strawberry Fields, named after the Beatles song *Strawberry Fields Forever*.

It is a teardrop-shaped landscape in honour of John Lennon, who was shot at the nearby Dakota apartment building. A black and white mosaic spelling "Imagine" serves as a memorial.

It's here I see a squirrel bouncing about in the lush grass – a picture-perfect ending to a storybook outing.

The writer was a guest of Bike and Roll and travelled courtesy of Virgin Atlantic, Virgin America and Accor.

FAST FACTS

Fly: V Australia (<http://www.vaustralia.com>) offers direct, daily flights from Sydney to Los Angeles.

Connecting flights are available to New York on partner airline Virgin America. Return economy fares from Sydney to New York are available from \$2160 inclusive of taxes and surcharges. Or try the fully flat bed and gourmet food and beverages in Business Class from \$11,360 inclusive of taxes and surcharges. Check out the website for current specials, bookings and all your travel needs.

Stay: Sofitel New York (<http://www.accorhotels.com>), 45 West 44th St, New York 10036. In midtown Manhattan, the Sofitel is conveniently located close to Times Square and Broadway. Rooms start from \$A385 a night.

Play: Bike and Roll (<http://www.bikeandroll.com>) is a green company with quality bikes – they have all-new bikes every year – offering bike rentals and guided tours at various locations around New York as well as Chicago, San Francisco, Washington DC and Miami.

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