The Roosevelt Island Walking Tour

ISLAND HISTORY

With six designated landmarks on the National Historic Register, Roosevelt Island is an integral part of New York City’s history. From the 1600’s to the 1800’s, ownership passed from the Canarsie Indians to the Dutch, then to English farmer Robert Blackwell, and finally to the City of New York. In the 1800’s, the City built eight hospitals and “asylums” on the Island, which became home to the chronically ill, mentally disabled and destitute. However, by the 1950’s, with notions of treatment changing, most of the City’s institutions were abandoned.

In 1969, New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC) was granted a 99-year lease by the City to develop and operate the Island. The Island was re-imagined when architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee, joined with UDC and others to design an innovative, mixed-income, traffic limited, residential community with visual access to the water. In 1973, the Island was renamed in honor of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1984, the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) was created as a state public benefit corporation, succeeding UDC in operating and developing the Island.

For more on the island’s history, visit www.rioc.ny.gov/history.htm.

LANDMARKS

The two-mile-long Island boasts a rich history and 6 amazing landmarks.

Lighthouse
Above the waters of the East River at the northernmost stretch of Roosevelt Island, shines the fifty-foot-high Lighthouse. Designed by James Renwick, Jr., the Lighthouse was built in 1872 by inmates of the penitentiary with stone quarried on the Island.

Octagon
In 1839 the New York Lunatic Asylum, which featured the Octagon Tower, was built with granite mined from the Island. It was one of the first institutions for the treatment of the mentally ill in America. Today, the landmark is housed in a luxury residential complex that features the largest solar panel in the City and the first fuel cell to power a residential building in New York. The site is open to visitors.

Blackwell House
Built in 1796 for the Blackwell family who owned the Island for many generations, the Blackwell House is one of the oldest farmhouses in New York City. The exterior of the modest colonial home has been refurbished, and there are plans to renovate the interior. Once complete, Blackwell House will be used as a community center as well as for periodic historical tours.

Strecker Laboratory
Built in 1892, the Strecker Laboratory was the first laboratory in the country devoted exclusively to pathological and bacteriological research. Currently, the building serves as the power conversion station for the E and V subway lines.

Smallpox Hospital (Renwick Ruin)
Designed by James Renwick, Jr., the Smallpox Hospital was built in 1856 and was the first hospital in the country to receive smallpox patients. Once a successful vaccine was implemented in the late 1800’s, the hospital was closed. The hospital’s ivy-colored medieval-type ruin is located in Southpoint Park.

EVENTS

From outdoor movie screenings to theatrical productions, recreational activities to festivals, RIOC sponsors events for the public all year round. For more information on upcoming events on the Island, please visit http://rioc.ny.gov/upcomingevents.htm.

OTHER VISITOR INFORMATION

Emergencies: Roosevelt Island Public Safety Office is located at 352 Main Street, (212) 832-4545, and is open 24 hours a day.

TRANSATLANTIC FERRY: The most modern aerial tramway in the world, providing breath-taking, runs every 15 minutes from 59th Street and Second Avenue in Manhattan to Roosevelt Island. Metrocards are accepted.

CITY BUSES: The Q102 MTA bus circles the Island and connects passengers to Queens.

RED BUS: The Red Bus, which costs a $0.25, and makes stops throughout the Island.

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CAR: The Roosevelt Island Bridge can be accessed at 36th Avenue and Vernon Boulevard in Queens. Visitor parking is available at the Motorgate Garage.

Brought to you by the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation of the State of New York
Andrew Cuomo, Governor Darryl C. Towns, Board Chair Person Donald D. Lewis, Acting President and CEO

Visit us online at rioc.ny.gov or call (212) 832-4540 Join us on facebook at www.facebook.com/RIOCNY
**Western Promenade, Pier and the Meditation Steps**

The Pier, the Promenade and the Meditation Steps north of the Pier, offer a peaceful setting to watch boats in the East River and the Manhattan skyline.

**Main Street**

Main Street was designed as the “spine” of the original Roosevelt Island residential community, providing retail and community space. Designed to maximize river views from the buildings, it echoes a walled medieval city.

**Southpoint Park**

Southpoint Park surrounds the Smallpox Hospital (Renwick Ruin). Located at the southern end of the Island, it offers an ideal spot to view Manhattan, Queens and the East River, and serves as the gateway to the Four Freedoms Park.

**Four Freedoms Park**

The Island’s southern-most tip is the site of Four Freedoms Park and a memorial to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Opened in October 2012, the Park is one of the last works designed by the famed architect Louis I. Kahn.

For more information visit www.rioc.ny.gov