

On the East River, follow that ferry to Brooklyn



By [Andrea Sachs](#), Published: September 1

As the Manhattan skyline receded to toy-scale size, I couldn't help thinking of those poor souls in the subway. While I was swimming in space aboard the East River Ferry, with a stiff breeze blowing like an industrial-strength fan, the less fortunate were stuffed inside airless cars with blighted views. All I could say is: Glad to be me, not them.

On previous visits to New York, I have been them. Before June 13, I would cram myself into the stifling subway for the jaunt between Manhattan and Brooklyn. Those were not happy times. But this summer, NY Waterway, which has run Hudson River ferries since 1986, expanded to the liquid highway on the other side of the island.

"For years, Brooklyn has been crying for cross-river service," said a grizzled crew member seated on my port side. "Now they have it. Let's see if they use it."

Unlike Circle Line and other tour boats, the East River Ferry is not a sightseeing operation per se. The trio of 149-seat, double-decker vessels that ply the water year-round lack gift shops, concessions, working toilets and guided narration. Though one employee did teach me the BMWs — Brooklyn, Manhattan and Williamsburg bridges — most of his comments were whispered.

“That’s not very ladylike, is it?” he asked me conspiratorially as we watched a woman inky with tattoos embark in Brooklyn’s DUMBO neighborhood.

The ride takes 30 minutes from start (east midtown at 34th Street) to finish (Wall Street/Pier 11), or finish to start, depending on whether you flow north or south. The route traces a crescent shape studded with five starry stops in Queens and Brooklyn: Long Island City, Greenpoint, North Williamsburg, South Williamsburg and DUMBO.

For my inaugural sojourn, I traveled the entire distance, scanning the docks and their environs for enticements. I listened hard for the call of the sirens, but many of the terminals seemed to be warning me to stay away — unless I cared to stumble around dilapidated warehouses or tangle with untamed vegetation. But then a passenger traveling from Long Island City to Wall Street encouraged me to look beyond the shoreline. As we passed Williamsburg, he told me to walk toward the church spire in the distance and follow Metropolitan Avenue, where I’d find a host of shops and restaurants. I was grateful for his advice and doubly thankful that he didn’t once mention boarding the subway.

After the boat turned around at Wall Street, I readied myself to jump ship at the next stop. But I missed the DUMBO landing because of an unfortunate dispute over my ticket. In short, I didn’t have one. I had mistakenly assumed that I could buy a full-day pass on the boat, but a ferry official informed me that the company sold only per-trip tickets on board. For unlimited rides, I’d have to disembark and hit up one of the kiosks arrayed around each terminal. After three ports of call — and an outlay of \$16 — we resolved the issue.

“The ferry is not very leisure-friendly,” said a hipster dad who had parked a stroller holding his young daughter near the windy entryway. “People who ride it daily understand how it works.”

Once ashore, I knew exactly what to do: read every piece of signage, including the departure schedule (every 20 to 30 minutes, depending on the day and time period) and the abbreviated list of nearby attractions. For example, in North Williamsburg, the mystery tour guide recommended a dozen diversions, including Brooklyn Oenology, Brooklyn Brewery and the Brooklyn Flea Market.

Since it was too early to drink and a day too late for the flea market, I followed the waterfront trail lined with glittery condos and sunbathers draped on chaise longues. Then I sat on a bench and waited for my ride.

I made it to DUMBO, an artsy enclave tucked beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, on my second attempt. Taking a cue from the suggested sites, I walked a rough triangle shaped by St. Ann’s Warehouse, a performing arts venue; Galapagos Art Space, which hosts such nonconformists as cabaret singers and trapeze artists;

and Grimaldi's, the legendary pizza joint. If the ferry ever installs a suggestion box, I'd also toss in Jacques Torres Chocolate, for bonbons to go, and powerHouse Arena, a nexus of art, literature and twisted minds. Whenever I was on the ferry, which was more than half the time, I always occupied the same spot — front-row middle seat, facing the stern, with clear views of our comings and goings. Here, I could feel the blast of the wind and the gentle spray of the river. It was a cooling interlude between scorching moments on terra firma.

As evening neared, the cast of passengers changed. I saw a surge of men with jackets and computer cases, and women in pencil skirts and shoes useless in the event of a sudden swell.

The ferry seemed to take on greater urgency in its role as commuter workhorse. As the vessel made its rounds, I stayed seated, in no rush to make landfall.