

CENTRAL PARK, MANHATTAN

CENTRAL PARK: THE GREATEST HITS

A MUSEENYC WALKING TOUR · FREE, AND NOT SPONSORED BY ANYONE

DISTANCE 3.1 miles	TIME 2.5 to 3 hours
STOPS 14	START Merchants' Gate, Columbus Circle (A/B/C/D/1 to 59 St- Columbus Circle)
END The Reservoir, exit at 86th or 90th Street	MAP museenyc.com/tours/11-central-park-greatest-hits/map

Everything you came to see, in an order that actually works on foot. Central Park is 843 acres and most first visits are a confused zigzag; this one runs south to north through the formal heart of the park, hits every landmark you have already seen in a film, and ends on the Reservoir. Nothing here is a secret and that is fine. These places are famous because they are good. Go early on a weekend or any weekday morning, and know that the park is entirely man-made: every hill, every lake, every rock outcrop that looks natural was either kept, moved, or invented by Olmsted and Vaux between 1858 and 1876.

ROUTE CARD

Screenshot or tear off this page. Full detail for each stop follows.

1 Merchants' Gate, Columbus Circle	8 Strawberry Fields
2 The Pond and Gapstow Bridge	9 Bethesda Terrace and Fountain
3 Wollman Rink	10 Bow Bridge
4 The Dairy	11 The Ramble
5 Central Park Carousel	12 Belvedere Castle and Turtle Pond
6 The Mall and Literary Walk	13 The Great Lawn
7 Sheep Meadow	14 Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir

GETTING THERE AND BACK

START	A/B/C/D/1 to 59 St-Columbus Circle, right at Merchants' Gate. Or N/Q/R/W to 5 Av-59 St for the Pond end.
FINISH	4/5/6 at 86 St or 96 St on the east side, B/C at 86 St or 96 St on the west. Pick whichever side you exit.
ALONG THE ROUTE	The park is bracketed by two subway lines the whole way: B/C under Central Park West (72, 81, 86, 96, 103, 110) and 4/5/6 under Lexington (59, 68, 77, 86, 96, 103). Crosstown buses run right through the park at 66th, 72nd, 79th, 86th, 96th and 106th Streets: M66, M72, M79 SBS, M86 SBS, M96, M106. You are never more than about ten minutes from a way out.

Cutting it short

Every walk here has exits. Good ones on this route:

- After stop 6 (The Mall): M66 crosstown, or 6 at 68 St-Hunter College.
- After stop 9 (Bethesda): M72 crosstown runs through the park at 72nd St. Easiest exit in the park.
- After stop 12 (Belvedere Castle): M79 SBS at 79th St, or B/C at 81 St.
- After stop 13 (Great Lawn): M86 SBS, or B/C and 4/5/6 at 86 St.

THE WALK

1 MERCHANTS' GATE, COLUMBUS CIRCLE

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

In 1862 the park's commissioners named the gates for the trades and types of people they expected through them: Merchants, Artisans, Scholars, Women, Strangers. The names were not actually carved into the walls until 1954 and the 1990s. The USS Maine National Monument at this corner is a 1913 memorial to the battleship explosion that started the Spanish-American War, and the gilded figures on top were cast from metal recovered from the ship's guns.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.76790, -73.98190

2 THE POND AND GAPSTOW BRIDGE

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Into the park from Columbus Circle, bear right and follow the path east along Central Park South about 8 minutes.

Heads up: Grab a paper map at any kiosk. Phone GPS is unreliable under the tree canopy and every path curves.

The Pond was swampland before the park existed. Gapstow Bridge, the low stone arch, is the 1896 replacement for a fussier wooden original, and the view north across the water with the Plaza Hotel and the midtown towers behind it is the single most reproduced image of the park. Get here before 10am and it is nearly empty. The wooded slope on the west side of the Pond is Hallett Nature Sanctuary, four acres fenced off as a bird sanctuary in 1934, reopened to visitors in 2016, and now open daily from 10am until shortly before sunset.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.76680, -73.97390

3 WOLLMAN RINK

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Around the north side of the Pond, 3 minutes. The rink is just above it.

Built in 1949 on a filled-in section of the Pond. It is worth stopping at whether or not it is skating season, because the sightline south over the ice to the towers on Central Park South is the compressed version of everything the park does: a low open foreground, trees framing the sides, and the city held at arm's length behind.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.76790, -73.97420

4 THE DAIRY

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: North past the rink to the 65th Street Transverse. The Dairy is tucked below the path on your left.

Heads up: Free visitor center and the cleanest bathrooms at this end of the park.

Calvert Vaux designed it in 1870 as an actual dairy, serving fresh milk to children in an era when city milk was frequently contaminated and infant mortality was appalling. The ornate wooden loggia was torn off in the 1950s and rebuilt in 1979. It is now a visitor center with a good free exhibit on how the park was built. Go in and pick up a paper map, which is better than your phone for this park.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.76950, -73.97350

5 CENTRAL PARK CAROUSEL

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: West and slightly north, 3 minutes. Follow the music.

The fourth carousel on this site. The first, in 1871, was powered by a live mule and a horse in an underground pit, who were signalled to start and stop by taps on the floor. The current one was built in 1908 in Coney Island, found abandoned in a trolley terminal, and installed here in 1951. Fifty-seven horses, carved almost life-size, still running on the original Stein and Goldstein carvings.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.76990, -73.97470

6 THE MALL AND LITERARY WALK

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: North on the path past the Chess and Checkers House to the bottom of the Mall. You will know it when the trees close over.

Heads up: Walk the full length rather than cutting across. It is the one straight line Olmsted allowed himself and it is built to be walked.

Olmsted hated formal axes and built exactly one, deliberately, as the park's promenade. The double row of American elms is now one of the largest surviving stands in North America, most of the species having been wiped out by Dutch elm disease, and in summer the branches close overhead into a green vault. The southern end is Literary Walk, lined with statues of Shakespeare, Burns, Scott and Fitz-Greene Halleck. Walk the full length. It is designed to be walked, not crossed.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77200, -73.97200

7 SHEEP MEADOW

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Step off the Mall's west side at about 69th St. The lawn opens immediately.

Heads up: Quiet zone: no sports, no amplified music. Enforced by everyone lying on the grass.

A flock lived here and was walked across the West Drive twice a day to a sheepfold that is now Tavern on the Green. Robert Moses got rid of the sheep in 1934, reportedly sending them to Prospect Park and then upstate. By the 1970s the meadow was bare dirt; it was closed, rebuilt and reseeded in 1980. It is now a quiet-zone lawn, no sports, no amplified music, and on a warm afternoon it is the most relaxed place in Manhattan.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77140, -73.97490

8 STRAWBERRY FIELDS

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Northwest across the lawn to the West Drive, then north to about 72nd St. Enter the fenced section.

Or ride: M10 bus runs on Central Park West if you want to skip ahead.

Heads up: Crowded right at the mosaic, empty fifty feet away.

Yoko Ono funded this 2.5-acre section as a memorial to John Lennon, who was shot in 1980 at the Dakota, visible through the trees on Central Park West. The Imagine mosaic was a gift from the city of Naples. Countries around the world donated plants; it is designated a Garden of Peace. Expect a crowd right at the mosaic and almost nobody fifty feet away, which is the trick with this whole park.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77563, -73.97490

9 BETHESDA TERRACE AND FOUNTAIN

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: East across the park on the 72nd St path, about 10 minutes, and down the grand staircase.

Or ride: M72 crosstown bus runs right through the park on 72nd St.

Heads up: Go down the stairs into the arcade under the terrace. The tiled ceiling is the thing most visitors walk straight past.

Vaux called this the drawing room of the park. The Angel of the Waters, by Emma Stebbins in 1873, was the first major public art commission in New York awarded to a woman, and it commemorates the Croton Aqueduct bringing clean water to the city. Do not skip the arcade underneath the terrace: the ceiling holds nearly 16,000 encaustic Minton tiles, taken down in the 1980s and painstakingly reinstalled in 2007. Stand in the middle. Someone is usually singing.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77400, -73.97090

10 BOW BRIDGE

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: North from the fountain around the west side of the Lake, 5 minutes.

The second-oldest cast-iron bridge in America, designed by Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould, and built to let the iron expand and contract with the seasons. For a century, books claimed it rested on cannonballs to let it move; when it was restored in 1974, workers found no cannonballs at all. Cross it and look back west at the Lake with the San Remo towers behind.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77670, -73.97160

11 THE RAMBLE

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Cross Bow Bridge and keep going north into the woods.

Heads up: You will lose your bearings. That is the design. Head north and uphill and you come out at the Castle.

Olmsted designed the Ramble as a wild garden, with narrow paths that switch back on themselves so you lose your bearings within a hundred feet of the Lake. It is the best birding spot on the Atlantic flyway inside a city, with more than 230 species recorded. It was also, for over a century, a discreet meeting place for gay men, long before that was safe anywhere else in the city. Wander a bit here even on a highlights tour. Head roughly north and you come out at Belvedere Castle.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77780, -73.97050

12 BELVEDERE CASTLE AND TURTLE POND

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: North through the Ramble and up the stone stairs on Vista Rock.

Heads up: Free to enter and climb. Best view in the park for no money.

Vaux built it in 1869 as a pure decoration: a miniature castle with no interior purpose, placed on Vista Rock to give the view a focal point. The National Weather Service has taken Central Park's official readings from the tower since 1919, which means every time you hear the temperature in New York, it was measured here. Closed and derelict in the 1970s, restored twice since. Climb to the terraces for the best free view in the park: Turtle Pond below, Great Lawn beyond, Delacorte Theater to the left.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77970, -73.96910

13 THE GREAT LAWN

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Down the castle stairs, around Turtle Pond on the west side, and onto the lawn.

This was the rectangular Croton Reservoir until it was drained in 1931. During the Depression the empty basin filled with Hooverville shacks; the lawn was finally laid in 1937. Simon and Garfunkel played to half a million people here in 1981, Garth Brooks to a reported 980,000 in 1997, and the crowds destroyed it so thoroughly that it was rebuilt in 1997 with a drainage system and a strict permit regime. Eight ball fields, and on a summer evening every one of them is in use.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.78120, -73.96650

14 JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS RESERVOIR

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: North across the Great Lawn and up to the Reservoir's south gatehouse. About 10 minutes.

Or ride: M86 SBS crosstown at 86th St, or B/C at 86 St.

Heads up: Track runs counter-clockwise by unenforced custom. Join the flow. Runners will not slow down for you.

Built in 1862 as a backup water supply and decommissioned in 1993. The running track around it is the most famous loop in the city and traditionally runs counter-clockwise, which everyone obeys without anyone enforcing it. The south end gives you the midtown skyline reflected over the water, and it is the best sunset spot in the park.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.78560, -73.96260

COMBINING THIS WITH OTHER TOURS

- [Tour 12 \(Central Park: The Wild North\)](#) is the other half of this park and shares two stops with it, Gapstow Bridge and the Ramble. Tour 11 ends at the Reservoir; Tour 12 passes the same water on its way south. Do 11 in the morning and 12 the next day, not both at once.
- [Tour 5 \(Upper West Side\)](#) runs along this park's western edge and shares the Dakota and Strawberry Fields. If you have done Tour 5, start this one at stop 9 (Bethesda) and skip the west-side overlap.
- **Short version:** stops 6 through 12. The Mall, Bethesda, Bow Bridge, the Ramble, Belvedere Castle. About 1.5 miles and 90 minutes, and it is the best sequence in the park.

WALKING NAVIGATION LINKS

Google caps a directions link at ten points, so the route is split. Open a segment on your phone and it starts walking navigation.

- [Stops 1–10](#)
- [Stops 10–14](#)

THE MAP

Open the MUSEENYC map for this walk at museenyc.com/tours/11-central-park-greatest-hits/map. Every pin carries its own walking directions, transit alternative and notes.

-  **Green pin** = open to the public.
-  **Orange pin** = private, look from the sidewalk. Several are people's homes: no gates, no doorways, no photographing into windows.

The orange line is a straight-line guide between stops, not the walking route. Use the navigation links for turn-by-turn.

MUSEENYC

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Questions about a stop, a closure, or anything else on this walk? Reach MUSEENYC at museenyc.tours@gmail.com or [@museenyc](https://www.instagram.com/museenyc) on Instagram. More walks at museenyc.com/tours.