

CENTRAL PARK, MANHATTAN

CENTRAL PARK: THE WILD NORTH AND THE WATERCOURSE

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

DISTANCE 5.4 miles	TIME 4 to 5 hours
STOPS 16	START Conservatory Garden, Fifth Avenue at 105th Street (6 to 103 St)
END Gapstow Bridge and The Pond, Grand Army Plaza (N/Q/R/W to 5 Av-59 St)	MAP museenyc.com/tours/12-central-park-wild/map

Central Park north to south, following the water. The top third of the park is a different place entirely: a gorge with a stream running through it, a waterfall you can stand under, a fort from the War of 1812, and paths that genuinely feel like upstate. Almost nobody above 96th Street is a tourist. This is the long version for people who want to walk all day and see the park as a designed landscape rather than a list of sights. Every waterfall on this route is fed by city tap water through a hidden pipe, which somehow makes them better rather than worse. Wear real shoes. Some of this is unpaved, rocky, and genuinely steep.

ROUTE CARD

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

1 Conservatory Garden	9 The Great Hill
2 Harlem Meer	10 North Meadow
3 Charles A. Dana Discovery Center	11 The Reservoir, north gatehouse
4 Huddlestone Arch	12 Summit Rock
5 The Loch and the Ravine	13 Shakespeare Garden
6 Blockhouse No. 1	14 Azalea Pond and the Gill, in the Ramble
7 Glen Span Arch	15 Hallett Nature Sanctuary
8 The Pool	16 Gapstow Bridge and The Pond

GETTING THERE AND BACK

START	6 to 103 St, then two blocks west to the Vanderbilt Gate on Fifth Ave. Or 2/3 to 110 St-Central Park North for the Meer end.
FINISH	N/Q/R/W at 5 Av-59 St, or F at 57 St, both a few minutes from the Pond.
ALONG THE ROUTE	Same brackets as Tour 11: B/C under Central Park West, 4/5/6 under Lexington, 2/3 at 110 St-Central Park North for the top end. Crosstown buses through the park at 66th, 72nd, 79th, 86th, 96th and 106th. The M10 runs the length of Central Park West and the M1/M2/M3/M4 run down Fifth Ave, so either edge of the park is a bus ride from anywhere on this route.

Cutting it short

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

- After stop 3 (Discovery Center): 2/3 at 110 St-Central Park North, five minutes east.
- After stop 9 (Great Hill): M10 bus on Central Park West at 103rd, or B/C at 103 St.
- After stop 10 (North Meadow): M96 crosstown runs through the park at 96th St.
- After stop 12 (Summit Rock): B/C at 81 St or 86 St, or M86 SBS.
- After stop 14 (the Ramble): come out at Bethesda and take the M72 crosstown. This is the natural place to stop if you are losing daylight — the last leg south is 25 minutes.

THE WALK

1 CONSERVATORY GARDEN

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

The gate came off the Vanderbilt mansion on Fifth Avenue and 58th Street when it was demolished in 1927. Behind it are three gardens in three styles: Italian in the center with a wisteria pergola and a straight lawn, French to the north with the Untermyer Fountain and concentric beds of tulips then chrysanthemums, English to the south around the Burnett Fountain, named for the author of *The Secret Garden*. It is a quiet-zone garden, no sports, no picnicking, no bicycles. Enormously popular for weddings and almost empty on a weekday morning.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79390, -73.95190

2 HARLEM MEER

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: North out of the garden's top gate and into the park. The Meer is two minutes ahead.

Dug out of what was originally tidal marsh at the top of the island. For decades the shoreline was concrete and the water was neglected; it was rebuilt in the 1990s with a soft naturalistic edge and now has some of the best birding in the park. You can fish it, catch-and-release, with free poles from the Discovery Center. The Meer is the bottom of the park's whole watercourse: everything you walk past today drains into here.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79700, -73.95240

3 CHARLES A. DANA DISCOVERY CENTER

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Around the north shore of the Meer to the low building on the water.

Heads up: Stop in. Free maps, free fishing poles in season, and staff who know what is happening on the water this week.

Built in 1993 on the site of an old boathouse, and it functions as the park's northern front door. Free exhibits, free fishing poles in season, and staff who will tell you exactly what is blooming and what has been seen on the water that week. Stop in even for five minutes. It reframes the rest of this walk.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79665, -73.95175

4 HUDDLESTONE ARCH

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: West along the south shore of the Meer, then follow the stream inland about 5 minutes.

Heads up: Go under the arch rather than over it. The whole point is standing beneath it.

Built in 1866 from enormous schist boulders found on site, fitted together dry with no mortar or bolts anywhere in the span. Their own weight and friction hold it. A carriage drive runs directly over the top. Standing underneath it while the Loch runs past is the single most convincing moment in the park that you are not in Manhattan.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79650, -73.95330

5 THE LOCH AND THE RAVINE

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Follow the stream upstream on the north bank path. 10 minutes of gorge.

Heads up: Unpaved and uneven. This is the steepest, rootiest stretch of the whole walk.

Loch is Scottish for lake, and this was one when it was built; it silted into a stream, which turned out to be better. The Ravine around it is the closest thing in Manhattan to the Adirondack landscapes Olmsted was imitating, with steep wooded banks and several small waterfalls along the run. The whole thing collapsed into neglect and crime by the 1970s and was painstakingly restored through the 1990s. Follow the stream on the north bank path. Go slowly.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79720, -73.95560

6 BLOCKHOUSE NO. 1

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Up the unmarked path to the rock outcrop above the North Woods. Steep, about 5 minutes.

Heads up: The path is not signposted and it is a real scramble at the top. Skip it if the ground is wet.

A small stone fort built in 1814 by volunteers, including Columbia College students, firemen and butchers, when New Yorkers expected a British attack from the north that never came. It predates the park by more than forty years and it is the oldest surviving building in Central Park. Roofless and empty now, standing on a cliff at the top of the North Woods. The path up is unmarked and steep.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79740, -73.95770

7 GLEN SPAN ARCH

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Back down and continue west along the stream to the arch under the West Drive.

Heads up: Walk through, turn around, walk back. It is built as a transition and it only works if you feel the change.

Another rough-stone arch, carrying the West Drive over the stream. It was originally a neat rustic bridge; the boulder facing was added later to make it read as a natural cleft in the rock. Go through it, turn around, and come back. It is designed as a transition, dark and low, opening into the Ravine on one side and the Pool on the other, and the effect only works if you experience the change.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79690, -73.95930

8 THE POOL

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Through the arch and the water opens out. Two minutes.

Heads up: Sit on the north bank. This is the quietest good place in Central Park.

A small artificial lake at the head of the watercourse, fed by a pipe from the city supply and draining east over a cascade into the Loch. Weeping willows on the bank, a lot of herons and egrets, and on most weekday mornings you will have it to yourself. Sit on the north bank for ten minutes. This is the quietest good place in Central Park.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79610, -73.96100

9 THE GREAT HILL

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: West and uphill from the Pool, about 6 minutes to the plateau.

Or ride: M10 bus on Central Park West at 103rd St.

Heads up: Good spot to eat. Restrooms are at the North Meadow Rec Center, ten minutes ahead.

One of the highest points in the park, at the top of the western edge. It was a carriage-drive destination in the 1860s, then deteriorated so badly it was closed. The restored version is a broad flat lawn ringed by mature trees, popular with family barbecues on summer weekends and empty the rest of the time. Good place to eat something you brought.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79570, -73.96230

10 NORTH MEADOW

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: South and east across the park on the 97th St Transverse path, about 10 minutes.

Or ride: M96 crosstown bus runs through the park at 96th St.

Twenty-three acres, one of the largest open spaces in the park, and almost entirely used by New Yorkers playing actual games rather than visitors. The Recreation Center in the middle lends out free game equipment. Cut across the middle of it and you get a sense of the park's real daily function, which is not scenery.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.79170, -73.95800

11 THE RESERVOIR, NORTH GATEHOUSE

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: South to the Reservoir's north gatehouse and join the track.

Heads up: Counter-clockwise. Walk the west side south.

The north gatehouse is one of two granite structures that controlled the flow when this was a working reservoir supplying the city. Join the track here and walk the western half south. The north end is consistently the least crowded stretch of the most crowded loop in New York.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.78960, -73.96060

12 SUMMIT ROCK

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Leave the track at the 86th St crossing, continue south inside Central Park West to 83rd St. About 12 minutes.

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

Heads up: Read the Seneca Village signs a few hundred feet south along the West Drive. The village was here, and 225 people were removed to build this.

A schist outcrop just inside Central Park West at 83rd Street, with a set of stone stairs up either side and a small overlook at the top. The land under it was part of Seneca Village, a community of mostly Black property owners, roughly 225 people with three churches and a school, cleared by eminent domain in 1857 to build the park. There are interpretive signs about the village a few hundred feet south along the West Drive. Read them.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.78430, -73.96900

13 SHAKESPEARE GARDEN

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: South and east about 8 minutes. The garden climbs the rock slope west of the Delacorte Theater.

Or ride: M79 SBS crosstown at 79th St.

Rustic benches, winding paths up a rock slope, and bronze plaques quoting the relevant line beside each plant: rosemary, quince, columbine, wormwood. It began in 1913 as the Garden of the Heart and was rededicated in 1916 for the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death. Steep, small, and easy to miss entirely from the Great Lawn side.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77990, -73.96960

14 AZALEA POND AND THE GILL, IN THE RAMBLE

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: South past Belvedere Castle, across the 79th St Transverse, and down into the Ramble. Follow the stream.

Heads up: Birders at Azalea Pond will tell you what is in the tree above you if you ask. They are usually right.

The Gill is a man-made brook that runs the length of the Ramble, pooling at Azalea Pond, dropping over small cascades, and emptying into the Lake. Birders stand at Azalea Pond for hours in migration season and will happily tell you what is in the tree above you. The paths here deliberately disorient; if you want out, head downhill and south and you will hit the Lake.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.77740, -73.97040

15 HALLETT NATURE SANCTUARY

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Long stretch south. Out of the Ramble at Bethesda, down the East Drive past the Zoo, about 25 minutes.

Or ride: M72 at 72nd St, or 6 train to 68 St then walk in. This is the leg to cut if you are running out of daylight.

Heads up: Open daily from 10am until shortly before sunset, with a cap on visitors, so arrive with daylight to spare.

A wooded promontory over the Pond at the southeast corner, closed as a bird sanctuary in 1934 and left almost entirely alone until a restoration reopened it to visitors in 2016. It has a single loop path and a rustic gate, and it closes shortly before sunset. Being inside it with the Plaza Hotel visible through the branches is the strangest juxtaposition in the park.

[Open in maps](#) · 40.76700, -73.97400

16 GAPSTOW BRIDGE AND THE POND

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Walk: Two minutes west. The bridge is at the Pond's narrow neck.

Heads up: You started at the top of the watercourse and finished at the bottom. Turn around and look north once before you leave.

You started at the top of the watercourse and finished at the bottom. The Pond is the southernmost body of water in the park and Gapstow the low stone arch across its neck, with the midtown skyline stacked behind. After five miles of gorge and woods, the postcard view lands differently.

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

COMBINING THIS WITH OTHER TOURS

- [Tour 11 \(Central Park: The Greatest Hits\)](#) covers the formal south end. This one covers everything above 96th plus the two streams. Together they are the whole park, but that is nine miles and you should split it across two days.
- [Tour 4 \(Harlem\)](#) starts at 125th Street, about 12 minutes north of the Harlem Meer. Run Tour 4 in the morning, walk south into the park, and pick this one up at stop 2.
- **North-end-only version:** stops 1 through 9. Conservatory Garden, the Meer, the Ravine, the Loch, the Blockhouse, the Pool, the Great Hill. About 2 miles, 2 hours, and it is the part almost nobody sees.
- **Water-only version:** stops 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 14, 16. Follow the two streams and skip the hills.

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 10–16](#)

THE MAP

Open the MUSEENYC map for this walk at museenyc.com/tours/12-central-park-wild/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.