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New York City Museums Become a Haven for Art-Loving Locals

With fewer tourists, residents enjoy wandering uncrowded galleries during the pandemic



By [Anne Kadet](#)

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Last week, Slavik Kuharchuk traveled from Queens to Manhattan to try something he hadn't enjoyed since the start of the pandemic: a trip to the museum. He went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his friends to explore the Egyptian galleries and musical instruments hall. His verdict? A big thumbs up.

"Now it's the local crowd," the 33-year-old audio-visual technician observed, glancing around the museum's Great Hall. "It's a unique feeling. I do like tourists, but this is cool—to have the city to ourselves."

He's right! But like Mr. Kuharchuk, it took me a while to seize the opportunity. While the city's big-name museums reopened last fall after a five-month shutdown, the prospect of a visit didn't sound enticing.

Typically operating at 25% capacity, the museums require visitors to reserve a time slot. There's also the shortened hours, temperature checks but no coat-checks, no paper maps or programs, no water fountains and no cafe. Imagine a museum with no overpriced cappuccino. Are we supposed to be satisfied with mere art?

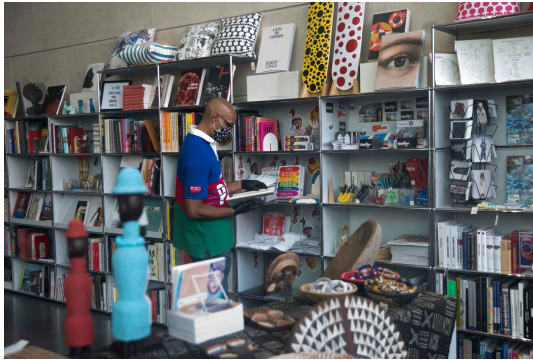
But it's too cold for outdoor dining these days for most of us, and the museums are one of the few options left to New Yorkers who want to get out of the house. Last week, I toured three and was happy to discover: a pandemic visit may be even better than a regular visit.

Yes, reserving a time can be frustrating. When I tried on a Friday morning to snag a weekend admission to the Metropolitan, for example, every Saturday and Sunday slot was taken. I had to settle for a weekday afternoon.

Visitor capacity at the 2-million-square-foot museum is capped at roughly 5,000 a day, says Metropolitan spokesman Ken Weine, compared with the 25,000-plus guests the museum could welcome before the pandemic. Admissions are further throttled to 600 from 1,000 an hour to avoid entrance bottlenecks.

I had no trouble snagging a Sunday afternoon reservation at MoMA, which is admitting 850 visitors an hour, or 6,000 a day, to its 150,000-square-foot space. But Sonya Shrier, the museum's director of visitor engagement, says the first slot of the day tends to sell out.

At the 560,000-square-foot Brooklyn Museum, meanwhile, special exhibits have been selling out on weekends, but general admission slots generally are available any time, and 20% of these tickets are allotted to walk-ins. “Not everyone has a smartphone or a way to buy a ticket online,” says Sara Devine, the museum’s director of visitor experience.



A Brooklyn Museum visitor browsed through books at the museum gift shop in August.

PHOTO: JONATHAN DORADO/BROOKLYN MUSEUM

The systems do the job. Arriving at the designated hour, I enjoyed a minimal wait at all three museums. And I particularly enjoyed the weirdness of the MoMA entry, which now features contactless temperature checks and bag screenings conducted by glowing machines to accompany the lobby’s sense-assaulting audio-video installation which, according to the museum, creates “a space as a being.”

Hopefully, one comes prepared. A friend who came along to the Brooklyn Museum was a little annoyed by the closed coat check. I brought a small jacket I could stuff into my bag and bottled water to make up for the disabled water fountains. Moreover, the museum recently installed four contactless, self-cleaning vending machines featuring an array of snacks—Cheez-Its, turkey sandwiches and beef jerky—that would make any Brooklyn bodega proud.

And touring the galleries makes up for any minor inconvenience. Given the almost entirely local crowd on-hand—the Metropolitan says this segment grew from 30% to 90% of admissions—this is our big chance to enjoy everything from Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” to Adrian Piper’s jar of personal fingernail clippings without getting jostled by a pesky crowd of globe-trotters. The relaxed, communal feeling is its own pleasure.

Indeed, some museum officials say people are lingering longer these days. “Visitors appear to be taking their time more and really soaking up the contemplative atmosphere in the museum,” says Ms. Shrier at MoMA.



Visitors browsed Richard Serra's 'Equal' at the Museum of Modern Art in November.

PHOTO: JOHN MINCHILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

As for the safety issue, may I note that museums were practically designed for pandemic enjoyment? These are huge, spare spaces dedicated to displaying objects we're not allowed to touch. People are very good about wearing masks, and the museums have gone absolutely bananas with precautions. The Metropolitan, for example, has installed 800 directional, health and safety signs, not to mention 120 hand-sanitizer stations dispensing 20 gallons of goop every week.

So how are the museums faring? The big drop in admissions isn't the death blow one might expect, at least for the larger institutions. Even in a normal year, they typically earn less than 20% of their revenue from ticket sales. They take in more from endowment income, memberships and donations, which officials say have held steady.

But they're also dealing with a sharp drop in cafe, restaurant and gift-shop sales. In 2019, the Metropolitan earned \$85.8 million from these and other concessions, including the parking garage. That figure will see a dramatic reduction.

Most museums have cut their hours to compensate. The Metropolitan, which was open seven days a week, reduced its staff from 2,000 to about 1,600, and is now closed on Tuesday and Wednesdays, for example. It also eliminated evening hours.

But if a visit fits your schedule, what are you waiting for? "One of our messages to New Yorkers right now is, please come and enjoy this gem you have in your backyard," Mr. Weine says. "You deserve it!"

Write to Anne Kadet at Anne.Kadet@wsj.com

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