Would You Follow This Man?

Say yes, and alumnus Arthur Marks will show you the New York you never knew.

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Feature

““It’s a lovely day today, so whatever you’ve got to do, you’ve got a lovely day to do it in, that’s true.”

Perched on the stoop of the Washington Square Hotel, tour guide Arthur Marks sings his welcome to a group of walkers he’s about to lead on a tour through historical Washington Square in New York City’s Greenwich Village.

Indeed it is a lovely day—May Day to be exact—and the village is in full bloom, full sunshine, and full swing. Washington Square is jumping—people are lying in the sun, strumming guitars, having a smoke, and meandering through the crowd watching an array of street artists.

The square is lined on all sides by beautiful architecture—Greek revival houses, several New York University buildings, lovely brownstones with French doors. In fact, there are so many brownstones in this area that author Edith Wharton referred to it as a “chocolate-covered city,” says Marks, himself impressed with the neighborhood’s charm.

There are about 17 of us on this tour, an excursion that was originally supposed to take place on March 13, but got waylaid by the great blizzard. Sponsored by the CIII Restaurant at the Washington Square Hotel, the tour will end with American high tea after Marks gives us a glimpse of Greenwich Village life—both past and present.

For nearly 30 years, Marks, a 1957 SU graduate, has given groups and individuals an educated, enlightened, and entertaining view of New York City. In tours ranging from the celebrity-studded Upper West Side to the bohemian artisan neighborhoods of SoHo and Greenwich Village, he has established himself as the quintessential New York City guide, working through various institutions and museums and under private contract.

Marks is an especially spirited tour guide. As we walk along the streets of Washington Square, he enthusiastically points out special features of the buildings, describing their ins and outs—where the parlor was, who lived on what floor, and how families lived during the nineteenth century.

The saying “don’t throw away the baby with the bath water,” says Marks, comes from the bathing customs of residents who once lived in homes such as these. Babies were last in line on bathing day.

Over there, Marks says, is the tree where public hangings once took place—a prime spot in public view, perfect for the kind of popular entertainment it provided in the nineteenth century.

Marks has an I-know-something-you-don’t-know look in his eyes and devilish grin as if he has all the secrets of the city locked up underneath his trademark fedora. He drops a few names here and there, alluding to scandals and affairs of the day.

To escape the noise of a street band belting out anti-smoking law sentiments, we duck around the corner and head into a fancy co-op apartment building at Two Fifth Avenue, built on top of Minetta Creek, Manhattan’s underground waterway. Bella Abzug and Ed Koch are among the prominent who dwell inside. Along the lobby walls, pictures depict those who lived here before them.

“It’s like a slide show of old New York,” says Marks, a history buff.

A Cooper Union and Square, in the heart of Greenwich Village, is a popular place for aspiring artists.
A. Marks describes the history of the Washington Mews to onlookers. The buildings, which were once used as stables, now house several New York University faculty members.

He sweeps us across the street onto the partly cobblestoned drive of the Washington Mews—a peaceful change from the chaotic pace of the city beyond this quaint enclave. The charming block of vine-covered homes once served as stables for the wealthy nearby homeowners. After the introduction of the automobile and the demise of the horse-drawn carriage, the Mews were converted into private houses.

On another corner, Marks points out a building where Edward Hopper, Guy Pène du Bois, and one-time Syracuse University student Stephen Crane all lived at one time or another. Marks drops names of other famous Village personalities. Author Henry James was born in this neighborhood, Marks tells us, and later went on to write about it.

“On the first of May, it is moving day. Spring is here, give a cheer. Throw our cares away.”

Sprinkling in songs here and there, Marks explains that several decades ago people typically changed residences in the spring. Eleanor Roosevelt, for instance, moved several times while living in this bohemian neighborhood.

Once in the square, we carefully maneuver the masses of people: men playing bocci ball, chess and backgammon players, rollerbladers, parents with young children.

“One of the things I love about it here is that it’s intergenerational,” says Marks, who lives just a few blocks away.

As we wind our way back, Marks is once again standing on the stoop (Dutch for “step”) of a brownstone—a nice backdrop for his colorful tie and yellow pocket handkerchief. As a man walking his dog stops to listen, Marks elaborates on the boot scrapers common in the area, which came in handy for scraping the mud off shoes in pre-pavement days.

It’s been a hot day and as we pass the building used by Robert Redford and Jane Fonda in Barefoot in the Park, we walkers are glad to get back to the restaurant. Every Saturday in the spring and fall, Marks leads these refreshing “tea tours.”

We sit down, sip our mint tea, and snack on salmon sandwiches and homemade biscuits with cranberry-orange butter. Marks circulates, chatting and making sure everyone has what they need. He clearly likes to meet people and welcome them to his neighborhood.

The Jefferson Market Courthouse Library was built during the United States’ third president’s tenure in office.
"I've always loved New York," says Marks. "I like the fun of New York — looking for spaces and light and art. I love sharing my knowledge of New York. I love looking at buildings. I like looking at interiors and I like meeting people, all kinds of people."

Although the majority of his "followers" come from the metropolitan New York area, he also leads tours for "foreigners" from places like Central New York and beyond. This morning's group included two couples from Scotland.

Marks grew up in Woodmere, Long Island, but spent most of his childhood Saturdays in the city, visiting museums, taking art classes, and learning to tap dance.

"I always thought life was like the movies. Life was a musical comedy," says Marks. "The reason I sing songs on tours — and I'm the only one who does this — is that certain places remind me of songs."

Marks followed in his father's footsteps by attending Syracuse University. After receiving his bachelor's degree in design from the College of Visual and Performing Arts in 1957 he eagerly headed back downstate. "After college, to live in New York City was the most wonderful thing for me," he says. "It's what I'd dreamed of and I've lived here ever since."

In the early sixties, Marks occasionally joined his parents on walking tours sponsored by the Museum of the City of New York and became so impressed with them that he called up to volunteer.

"At the time they were desperate to have anybody do anything," says Marks. "I have a better speaking voice than most and I sing and I dance and I'm interested in doing research."
The Roman arches and iron gates on the DeVinne Building are two of many architectural styles seen on Lafayette Street, says Marks.

He was soon running the museum’s walking tour program and actually began writing different tours, usually based on an era, an area, or a historical figure. Although he’s no longer employed by the museum, he still occasionally gives tours on its behalf.

Since then he’s done tours for the New York Historical Society, the 92nd Street Y, and several private organizations, including SU’s Office of Alumni Relations. He’s also donated tour time to various charities over the years.

Earlier that morning, Marks led a group of junior high school students from Ohio on a city bus tour. By asking a lot of questions and encouraging the students to become involved, he learned what the students knew about New York, rather than presuming they would recognize names like Astor, Onassis, and Vanderbilt.

What makes Marks such a good guide is not only his engaging personality, but also his knowledge in key areas. He has studied at the New York School of Interior Design, Fashion Institute of Technology, and Parsons School of Design. "I have a great understanding of architecture, interiors, fashion, and sociological background," says Marks.

Marks also spends a lot of time in the library, doing historical research and working with architects and scholars.

Currently, he’s researching Duke Ellington for a tour he’ll give in October for the Museum of the City of New York. (And yes, he’s also brushing up on a few tunes for the tour.) It’s not his first musical tour. He gave an Irving Berlin song tour some time ago.

Marks also works as a private location coordinator, finding backgrounds for films, television, and print photography. He’s worked with Woody Allen and on films such as Working Girl, Six Degrees of Separation, and Age of Innocence.

"I have a general background, but I am constantly doing research and learning," he says. "You have to keep abreast, especially since New York changes every few seconds."
The following day, another group gathers in front of a Blimpy's restaurant on Broadway to begin a tour of Walt Whitman's Bohemia, an area better known as NoHo. Pfaff's, one of the poet's favorite haunts, once stood in this very spot.

Marks opens with a poem, Two Vaults, which Whitman wrote about Pfaff's. In this poem, Whitman contrasts life, romance, sex, and death with the traffic, lights, and buzz of Broadway.

Unlike the day before, this group of about a dozen is composed primarily of resident New Yorkers and coincidentally includes two other SU graduates.

Marks tells us of a "cozier time," in pre-Civil War New York, when people romanticized life and death. Whitman, a true romantic, wrote several poems during his days of wandering in this "literary salon."

On Lafayette Place, we pass by the building where Franklin Delano Roosevelt's mother lived as a child. We bend the corner to the Bowery and head toward Cooper Union.

"On the Bowery, the Bowery, they do such things and they do such things. The Bowery, the Bowery. I'll never go there anymore."

It was at Cooper Union that Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous "Faith that right makes might" speech, a speech Whitman could have heard from somewhere in the crowd. Lincoln, it turned out, became a very influential figure in Whitman's life.

At the corner of Eighth Street and St. Mark's Place stands a hotel that's been there since the 1840s. McSorley's, a popular ale house built in 1854, is the type of place Walt Whitman and his pals frequented during his New York days. A cool drink on this warm day sounds like a hot idea right now.

As the tour winds down, we arrive at the Old Merchant's House at 29 East Fourth Street, the only nineteenth-century house in Manhattan to survive the years intact along with its personal furniture and family memorabilia.

The home, built by Joseph Brewster in 1832, was occupied by the family of Seabury Tredwell from 1835 until 1933. Since 1936, the Greek revival house has served as a museum where visitors can peek into the private life of this upper-middle-class family.

It's been nearly four hours, but before he bids us his final fond farewell, Marks tips his fedora, and one last time sings to us "so long."

"Every street's a boulevard in Old New York. Every street's a highway full of dreams. Why it's a thrill to shop on 34th Street or down in Union Square. You'll love the people you'll meet on Mulberry Street. Have you ever been there? Every street's a boulevard in old New York. So remember and you'll never wear a frown. There's the east side, west side, uptown, and down.

That's why I'm proud to be the premier tour guide of this town."