

the Meatpacking District (MPD)

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The Good News

1. Great location.

Meatpacking's proximity to the Hudson River, West Side Highway and newly erected High Line are all enviable. Some of lower Manhattan's best streets and offerings sit nearby in the neighboring West Village.

2. Outstanding amenities.

Two ultra-swanky hotels book-end great restaurants, art exhibitions and shops, and they all comprise a small, pedestrian-friendly area.

3. Interesting vibe.

Meatpacking exudes an "up and coming vibe" that attracts creative folks and ventures. Examples includes high-end fashion retailers (DVF, Alexander McQueen), transformative art (Whitney Gallery downtown expansion alongside polished graffiti) and architecture (The Standard Hotel, the High Line), and powerful commercial residents (both Google and Apple have their NYC bases in the Meatpacking District).

The Bad News

1. Few residential options.

Once abandoned warehouses now house stylish stores, museums, restaurants and night clubs, leaving limited space for modest shoeboxes that better accommodate budget-conscious New Yorkers.

2. Trendy & Touristy.

The aforementioned "interesting vibe" brings with it certain unpleasant features, some of which nauseate down to Earth personalities. European men wearing tight and cropped jeans abound as do hipsters sporting sunglasses...indoors. Night clubs are guarded by arrogant bouncers, who give priority to celebrities, hair gel and short skirts. During weekend nights, MPD becomes an unpleasant caricature (Jersey Shore meets Eurotrash meets Lindsay Lohan).

3. Unnecessarily expensive.

MPD residents often prefer to venture to the West Village for drinking and eating, where myriad eateries provide delicious, affordable fare in a city where nothing comes cheap. MPD's expansion has boxed out small, homegrown business owners, leaving a few memorable places alongside overhyped, overpriced spots.

The Geographical Boundaries

The traditional Meatpacking boundaries are as follows: 14th Street on the North; Hudson Street on the East; Gansevoort Street on the South; and the Hudson River on the West. Recent expansion creates blurry lines, and some would extend the area as far North as 16th Street.

The Meatpacking District

I first became acquainted with modern day Manhattan through television and film. Seinfeld, Woody Allen, and Candace Bushnell walked me through New York—its gritty streets, cozy restaurants and stranger-than-fiction characters—before I was old enough to experience the city on my own. My exceptions to this media-centric relationship were occasional family trips from Texas, the majority of which were devoted to museums and theater, staples of midtown Manhattan.

The Meatpacking District was certainly never on my radar during those vacations, when we'd see jocosely musicals and dine at the 21 Club, Cole Porter songs still dancing through our minds. Just as my parents had crafted their own version of Manhattan, one that no doubt paid homage to their parents' generation, I had to create mine many years later. Unsurprisingly, my first acquaintance with the now extremely hip borough was through pop culture, when *Sex and the City's* Samantha Jones moved into a Meatpacking loft. You've all seen the episode: Samantha adores her light-filled, spacious bachelorette pad, until she discovers that transvestite prostitutes gather beneath her window nightly, when they make a cacophonous ruckus.

Compared to the West Village, a neighborhood with a genuinely residential vibe, Meatpacking remains faithful to its commercial roots despite many dramatic shifts. A century ago, Meatpacking housed some 250 packing plants and slaughterhouses, the gradual departure of which left many large warehouses vacant yet intact. Criminals, scoundrels and party people seized on the abandoned area where they could behave near-anonymously. Business and pleasure were conducted in clubs and darkened alleyways.

Its grimy past has all but vanished, but MPD is still funky, even though its street graffiti and businesses are now owned by big corporations. Like Google and Apple, two of the powerful additions to the neighborhood, MPD is navigating a

precarious balance between its underground past and a stable, albeit corporate, future. Although MPD lacks the charm and camaraderie of other New York neighborhoods, it is best viewed as a complement to the West Village and Chelsea. These are places where residents can better find balance and connection within their community.

My inner epicurean is satisfied by a multitude of **restaurants** in lower Manhattan—a gastronomical Mecca—although the MPD venue depends in large part on the occasion. For casual brunches or weeknight dinners, I prefer the Standard Bar & Grill, Paradou (aim for the outdoor garden area), Son Cubano (live music and salsa dancing), and Bill’s Bar and Burger. Some of my other favorite casual eateries reside on the fringes of Meatpacking: Café Gitane (quaint Parisian café in the Jane Hotel); La Taza de Oro (Puerto Rican cuisine); the Fatty Crab (Malaysian); and the Spotted Pig (extremely popular European gastro pub).

Low-key drinks are shared at the Standard Beer Garden, Gaslight, or over foosball and board games at 675 Bar. Brass Monkey is my go-to dive, with a younger crowd that takes me back to my college days. Formal evenings, occasion-driven or not, are spent at the Homestead steakhouse, or over Italian cuisine at Valbella or the newly opened Scarpetta. Nights of every variety can be concluded at the nearby Diner, where greasy disco fries work wonders to prevent hangovers (open ‘til 6am on Saturdays).

Shopping in the Meatpacking District is civilized compared to more dense touristy areas like Soho and 5th Avenue. Stores are spacious and walking between them is easy, but the majority of MPD stores—Diane Von Furstenburg, Alexander McQueen, Stella McCartney, Christian Louboutin—are out of any normal person’s price range. Some of the more affordable boutiques—like Jeffrey, Scoop and Calypso—lure me in for the occasional accessory splurge, but I prefer to spend my free days meandering along the newly opened High Line.

The High Line—originally utilized as a lifted rail track—was nearly demolished during the 1990s. Dedicated community efforts precluded this fate by offering a unique alternative for the rare space. The result, a sort of raised public park, is loyal to its original purpose and synchronized to contemporary design. Wild, weed-ridden foliage borders the pathway, and wooden seats, some of which link into the original rail tracks, provide visitors the chance to sit and soak up Hudson vistas.

I’m also hugely fond of sharing beers and games of ping-pong at the **Standard Hotel** Beer Garden. This large semi-outdoor space brings urban zest to the traditional German Biergarten. A variety of foreign and domestic accents buzz across the narrow wooden tables, where people snack on pretzels and pound heavy steins of beer. Adjacent to the beer garden is the Standard Grill, a fantastic, reasonably affordable restaurant that defies the MPD vibe with warmth, traditional décor and food. The burger and fries are absolutely decadent, and lunching there is a welcome alternative to the established spots (Pastis and

Barbuto) and the ultra-rowdy Bagatelle (where lunch precedes heavy boozing and dancing typically reserved for nightclubs).

The willingness to pair modernity (epitomized by the hotel structure, lobby and upper level bars) with classic, even retro, features (the Standard Grill and most of the hotel suites) characterizes the Standard's spirit. Creativity is of utmost importance, whether in guest rooms (masculine throw-backs that conjure up images of Hugh Hefner circa 1970) or the upper terraces, one of which includes large mattress-like seats where guests can sip cocktails and watch the sun set, or more likely, rise.

Other late night revelers do the same atop the Hotel Gansevoort, the first contemporary hotel to grace the MPD skyline. Although the Standard and Gansevoort are comparable in size, price, and scene, at least when the metrics are modern and trendy, the two employ distinctive styles. Unlike the retro newcomer, the Gansevoort is 110% modern, its color-scheme dominated by gray and neutral colors (with, of course, the requisite splash of lavender). The Gansevoort rooms are more classic, feminine and spacious than those at the Standard, and the hotel service seems more on cue. What's missing is the Standard's friendliness and edge, or maybe the Gansevoort just feels old in comparison, in a place where newness reigns.

It's fitting that I end my musings, here, with the two landmark MPD hotels. These two structures dramatically changed the MPD landscape, one that is now eternally influenced by their presence, for better or worse. They demonstrate too that the neighborhood caters to vacationers more than locals, this being a neighborhood of fantasy over fiction...either a liberating or depressing realization depending on your intentions.