urban ADVENTURES

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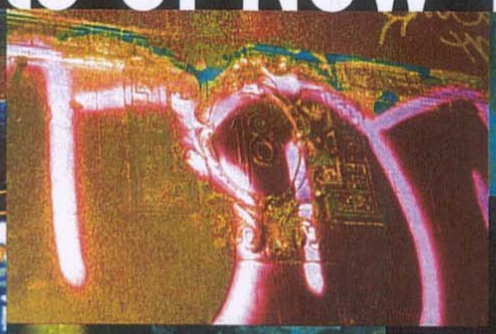
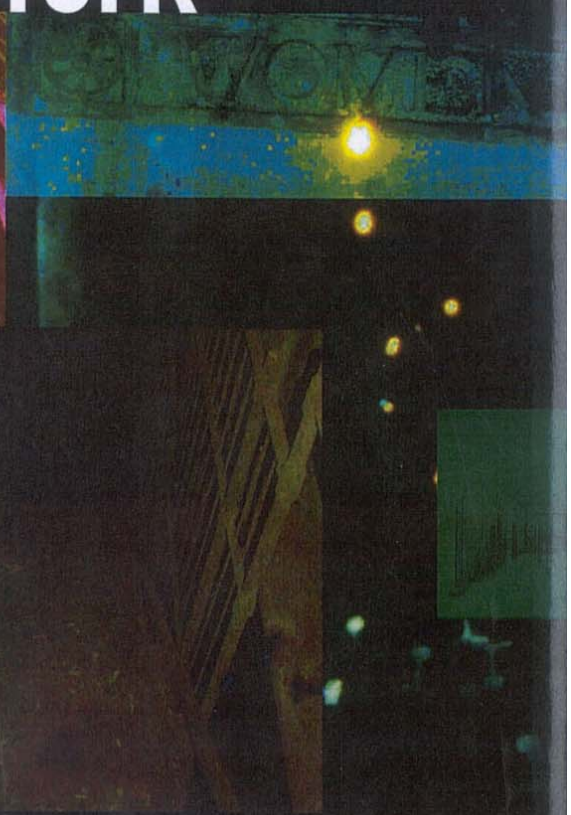
The Ghosts of New York





THE CITY THAT BEST SYMBOLIZES THE CONCRETE JUNGLE HAS A SIDE TO IT THAT IS RARELY, IF EVER, EXPLORED BEYOND THE QUICK GLIMPSES OF THE GLAZED COMMUTER.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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DISCLAIMER:
Do not try this at home. Professional driver on a closed course. Surgeon General's warning. Objects in mirror are closer than they appear. Keep hands and feet inside the ride at all times. Any and all disclaimers apply here: entering and/or crossing the tracks of the New York City subway system is illegal, dangerous, and carries a penalty of fine and possible imprisonment . . . not to mention 600 volts.

We approached the tunnel shortly after midnight local time. We'd timed the intervals of the guard's patrol. The last armed officer passed by on a skeletal steel walkway to the south of us, and we ducked beneath the security cameras and headed into the northern mouth, scrambling through the darkness and pausing briefly at a turn-of-the-century generator to check our gear. The route we followed was dangerous, and our path was littered with potentially lethal pitfalls. Our breath frosted before us, and scurrying over our boots and clambering about were fat Norwegian rats—surly, fearless and host to countless maladies. We ignored them. The going was perilous ahead; the tunnel curved to the northwest beyond our view. There was no telling what we might encounter once we were committed. We turned on the headlamps attached to our helmets, and stepped away from the safety the generators afforded us, moving carefully toward our target.

The 4 train came barreling around the corner. We scarcely had time to hurdle three sets of 600-volt third rails and get back to the generators. As the Lexington Express clacked by, we let out a collective sigh: hard to believe the commuters think the New York subway experience is rough.

Okay, so we hadn't timed the trains quite right. Having lived to remember our lesson, we followed the tracks another 30 meters to what had once been the 18th Street station, closed since 1948 and now covered in grime and graffiti, but still very much standing.

It's a place no train will ever take you, and one where a subway token is of no use (some of these stations were closed before tokens were even introduced). This is an experience in which

both the journey and the destination are of equal fascination. Getting to an abandoned subway station is an often harrowing—and exhilarating—experience, but the arrival is just as great: we are privy to a place that once teemed with Depression and war-era commuters but now sits dead and forgotten within a city of millions. An abandoned subway station is a desolate island in New York's sea of frenetic energy.

beneath is a federal offense, and the route, long and dark. Some stations are intentionally lit so that a passing motorman can easily spot an intruder. Some are along tunnels where there is no place to escape a train should one bear down on you.

But 18th Street has always been our sentimental favorite, though not for any particular reason. It bore witness to the 1991 crash in which a drunk motorman hit the switches at 40 miles per hour and

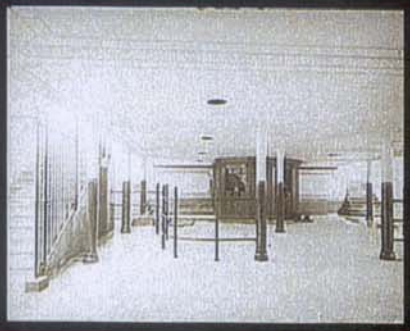
Aggressive express trains aside,

our venture into the bowels of New York City's dark warrens went exceptionally well...this time. We roamed the old platform, viewing the intricate ceramic shields and tilework, determining where certain features would have been located, and making futile attempts at deciphering the graffiti that covered it all. As uptown and downtown local and express trains passed the station every few minutes, we avoided notice by turning our lights down and positioning ourselves within grimy, tile-ensconced alcoves or deep within stairwells with no outlet.

Admittedly, there have been less successful attempts. Construction, repair and maintenance crews working the rails, junkies, taggers, transit cops and good citizens have all kept us from a station at one time or another. Some stations have specific hindrances. The grate through which we enter one particular station is right outside a 24-hour donut shop—can there be any greater magnet for New York's Finest? Some stations are exceptionally difficult to access, and the penalties (inherent dangers notwithstanding) are far more severe. One station is now under a federal building. Trespassing threw the train off the tracks, killing five and threatening to drop portions of Park Avenue into the tunnels. Emergency crews entered the station via a sidewalk panel and constructed a sluice built of plywood and 2x4s along the old staircase to slide telephone poles into the tunnel. Workers used those lengths of timber to shore up the ceilings until the damaged steel support beams could be replaced.

When we embark upon our

subterranean excursions, we usually dress in a fashion similar to such workers: union suits, steel-toed boots, Carhartts, safety vests, hardhats with lamps, work gloves. The gear is not only appropriate for the environs but also helps us escape scrutiny from the casual commuter—two guys dressed in blue-collar work attire arouse far less suspicion than would two guys in jeans and T-shirts waving flashlights around. Once we arrive at our destination and are safe from the trains' danger, we typically shed the reflective vests so we aren't caught in the lights of an oncoming train. Go ahead and try, but you won't see us once we're down there. We're invisible. We're ghosts. ▶



Staying aboard the train is certainly a far safer alternative than walking the tracks—especially because there is no real place to get out of an approaching train's path.

Ride the trains long enough

and eventually you'll see one of them: a recess along the tunnel walls that sinks well beyond your field of vision. There are four completely abandoned stations, more than a dozen with large unused portions, and countless lengths of unused tunnel and track. So why, in a city where real estate is at such a premium, are these stations idle, doomed to languish in dust and spray paint?

The answer is fairly simple: the subway is popular. When the city's original subway system (the Interborough Rapid Transit, or IRT) opened for business in October 1904, local trains were five cars long and express trains three, and the stations were built accordingly. But ridership grew far beyond anything the planners had imagined, and the need for trains with greater capacity (i.e., with more and longer cars) became apparent.

In 1940 the IRT, along with the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Company (BMT) was purchased by the city, and along with the city-owned Independent (IND) system, merged into one entity. So began a decades-long process of extending the IRT stations to accommodate what would eventually be a 10-car train, more than doubling the length of the stations. At certain locations along the original IRT line, stations were spaced too close to one another to warrant extension, thus resulting in the abandonment of some.

The showpiece of the system, City Hall station, was a loop station, and the extreme curve of the tracks were not conducive to the new, longer trains. The station doomed itself in its grand design, and was last used by passengers in December 1945. Though by far the most beautiful, City Hall was not a heavily used station, and the Brooklyn Bridge station was only a train-length to the north. Part of the Union Square station (at 14th Street) was expanded to 17th Street, thus making our beloved 18th Street obsolete. The 86th Street station on the Seventh Avenue line was expanded northward and the 96th Street station expanded to the south, pinching the 91st Street station out of use in 1959. Worth Street, on the other hand, survived the first round of expansions but was closed during another Brooklyn Bridge station expansion. The result: the downtown stretches of what is now the 6 train are an urban spelunker's dream. From the old City Hall station to 23rd Street—a rail distance of less than two and a half miles—there are three abandoned stations (City Hall, Worth and 18th) and several lengths of abandoned platforms in between.

Some abandoned stations

simply sit in neglect, fading into history as subtly as they fade into the shadows. Many others are used as movie locations, such as the lower level of the 9th Avenue station in Brooklyn. (Remember that closing scene in *Crocodile Dundee* when Paul Hogan walks on everyone's shoulders?) The old Court Street shuttle station in Brooklyn, originally abandoned in 1946, was reopened in 1976 as a temporary exhibit during the Bicentennial. The exhibit proved so popular that it was never closed, and this year the New York Transit Museum there will celebrate its 25th anniversary.

The success of the transformed Court Street station, which had originally run the HH shuttle train, prompted an announcement in 1995 that federal grant money would fund a restoration of the City Hall station, and dedicate the classic station as an extension of the Transit Museum by 1998. *The New York Times*, *National Geographic* and other publications heralded the promised museum. But in late 1998, the city canceled the renovation plans for the station, and the public was prohibited from riding the loop any longer. The Transit Museum also canceled their popular guided tours of the station and other closed areas such as the 91st Street station, which were a popular part of their "Day One on the IRT" tour.

You can see most of the abandoned stations, briefly, from passing trains. These days, the safest—and almost only—way to see the City Hall station is to remain on the downtown 6 past the current "last stop" at Brooklyn Bridge. Transit workers usually check the cars and clear the trains (and if they ask you to exit, please do so), but on occasion they skip the process and assume all passengers have moved clear. If one happens to stay on the train, it won't stop at the City Hall station, but it will roll through the loop slow enough to afford a good look at the system's former "crown jewel." Trust us: staying aboard the train is certainly a far safer alternative than walking the tracks—especially because there is no real place to get out of an approaching train's path between Brooklyn Bridge and the City Hall loop (the IRT lines were not fitted with catwalks like some later routes).

So what about the infamous

tunnel dwellers, those ghoul-like people who live in the vast tunnel system and never see daylight? Largely myth. Sadly, there are certainly homeless denizens in the subway, but most of the homeless community that everybody seems to have heard about on the street, or read about in Jennifer Toth's wildly inaccurate *Mole People*, didn't live within NYC's subway system. That seemingly ubiquitous but entirely human community made their home within a series of Amtrak tunnels on Manhattan's Upper West Side, and have since been removed by Amtrak police and social workers. Though certainly a concern to the urban spelunker, the homeless aren't as great a concern as trains or that live rail (and no, there aren't any alligators, either).

There are abandoned subway stations outside of Gotham. The Paris Metro has a dozen derelict stations (many abandoned during World War II and some as early as 1930), and several other cities (including Rome, Boston and Toronto) have a few disused stations. King William Street station in London has been closed now for 101 years, and Cincinnati has abandoned their entire system.

But New York's stations capture the imagination like no other, and there are sections we haven't even begun to investigate. All said, the journey is sometimes dangerous, often filthy, and always intense. After running the rails, simply riding them is never quite the same.

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