



Where in the World is Willine?

A 79-year-old makes
her first trip to NYC

BY DANA SHAVIN



WILLINE TAKES HER FIRST SUBWAY RIDE.

The first time I went to New York, it was 1979. I was a freshman on summer break from Bard College. I was exhilarated — and overwhelmed.

The first night of my month-long apartment-sitting gig on West 57th Street, my boyfriend's pricey camera was stolen from the trunk of his car. Every morning that month I walked past homeless people begging for change and hooting construction workers begging for smiles, to my waitressing job on Broadway where the patrons were hurried and surly and the busboys stole tips off the tables.

When my sitting gig was up, I vowed I was through with New York.

As it turns out, I was just getting started. I've returned to the city numerous times since then, mostly with my husband, Daryl.

Today's New York is far kinder than its late 1970s gritty, less forgiving self, and so we thought it might be fun to take his mother for a visit for her 79th birthday. We would introduce her to Broadway, real bagels, museums,

the subway, skyscrapers, Central Park, exotic foods — all things with which she had no familiarity.

She didn't even have to think before saying 'yes.'

Willine (pronounced Will-lean) was born in rural Cairo, Illinois. She married after high school, had Daryl at age 21, and for the next 60 years lived with her husband, a forklift driver who died two years ago, on a 100-acre farm in Bradford, Tennessee (population 1,053). There she ran a small but successful beauty shop next to the house.

There were a few family trips: to Louisville to see relatives, to concerts in Memphis, to the Houston Astrodome, but she had never been to New York.

Because Willine had recently had heart surgery, we decided we would plan at most two major events or sights per day (aside from meals and shopping), and we would take Uber whenever possible, plus one cab ride and one subway ride just to give her the experience.

In the pre-dawn hours of a warm fall day, we boarded a plane at Chattanooga's Lovell Field. It would be Willine's first flight in over 50 years.

DAY ONE

Down the steps and into the acrid, teeming intestines of New York we went, watching Willine's face for signs of discomfort, joy or anything in-between. But she isn't one to show her cards. One year at Christmas, Daryl accidentally tucked his well-worn toothbrush into her Christmas stocking. She pulled it out and, after examining it, thanked him warmly. When we explained what had happened, she said in her characteristic soft drawl, "Well, I thought it was an unusual gift." Not even when we were on the subway, and Willine found her shoulder pressed into service as a stranger's pillow, did she appear ruffled.

OUR STOPS

Zabar's

2245 BROADWAY

If Judaism has a smell, and I think it does, it is Zabar's, an authentic Upper West Side Jewish deli. There are blintzes (thin pancakes filled with sweetened cheese), knishes (fist-sized knots of mushroom, potato and spinach) and bagels of seemingly infinite varieties. Willine, who is not Jewish, had never seen — much less eaten — most of these foods. Her verdict? Two thumbs up on the blintz, a pleasant but not overly enthusiastic thumbs-up on the bagel, and no thumbs up on the knish. (In her defense, it was a little bland.)

Metropolitan Museum of Art

1000 FIFTH AVE.

The line to get in was about 200 people long, but we moved quickly. Once inside we made our way to the modern masters floor, where Willine got to see, for the first time, works by Picasso, Matisse, O'Keefe, Pollock, Kandinsky, Warhol and many others. She would later admit she'd been overwhelmed by standing in front of masterpieces she'd previously only seen in books.

Hangawi



COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT, WILLINE, HER SON DARYL THETFORD AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW DANA SHAVIN MEET UP WITH FRIEND BRIAN RICHARDS AT HANGAWI RESTAURANT. RICHARDS WOULD SUGGEST WILLINE'S FAVORITE ACTIVITY FROM DAY 2: THE BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF "MOULIN ROUGE."

12 E. 32ND ST.

Daryl and I had discovered Hangawi the previous winter and thought it some of the best vegetarian food we'd ever tried. We loved that you had to remove your shoes at the door. We loved the extensive tea menu and the elegantly earthy serving platters and the cast-iron hot pot soup that arrived at the table in a roiling boil and whose combined temperature and spice level threatened to do permanent damage to exposed skin, not to mention mouths. Willine ordered the Zen stone bowl bibimbap, wild mountain greens with mushrooms served with black rice and spicy chili sauce — a brave choice for a woman more comfortable with homegrown collards and mild cream-colored carbohydrates.

She loved it.

Eataly

200 FIFTH AVE., FLAT IRON DISTRICT

If there is anything I've learned in the 30 years I've been a part of Daryl's family, it's that the remedy for an out of control gastrointestinal blaze is dessert. Eataly is the Disney World of Italian prepared, pre-packaged and sit-down-and-order-from-a-menu foods. There we consumed, without shame, puffed pastries stuffed with cream, hazelnut chocolate trifles, and a mailbox-sized amount of tri-flavored gelato.

Willine's top pick: Seeing the work of the masters at the Met
DAY TWO

One of the highlights Daryl had planned for his mother was a Broadway show. Our friend Brian recommended "Moulin Rouge," which he loved so much he's seen it three times. Ben Brantley, in his review of the play for The New York Times, called it "... a gasp-inspiring nest of valentine hearts, cushioned nooks and outsize exotica, illuminated in shades of pink and red."

OUR STOPS

Brooklyn Bagel Company

286 EIGHTH AVE.

This deli feels a bit less homey than Zabar's, but it too was crowded. Having crossed kishkas and blintzes off her to-do list, Willine opted



THE VIEW FROM ONE WORLD TRADE CENTER

for an unfussy bagel with eggs. As at Zabar's, the toasting of these bagels was perfectly executed, and, with the addition of bright orange slices of lox, a more perfect breakfast there never was or could be.

One World Trade Center
285 FULTON ST.

While this 1,776-foot-tall skyscraper stands on haunted ground — the site of the World Trade Center which fell in the 9/11 attacks — it is not itself depressing in any way. The views of the city from all points north, south, east and west are stunning. For mothers-in-law and others not accustomed to large crowds and days that begin early and end late, the venue features plenty of seating. And the people-watching, like the views from the windows, is unparalleled. It might have been here that Willine observed, “People in New York don’t dress like people in West Tennessee.”

Desigual

594 BROADWAY

If you are looking for something to do that could not interest your mother-in-law any less, we recommend a trip to Desigual. This is a clothing store whose styles are mostly outlandish and pretty much unwearable unless you are 12-19 years old and the star of a Teen Vogue magazine ad.

Nanoosh Mediterranean

111 UNIVERSITY PLACE, GREENWICH VILLAGE

Nanoosh is a low-key place, not terribly comfortable for lingering, but the authentic offerings make up for it. The utterly fresh baba ganouj, pillowy pita bread and watermelon and feta salad put joy on my husband's face. Willine's meaty-tasting but meat-free lentil soup came in what looked like a bottomless cup, and she loved it.

Al Hirschfeld Theater

302 W. 45TH ST.

As Brantley wrote of the play we were about to see, “This one's for the hedonists.” Daryl and I worried that a play set in a burlesque club featuring scantily clad women cavorting around a stage might make Willine uncomfortable, but she beamed throughout. As everyone knows, it's hard to hew to high moral ground when the conduct in question is so darned entertaining.

Kodama Sushi

301 W. 45TH ST.

Searching for a suitable dinner spot, we settled reluctantly on what we were certain would be a tourist nightmare: Kodama Sushi, directly across the street from the theater. It turned out to be some of the best sushi Daryl and I have had anywhere, and we've had a lot of sushi everywhere. Because Willine had heard rumors about the existence

of “sushi worms” that live in the gut of people who eat contaminated raw fish, she opted for the tempura shrimp, which arrived at the table looking like a plated sculpture — and which she declared was some of the best fried shrimp she'd ever had.

Willine's top pick: “Moulin Rouge”

DAY THREE

Daryl and I loved showing Willine some of the richness and mystery we have found in the city over the years, not just great food and art and theater but also what it feels like to be in one of the most iconic cities in America, feeling the swirl of excitement around you and becoming a part of the swirl itself. So before we boarded a plane for home and watched the city and all her charms disappear below us, we decided to soak up as much more as we could fit into the short time we had left.

OUR STOPS

Housing Works

143 W. 17TH ST.

This quirky nonprofit consignment store is where high-end furniture hobnobs with costume jewelry, a wide assortment of dishware from the funky to the kitschy, and a smallish selection of clothing and shoes ranging from cheap to unaffordable. Proceeds from the sales go to fight AIDS and homelessness.

Whitney Museum

99 GANSEVOORT ST.

By the time the museum opened, we had only about an hour to spare before we needed to grab lunch and get to the airport. With the famed Whitney Biennial underway — 75 artists and collectives showcasing painting, sculpture, installation, film, photography, performance and more — we were sorry we didn't have hours to spend.

Willine's top pick: The unusual contemporary art installations at the Whitney, and a cab ride to the airport



WILLINE AND HER SON, DARYL, ON HER FIRST FLIGHT IN 50 YEARS



WILLINE AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



WILLINE SHOPS AT DESIGUAL

A few weeks post-trip, I checked in with Willine to see what lasting impressions she had of the trip and the city. Apart from the sites of Manhattan, she was also fascinated by the people themselves.

“I didn't expect they would be so nice,” she said.

She was especially touched by our last Uber driver, an adorable, trash-talking, hijab-wearing young Muslim woman, and how hard she worked to get us through intense traffic to the airport on time, and how concerned she was that we catch our flight. “She treated us like family and I'll never forget

her,” said Willine.

“Everyone should get to see New York at least once, and the trip was more special because I went with family.”

New York can be overwhelming, whether you are 17 or 79. But Willine's openness to everything, and her cheerfulness despite rain, chilly temperatures, a packed schedule and unfamiliar foods, made for a great trip and a memorable way to spend time together outside the usual confines of home and holidays.

In fact, when we asked her what she wanted to do for her 80th birthday, she said, “San Francisco!” **CM**