

New York



If you are a movie buff, you probably know that – at least in cinema – New York is the centre of the world. Superheroes have their base here – Spiderman, the Avengers, Doctor Strange – you name them. If aliens invade Earth, they will attack New York first. Giant monsters likewise. Zombie apocalypses, paranormal events, portals to other dimensions... they will all have their epicentre in the Big Apple. If the entire world population is wiped out, you can bet that the last person standing will be found living in New York.

But New York is not just the city of earth-shattering events. Stories about big business find their ideal location here, on Wall Street. And there are no greater crime stories than the ones set in the Bronx or Little Italy, while Bohemian life has its natural setting in Greenwich Village. Not to mention love stories: what greater backdrop is there for them than the Big Apple?

There are so many great places to visit in New York that have been made even greater by cinema! I have chosen three: the Empire State Building, Washington Square Park and the Statue of Liberty.

Let's go!

I land at JFK Airport, in Queens. To get to my first destination, I decide to take a yellow cab. "Taxi!"

What a feeling!

I'm sitting inside a cinematic icon. Who doesn't recognise New York's cabs? It's not just because they're yellow. They have appeared in hundreds of films that have made them the most famous, recognisable taxis in the world. As I make small talk with the driver, Manhattan's phenomenal skyline starts to appear in front of us. And standing proudly in the middle of it is my first destination: the Empire State Building.

"Thank you! Keep the change!"

The Empire State Building looks impressive from down here. Construction lasted only 14 months and was completed in 1931. With a rooftop height of 381 metres, it was the tallest building in the world, a record it held for 42 years.

Its name comes from the nickname of the State of New York: the Empire State. It's fitting: solid, elegant, proud, almost arrogant, it can be considered *the* ultimate New York building, its most iconic representative.

I take the elevator up to the observation deck on the 86th floor.

The view of the city from up here is stunning.

To the south I see Lower Manhattan, with Freedom Tower dominating the Financial District. To the north is a forest of skyscrapers and the large, green rectangle of Central Park. But I'm more interested in what's above me: the building's beautiful art deco mast. It was supposed to be a docking station for airships, but was never used for that purpose – the logistics proved too complicated. I'm interested in this mast because it's the setting of a climactic battle fought between a giant ape and four biplanes.

It was 1933, and the movie was *King Kong*. The film tells the story of Carl Denham, a filmmaker who captures a gigantic ape named Kong on a mysterious island. He brings Kong back to New York to exploit him as a circus attraction. But the giant ape breaks free and runs amok in the city. At the film's climax, Kong climbs the Empire State Building and, at the top of its mast, fights for his life against four armed biplanes.

It's a violent, cruel scene that ends with the death of Kong. Depending on how you look at it, the Empire State Building can be a symbol of human ingenuity and modern civilization, or the emblem of an urban jungle which is merciless with its citizens and visitors, a seductive gilded world, a prison of glass, capable of crushing dreams and aspirations.

The Empire State Building was only two years old and it had already become an icon, not only of New York but of cinema too.

Once back at street-level, I walk down 5th Avenue. It's one of the main thoroughfares of New York, a straight, ten kilometre avenue that starts in Harlem, flanks Central Park, passes by museums and landmarks, and ends at my second destination: Washington Square Park.

The park is in Greenwich Village, once the Bohemian heart of New York. Many of the buildings around the park belong to New York University, and the place is still a lively meeting place for students and artists.

I walk around and look at the statues – there's one of Garibaldi – but especially at the benches. "It was on a bench in Washington Square," wrote Mark Twain, "that I saw the most of Louis Stevenson." Yes, on one of these benches, in 1888, two giants of English literature sat and talked. They were two of the most popular writers of the time: the authors of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Treasure Island*. Stevenson's main business in the park, wrote Twain, was to "absorb the sunshine."

I sit on a bench and absorb the sunshine myself, thinking that many other authors have passed by here. The writers of the Beat generation hung out in this park, as did the protagonists of the counterculture of the 50s and 60s.

I decided to come here because of a film shot during that vibrant period: the 1967 comedy *Barefoot in the Park*, starring Robert Redford and Jane Fonda. It's the troubled love story of a newlywed couple who move into a small flat not far from here. Jane Fonda interprets Corie, a free spirit, while Robert Redford is Paul, a down-to-earth lawyer. Corie accuses her husband of being too rational and stiff because he won't walk barefoot in Washington Square Park; a crazy idea, according to Paul, because it's winter.

It's a lighthearted comedy, and yet there's something deep and magical about it. Corie and Paul embody the two spirits of New York: the eccentric and the pragmatic, the artistic and the conformist, the dreamer and the achiever. And the two short circuits right here, in Washington Square Park.

The first two places I visited, and the films set there, suggest that New York is a place of contrasts and contradictions. My third destination – the Statue of Liberty – is different: she's a straightforward symbol of hope, progress, freedom and democracy. To visit her I need to get to the tip of Manhattan, some three kilometres south of here, so, again, I hail a cab.

"Taxi!"

The cabdriver takes me through Soho, then Tribeca, and, finally, the Financial District. We pass under Freedom Tower and reach Battery Park, where I board one of the Statue City Cruises.

Liberty Enlightening the World, or, more simply, the Statue of Liberty, was built in France by sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi and assembled here. Financed by the French and American people, she was meant to represent the friendship between France and the US. The Statue quickly transcended this initial meaning. She became a universal symbol of freedom and democracy. She also came to represent hope for the countless immigrants who arrived by ship to New York in search of a better life. "Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," says the Statue in Emma Lazarus' famous poem 'The New Colossus'.

When I look up at this giant, green statue, I have the strange sensation of having been here before, even though this is my first visit. I've seen her so many times in films that she has become uncannily familiar. Of all the movies she's in, I'm not interested in the ones where she appears as a comforting symbol of hope, but those where she's destroyed.

Most examples come from science fiction films. In the poster of *Escape from New York*, her head appears torn off and lying in a street. In *Cloverfield*, she's beheaded. She's submerged in ice in *The Day After Tomorrow*, and toppled in *Independence Day*. She's destroyed in one of the more recent Godzilla films and, most famously, she's half-buried on a beach in the revealing climax of the 60s classic *Planet of the Apes*.

The Statue of Liberty is a favourite victim in disaster movies and dystopic films because of her powerful, clear-cut symbolism. When she's destroyed by a natural disaster the message is clear: humanity can be easily swept away by the forces of nature. Dystopias, on the other

hand, destroy or pervert the Statue to suggest that the values she stands for – freedom, progress, hope and democracy – have been subverted.

And yet the statue is never fully obliterated in these films. What's left of her is a reminder that not all hope is lost.

As I stand here, looking up at Lady Liberty, I'm amazed at how this nineteenth century neoclassical copper statue has become a protagonist of the most speculative and futuristic of film genres.

My trip to New York ends here, on Liberty Island. I hope I was able to convey some of the awe this city exudes, as well as raise interest in the films that celebrate it.

Until next time.