

# Start spreadin' the news

Located across the Hudson River from Manhattan, Hoboken, N.J. is much more than just the birthplace of Frank Sinatra.

WORDS PAUL PRENDERGAST

**MORE OFTEN THAN NOT**, travel can throw up some pleasant surprises in places you least expect.

And in this case, I didn't quite know what to expect when visiting New Jersey last year.

I'm confident most locals would agree it is not generally regarded as an international tourism hotspot, certainly not by comparison to its venerable neighbour, New York City.

I was originally drawn to Hoboken, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, with nothing more than personal convenience in mind.

Covering the golf at the bi-annual Presidents Cup matches was the primary purpose for this visit and Hoboken was just a few miles to the north of the host venue, the Liberty National course in Jersey City.

I figured it to be an easier commute than crossing the river from Manhattan so, armed only with the knowledge of Hoboken's link to Frank Sinatra, Carlo's Bakery (from TV show *Cake Boss* fame) and the origins of baseball, we booked an apartment off 3rd St for the week ahead.

It proved to be an inspired decision because Hoboken, quite frankly, was a revelation and one of the highlights of a week in which the Internationals suffered a frightful drubbing at the hands of the Americans.

Wandering Hoboken's historic tree-lined streets of tidy brownstone homes – complete with the familiar external fire escapes so synonymous with the architectural style in New York – we were taken by the tranquillity of the spaces within this square mile precinct.

The last blooms of Autumn (Fall) were still flourishing in gardens and planter boxes and the first decorations of Halloween were starting to appear here and there in the windows, on stairs and in shop fronts.

While there is plenty of shopping, food and nightlife to be sampled along the busier main drag of Washington Street (my wife and daughter soon became regulars at Carlo's) and the waterfront areas with their uninterrupted views of the Manhattan skyline, the true charm of Hoboken for us lay in a stroll a few blocks to the west.

By day, school children played in shaded communal parks, dogs were walked, squirrels danced about with unflagging energy, people were enjoying alfresco catch-ups with friends in one of the many small restaurants, cafés and Italian delis that seem to materialise discreetly on every corner.

By night, families pushed strollers, people played pickup basketball, visited boutique galleries, joined in activities in art spaces or just generally enjoyed their good fortune in being able to live in this gentrified sanctuary adjacent to one of the world's busiest cities.

Best of all, Hoboken is just a 15-minute ride on the New Jersey Path train from the neon blindness of Times Square in Midtown, Manhattan.

The enormous legacy of Frank Sinatra is impossible to ignore in this town. Ole' Blue Eyes was born and raised in Hoboken and the community continues to pay homage to one of the 20th Century's most influential entertainment icons.

A star is embedded in the sidewalk outside his birthplace, parks and streets are dedicated to him and images from his long and colourful career adorn the walls of establishments everywhere.

I dropped in to Luca Brasil's Italian Deli on a quiet street corner for a quick bite on my way to the golf and drank in the framed Sinatra memorabilia that packed the walls, which included the famous police mugshots from a 1938 arrest.

We had a similar experience at the acclaimed Leo's Grandevous, where between the mouth-watering mussels with white wine entrée and my Lamb Bolognese, the waiter proudly remarked that 'Sinatra used to come in here all the time'.

The first game of baseball is said to have been played on the Elysian Fields of Hoboken in 1846 between the Knickerbockers and New Yorks. The fields are long gone but the location of the baseball diamond is marked with a plaque at home plate and base numbers on each corner of an intersection at the northern end of Washington St.

Maxwell's Bar has been a live music institution in the greater New York area for decades and the 3rd base on the diamond sits on the pavement immediately outside Maxwell's front door. >>

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Another of New Jersey's favourite sons – Bruce Springsteen – filmed the music video for the hit 'Glory Days' on the tiny corner stage right there in Maxwell's.

Other quaint bars in leafy locales – like O'Neal's on Park and 4th – are reminiscent of pubs in Sydney's Paddington area, for example, although the college football blaring out on big screens provided a constant reminder that you were on the other side of the world.

The Italian heritage coursing through the veins of Hoboken provides a strong influence to the cuisine of the area but if a hankering for home calls, you might find solace in the Bluestone Lane café on Washington Street.

The Bluestone is run by Kat, a native of Perth who has relocated to the U.S., as have many other Aussie baristas who are making their mark in the city.

The menu board offers up Vegemite toast as an option and it was comforting to be able to order a 'Skinny Flat White' or a 'Long Black' without dumbfounding everyone within earshot.

With the Presidents Cup over, my family and I moved across to Manhattan to spend an extra week soaking up the sights and sounds of New York, criss-crossing the town to stay in different areas and experience as much of life in the city as we could.

On our final night spent drinking in the sunset views over NYC from a rooftop bar, our 18-year daughter was quizzed by a New York local on what part of the city she had enjoyed the most.

Given we had explored and walked all over Midtown, Times Square, through Central Park, Greenwich Village, Chelsea, the Financial District and the Nolita areas, a response of 'Hoboken' was a surprise even to us.

Hoboken can hardly be regarded as a 'secret' with a rich and varied history dating back to the 17th century, but it's vibrancy, walkability and the variety of other attractions we experienced in just four days suggests it should be included on any itinerary when visiting the NYC area. ●

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