

"NEW YORK, New York." "So good they named it twice."

Yeah, yeah, whatever! We've heard it mentioned so many times before that even for the most fervent gay traveller countless trips to this monstrous, bustling, cosmopolitan city can often end in disappointment as you fumble your way from one bar to the next, search for somewhere decent to eat and before you can say 'Hooters', it's time to schlep back to JFK or Newark for the fullest cavity search you'll have had all week, thanks to the unsmiling guys from American Homeland Security. But it needn't be that way. A long weekend in the Big Apple can pay dividends if

you adopt the one secret ingredient for making it a fulsome experience and that's 'planning'. Anathema to a lot of gays, I know, but if done in advance a long weekend in NYC can prove to be enjoyable, cultured and satisfying. With the dollar at an all-time low it can certainly prove less expensive than a weekend in London. We travelled (I'd like to say 'courtesy of' but we paid) with Continental Airlines from London Gatwick (slightly embarrassing) to Newark (which ain't JFK), but as we went in January, we picked up return flights for just under £200, which is not to be sniffed at. And for the best deals on hotels check out www.hotels.com as they always have some amazing offers.

Word of mouth is always a better recommendation than guide books and magazines for where to go and eat (apart from this article, of course) so if you follow the simplest of instructions you'll have the time of your life.

After a seven-hour flight, a bus ride (told you we did this one on the cheap) from Newark to our hotel, **The Radisson Lexington**, and checking in the last thing you want to be worrying about is where you're going to eat. We'd booked a table at the famous **Mercer Kitchen** (99 Prince Street, New York 10012. Tel: 001 212 996 5454), which is located in the Bohemian-chic area of SoHo/NoHo. Smart, but not too in-yer-face with an eclectic mix of diners, this famous restaurant is not only good value for money but with Jean-Georges Vongerichten as Executive Chef, the food is exquisite. If you think American food is all burgers and steaks the size of a drag queen's handbag then you'd be wrong. With a bottle of wine and a couple of Cosmos the bill for two came to about \$150 - a bargain.

From there it's just a short hop, skip and a jump to what, in my opinion, is one of NYC's best gay bars, **XL** (357 W, 16th Street), which is slap-bang in the middle of Chelsea. However it's not that easy to find, so keep your eyes peeled for the hotel with ships' portals for windows and it's on the adjacent street. Stylish, fantastic toilets (design wise, I hasten to add) and split over two levels it's where all the gorgeous guys hang out. The Mezzanine level offers great views of the bar below

KEITH MC takes a bite-size piece of New York City



A SMALL SLICE OF A BIG APPLE

and although it sounds slutty - all the bar-men are buffed and topless, and you'll be wanting to slip them a few inches rather than the mandatory couple of dollars' tip. Open til late and with a Stoli and lemonade costing around \$6, just over £3, you'll be moaning your tits off to everyone who'll listen how overpriced London is in comparison.

After that we were dragged to a hip-hop night at **Plaid** (39W, 24th St) called **Select**. OK, so it was one of those clubs where ladies get in for free but it was full of cute gay guys as well. Apart from the sex clubs that Mayor Juliano has all but closed down, the New York gay scene is very mixed, so Select came as a very pleasant surprise.

The best cure for the Friday morning (well, afternoon) hangover was a Bloody Mary at **Saks** on Fifth Avenue - the department store to put all others in the shade, but don't be tempted to eat there as we were. Not only will you be surrounded by a sea

of 'ladies-who-lunch' (whilst not under the knife) but the food is God-awful. I won't dwell on it, so be warned. But please feel free to shop until you drop.

After all that plastic frenzy we just about had time to head back to the hotel, change and make our way to **The Biltmore Room** (www.thebiltmore-room.com) where we'd booked a table for dinner. Bookings are essential and it's worth making a bit of a sartorial effort. Not cheap, but sensational.

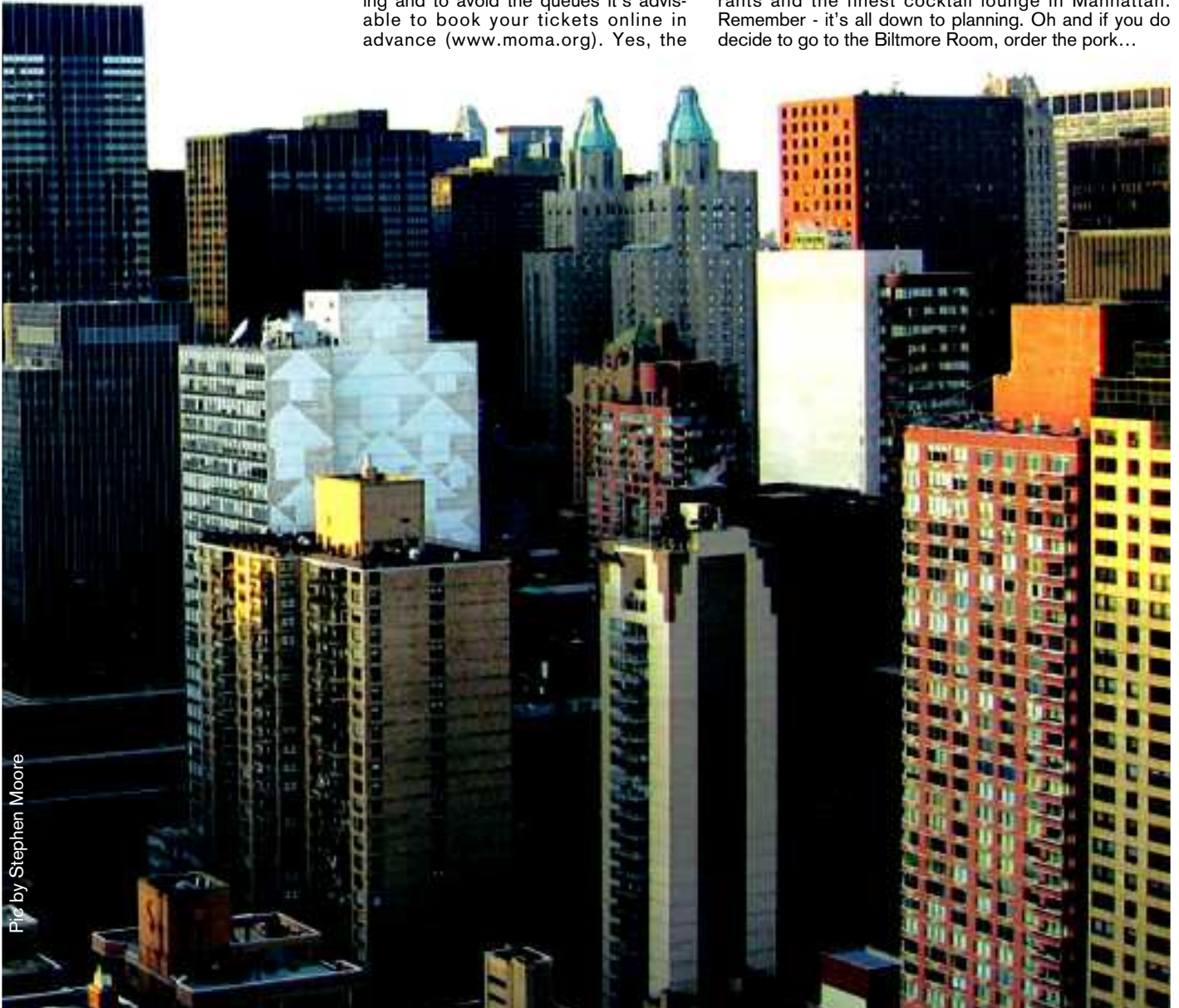
After that it was back to XL for a couple of Stolis - please note, always carry your business cards with you, remembering to add your hotel address, telephone and room number.

Saturday and Sunday were spent sight-seeing. You could spend a whole fortnight engaged in this activity but if you have time for only one bit of 'culture' then it has to be **MoMA** (Museum of Modern Art) in its brand new building designed by Yoshio Taniguchi. The space and collection of art is breathtaking and to avoid the queues it's advisable to book your tickets online in advance (www.moma.org). Yes, the

Guggenheim etc. are all worth a visit, but if you only want to do one museum it simply has to be this one.

Amongst many things for which this city is famous for are its cocktail lounges. We all know the Sex and the City haunts and the ubiquitous Cosmopolitan but, which is the best in NYC? The **Flatiron Lounge** without doubt. Not only did it feature in the UK Guardian Magazine before Christmas but it's also been voted the best cocktail lounge in the NYC Time Out Awards, as well as having the most eclectic list of cocktails in addition to one of the finest mixologists in town. You can book (www.flatironlounge.com) a table of four or more and you won't believe your tastebuds - Flight of the Day (a taster of three cocktails) is a snip at \$18 but with cocktails costing no more than \$11 you'll be there all night. Our bill came to over \$300 dollars so it's easy to get carried away - well, there were five of us. It's not gay but who cares when you get a Sour Apple Martini that will transport you to ecstasy?

After that it was on to one of the stalwarts of the NYC Scene, **Splash** (50 West 17th Street between 516 Ave) where anything goes - the music is house, the men are sexy and dirty and the liquor is cheap. 'Nuff said. So there we have it - a long weekend in NYC that delivered culture, sexy gay bars and clubs, upmarket restaurants and the finest cocktail lounge in Manhattan. Remember - it's all down to planning. Oh and if you do decide to go to the Biltmore Room, order the pork...



Pic by Stephen Moore

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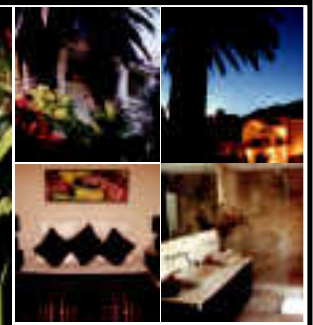


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