

About 7,50,000 people walk under the luminous roof of the Grand Central Terminal every day. But only a handful really look up to find a small square in the northwest corner of The Zodiac Ceiling which shows its original colour before it was refurbished in 1998.

THE WHEELS OF TIME

A GUIDED TOUR OF NEW YORK CITY'S GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL UNEARTHS HEAPS OF HISTORY, A CHEQUERED PAST AND SOME HANDY TIPS **BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**

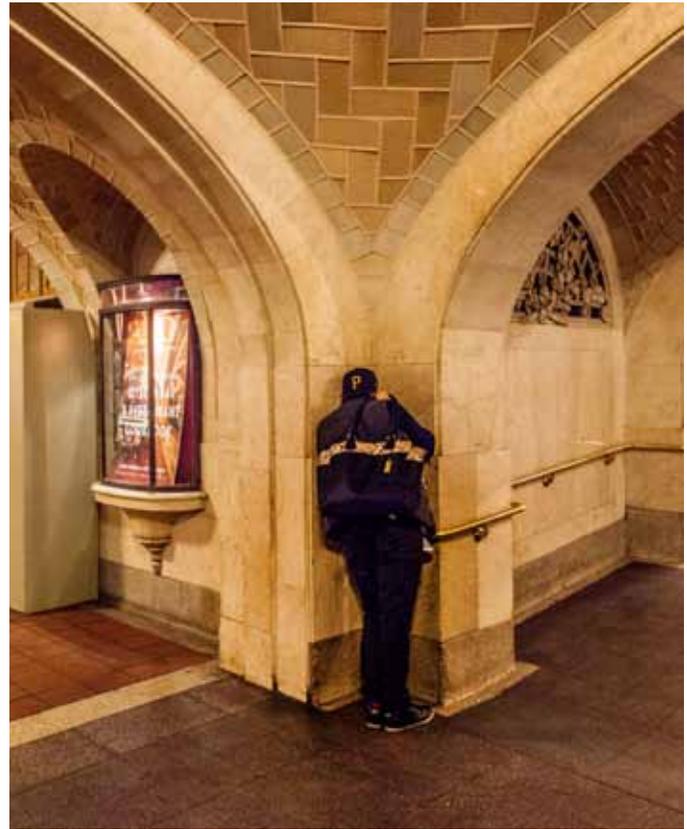
People discover their New York moment in various places; in the cheery music of a lone busker at Central Park, in the interminable wait to get inside the Met on a rainy day, even in the bite of a dense bagel laden with cream cheese. Me, I found it at the Grand Central Terminal. To be precise, at the statue of Roman god Mercury outside the building, flanked by Minerva and Hercules. Although this triumvirate sculpture is known as "Transportation," what it represents is the true spirit of New York. For, Mercury—messenger of the gods—is himself the god of commerce and communication, a fitting icon to this city that marches to the beat of financial glory. And on either

side, Hercules—known for his physical strength and love for adventure, and Minerva—goddess of wisdom and art.

SIZE MATTERS

Pass through the portal underneath and you enter one of the most iconic slices of NYC history, opened in 1913 and spread over 49 acres. Much like other important train stations all over the world, the Grand Central Terminal—just don't call it Grand Central Station, as that refers to the U.S. Post Office down the street—was a beehive of activity when I walked in late one spring morning for a guided tour. Commuters on their way to the platforms scurried on, immune to the magnificence of their

surroundings, whereas tourists such as myself simply stood and gaped in awe. The sweeping marble staircases, the lofty vaulted ceiling, the gleaming brass grills, all lit softly by sunshine streaming in through the tall windows, held my attention like a warm embrace. Early for my tour, I first headed to the Grand Central Market to graze and gaze upon the massive hall brimming with gourmet foods from all over the world. The market is a riot of colours and smells; think 400 types of cheese on display along with dozens of oven-fresh breads, juicy cuts of meat and bright fillets of fish. I was pleasantly surprised to see garam masala for sale, right next to Cajun potato mix and zaatar spice



The Whispering Gallery (right) at Grand Central Terminal is not an uncommon venue for wedding proposals; Magnolia Bakery's (top left) vanilla cupcakes are their bestsellers; Local vendors do brisk business at the Grand Central Market (bottom left).

mix, attesting to the city's status as the world's cultural melting pot.

EYE IN THE SKY

My two-hour walking tour started at the Main Concourse, with docent Bill Rosser directing our attention to the sprawling mural on the lobby's ceiling, a stunning canvas of 12 constellations painted in gold leaf, along with 2,500 stars, some of which twinkle with clever LED lighting. However, what I did not realise, until Rosser pointed it out, was that the Zodiac Ceiling, designed by artist Paul Helleu, was an inverse representation of the constellations. The logical explanation was that the painters placed the original design on the floor, drawing on the ceiling while looking down. However, businessman Cornelius Vanderbilt, Grand Central Terminal's prime benefactor, sheepishly claimed that the design was executed as intended, the constellations in reverse to depict the way god saw them from high up in the skies.

That blooper apart, the Grand Central Terminal is still considered one of the finest examples of the beaux arts style of architecture that originated in France and found favour in the U.S. between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing from classical Greek and Roman themes along with French and Italian baroque elements, this style has been used here to great effect through bold sculptures, massive chandeliers and grand archways. The terminal is also home to two iconic clocks—the world's largest Tiffany clock ticking on since 1914, right under the statue of Mercury, and the four-faced opal clock set in brass, estimated to be worth a staggering \$20 million, on top of the main Information Booth.

UPS AND DOWNS

On the walk, I learnt the terminal was built over 10 years, beginning at the turn of the 20th century. The modern terminal for electric trains replaced the old and obsolete Grand Central that

was meant for steam locomotives. Train travel was at its zenith at that time, for both commuter and cargo traffic, and the structure was built keeping future growth in mind. That foresight paid off, since this building still sees over 7,50,000 visitors every day, a good mix of travellers, tourists, train-spotters and history buffs. Keep in mind this is also the world's largest train terminal with 700 trains passing through each day, served by 44 platforms and 63 tracks. Even in the full throes of the 21st century, looking to a future filled with hyper loops, autonomous vehicles and spaceships ferrying folks to life on Mars, one might believe train travel still reigns when standing in Grand Central.

Yet, it has not always been smooth sailing for this beloved transport hub. The terminal thrived initially, having 65 million people cross its halls every year. However, during the second half of the 20th century, American railways as a whole lost their sheen. Grand Central fell into neglect, and was even



Located on the terminal's lower level, The Oyster Bar boasts an extensive wine menu, of which 80 can be ordered by the glass. It also serves over 25 types of oysters; Shake Shack's (bottom) breakfast menu is only available at transit hub locations, such as the Grand Central Terminal.

threatened with demolition several times. Although the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission designated it as a protected building in 1967, it was only in the 1990s that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority finally carried out restoration work.

Seeing its busy foyers and bustling food courts today, it is difficult to imagine the scenario described by my guide—where vandals and vagrants shared space with commuters under the grimy ceilings and unwashed windows of this New York landmark.

MURMURS AND MEALS

I pondered on the sordid chapters of the building's history until I reached the Dining Concourse at the lower level adjacent to the Whispering Gallery, the stuff of romance and intrigue. As we stopped in front of it to hear more about these walls and the popular Oyster Bar & Restaurant behind it, I could see people



of all ages pressing their faces to the wall to whisper sweet (and not-so-sweet) nothings to a partner listening on the other side of the gallery. Experts say that the acoustics are due to the domed ceiling, which carries the whispers along its curvature to the opposite end. Of course, plenty of people were indifferent to the wonders of such whispers and focused on their lunch at one of the several cafés in the Dining Concourse, many of them local favourites such as Shake Shack and Magnolia Bakery.

On our final foray, the guide took us to the chic bar that remains hidden to all but the most astute of Grand Central's regulars. The Campbell bar is a throwback to the good old days of classic cocktails, such as Campbell's Martini with vodka and dry vermouth, and The Stackhouse Sour made of bourbon, egg whites and fresh lemon juice.

There are way more secrets and stories in the passages of the Grand Central Terminal than my mind could contain—an annex of tennis courts once leased by President Donald Trump, a top secret room used during World War II that does not even appear on the building blueprints, and a covert platform used for discreet travel by celebrities,

including former President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Given the significance of the Grand Central Terminal in the contemporary landscape of New York, we can only be thankful for those who fought to preserve it in the 1960s, among them Jacqueline Kennedy. She once said, "I think if we don't care about our past, we can't have very much hope for our future."

ESSENTIALS

The Grand Central Terminal is located at 89 E. 42nd Street (www.grandcentralterminal.com). It offers daily tours led by experienced docents (nyc.docentour.com; 75 min; 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; adults \$30/₹2,110, children under 10 \$20/₹1,400). For an audio tour of the terminal, pick up a headset from the Tours office in the Terminal's Main Concourse (9 a.m.-6 p.m.; adults \$12/₹850, children \$10/₹700). The audio tour comes free with the New York Pass, and is also available as an app for iOS and Android devices for \$4.99/₹350.