

Staycationing in the City Parks

by Anne Schwartz

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Photo (cc) [superk8nyc](#) A Dutch 'pirate' at the New Island festival on Governor's Island this September

On the Sunday of Labor Day weekend, some friends and I went bicycling on [Governors Island](#). We pedaled around and through the small island, along the harbor and past shady lawns and historic buildings. Taking a break at a bright red picnic table at the island's southwestern end, we watched a spectacle starring a massive ocean liner, dozens of smaller craft, the Statue of Liberty and a pod of rapidly crawling swimmers.

We had plenty of company. In some places, the new promenade around the island was so thick with parents and children, tourists and groups of twenty-somethings that we had to stop and walk our bicycles through.

As of Labor Day weekend, more than [180,000 people](#) had come to the island, nearly double the 100,000 who had visited by that time the previous year. To be sure, some of the increase can be attributed to a growing awareness of Governors Island, an increase in ferry service, new amenities like the Water Taxi Beach, and an active schedule of exhibits and events.

But for many city residents like me, it seems that a visit to a park became a mini-vacation in the city, a budget alternative to a weekend in the country or a house at the beach. The New York City parks department does not measure park use, except to estimate beach attendance. But preliminary numbers from some park organizations that do track it showed a dramatic jump this summer in the number of people visiting parks and participating in park activities, despite the second rainiest June and July on record.

The increase in park use indicates that well-maintained and actively programmed public outdoor spaces, so important to city dwellers' quality of life, are even more crucial in a recession. By providing beautiful and interesting destinations for tourists and making a visit to the city more pleasant, parks also give a boost to the city's economy during hard times.

Fresh Spaces

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Luckily for New Yorkers, this recessionary summer coincided with the availability of new and newly discovered public spaces, including the [High Line](#) , [Governors Island](#) and the [instant transformation](#) of Broadway at Times and Herald squares into open space with the alchemy of paint, planters and movable tables and chairs. (A notable exception to this trend was in the South Bronx, where [Yankee Stadium](#) sits atop a former community park and running track, while residents waiting for the replacement parks got an interim synthetic-turf rooftop track and soccer field whose temperature [measured](#) 150 degrees during the August heat wave.)

People also flocked to free events and programs in parks all around the city, from concerts in Springfield Park in Queens to teen art classes in [the parks](#) at Battery Park City to the parks department's [Learn to Swim program](#) at three dozen pools citywide, which had a 25 percent increase in enrollment.

The free sports, arts and education programs run by the [City Parks Foundation](#) in underserved neighborhoods had a significant increase in the number of participants, said Nora Lanning, director of marketing and communication.

The number of children involved in the track program, offered in 37 parks, had grown steadily by about 5 to 7 percent a year over the previous three years, she said, but this summer, the program saw a 27 percent jump in participants. Anticipating the increase, the foundation added afternoon sessions to meet the demand. The year-end track meet, held at Icahn Stadium on Randalls Island, usually brings in 1,200 kids, but had 2,000 this year, said Lanning.

The foundation's free concert program had a 17 percent increase in attendance, attracting not just neighborhood residents but also young people from all over the city, she said, attributing much of the increase to the recession: "When concert tickets are \$60, people are willing to travel 50 minutes or an hour to see the same artists for free."

Park by Park

Although the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy offered more free nature education programs,

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such as seining for marine life in the East River and bird watching, than in the past, classes at the waterfront park filled quickly, and waiting lists had to be established. "We easily could have offered twice as many programs for families and children than we were able to," said acting executive director Nancy Webster.

The [Battery Park City Parks Conservancy](#) noted a 20 percent increase in participation in its many activities for adults, families and children, including drawing, tai chi and fishing, according to Battery Park City Authority spokeswoman Leticia Remauro.

Bryant Park takes a daily count of visitors, but the full tab won't be available for several months, said park spokesman Joe Carella. Anecdotal evidence indicates more people coming to the carousel, Monday night movies and other events, but the only numbers available so far are for the outdoor library called the [Reading Room](#), he said. With 53,000 visitors so far, up from just over 38,000 last year, it appears to be heading for record attendance. "Whether it has anything to do with the current economy is speculative," he said, "but one thing we know is that use has been increasing."

[Prospect Park](#) has also seen a rise in visitors, Prospect Park Alliance spokesman Eugene Patron wrote in an email, though it is difficult to quantify because it has so many entrances. But the [Lefferts Historic House](#) and the [Prospect Park Audubon Center](#) does count visitors and saw a significant rise, he said. In June and July '09, for example, 18,184 people visited the Audubon Center, compared with 13,334 the year before; at the Lefferts house, visits increased from 7,387 to 10,608 during the same period.

The trend was visible nationwide as well. A poll [conducted](#) in July for The Trust for Public Land found that one fifth of American park users have increased their visits to local parks and playgrounds during the recession and a third of families with children have upped their park use.

"The poll results indicate both a strong, consistent use of local parks and playgrounds and a renewed recognition of their value in tight economic times," said Peter Harnik, director of the [Center for City Park Excellence](#) at The Trust for Public Land. "This poll underscores the importance of maintaining and enhancing parks and playgrounds in cities, even during tough times."

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Anne Schwartz, in charge of the parks topic page since its inception in 1999, is a journalist who specializes in environmental issues.

When first published, this story said the Bryant Park carousel was free. It actually costs \$2.