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THE TIPPY DIARIES

Manhattan’s Rooftop Bars: Heaven’s Gates



Andrew Sullivan for The New York Times

The scene at Press, the rooftop bar of the new Ink48 hotel.

By FRANK BRUNI
Published: July 22, 2010

Shaken or stirred? Red or white? Draft or bottled? For most of the year these are the biggest questions confronting the thirsty New Yorker. And no answer is wrong.

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Top of the Strand has a view of the Empire State Building.

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But when the sun is strong and the days are long, an additional, equally important pair of options crops up, and the choice between them can make or break a good night.

Stay down or go up?

I speak of the rooftop bar, an institution with special relevance to New York City, where the roofs are higher, the views longer, the promise grander. In this vertical wonderland it seems only right to ascend.

But doing so is dicey, as recent skyward excursions reminded me. On a rooftop bar you indeed inch closer to heaven. But you can also wind up a whole lot closer to hell.

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Andrew Sullivan for The New York Times
The line for Press.

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Andrew Sullivan for The New York Times
Salon de Ning at the Peninsula Hotel.

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mad46, the bar on top of the Roosevelt Hotel.

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Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times
The Top of the Strand.

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So a primer is in order: a set of instructions on what to hope for, what to brace for, and when, how, why and where a rooftop can be most pleasurable or insufferable. Icarus headed toward the sun in a heedless fashion — and more or less got burned. Don’t make the same mistake.

Know for starters that many of the city’s most vaunted rooftop bars don’t merely have velvet ropes, they have velvet barricades — sometimes in the form of oddly restrictive admission policies, sometimes in the form of random, inexplicable hours.

With altitude comes attitude. My attempts Saturday to locate a suitable rooftop destination for three friends and me illustrated the point. I called 60 Thompson, a hotel in SoHo, to make sure its rooftop bar wasn’t closed for a private party. Experience had taught me that rooftop bars often are.

“It’s open,” the woman on the other end of the line said. “But it’s for members and hotel guests only.”

I asked, “What’s a member?” I wasn’t aware that you could join or pay dues to a hotel.

“A member,” she said, “is chosen by the hosts only.” Before I could ask who these mystical hosts were and by what mysterious criteria they made their selections, she was gone.

My next conversation, with someone at the Hotel on Rivington, on the Lower East Side, was even more confusing. “We do have a rooftop bar,” she confirmed, “but I don’t believe it’s open tonight.”

“A private party?” I asked.

“We do have private parties there sometimes,” she answered, “and sometimes we have public parties.”

And on this night?

They had neither, she said.

So why was it closed?

“I don’t know,” she said, her bored tone suggesting that she was as untroubled by her ignorance as I was exasperated with it.

Even when a rooftop bar is open, it’s rarely easily accessible. You have to find a special entrance, take a special elevator, follow a trail of bread crumbs left by the last pathetic saps who dared to dream of drinks under the stars.

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Take mad46, the bar on top of the Roosevelt Hotel, in Midtown.

The main bank of elevators won’t get you there. Instead you must go to a specific northeast corner of the hotel. On the sidewalk there I spotted an official-looking sentry dressed all in black, with a very conspicuous, secret service-style walkie-talkie. The walkie-talkie and its cousin, the headset-and-earpiece combo, allow crowd managers not just to communicate with one another but also to create an air of extreme exclusivity. Needless to say these accessories are ubiquitous among the staff at rooftop bars.

The mad46 sidewalk sentry directed my friend and me to an identically outfitted sentry guarding a rope line in front of a nearby elevator. Grimly and wordlessly this second sentry admitted us to the elevator and escorted us to the top floor, where we were handed off to a hostess, who looked us up and down before permitting us past her station, through a long, dark passageway and onto the roof. Pan’s labyrinth was less tortuous.

More rewarding too. While there are beautifully manicured hedges at mad46 and some inviting daybeds with white canopies, the cocktails are too sweet, the wines

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by the glass are pedestrian, the plastic cups in which drinks are served are flimsy, and the food is unforgivable. Sometimes a rooftop drinker gets hungry; he or she should have the possibility of an edible snack. The duck quesadilla at mad46 did not qualify. I could make a better treat out of emery boards and dental floss, and I’m not a particularly gifted cook (or cosmetician).

The clincher at mad46 was this: The view isn’t so spectacular, in part because the way the furniture is positioned in relation to the high perimeter wall means that you have to stand, not sit, if you want a real survey of the vast cityscape at your feet. And even then you don’t have an optimal vantage point.

That’s the case with many more rooftop bars than you would expect, and it’s an argument for hopping online, accessing some photographs and getting an idea of what you’re in for before you angle, grovel and prostrate yourself for admission to one of these haughty aeries.

While the recently renovated rooftop bar at the Gramercy Park Hotel, for example, has an appealing, lush greenhouse aesthetic and some (overpriced) snacks that are actually satisfying, you may have to crane your neck to see the nearby buildings, which don’t rise as high as their brethren. And that’s assuming that the glass upper halves of the surrounding walls are retracted. When I was there they weren’t. Combined with a



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temporary semi-opaque glass ceiling above, they succeeded in creating the impression of an indoor space, and negated the whole point of being up on the roof.

The bar atop the Peninsula Hotel, in contrast, conveys the heady sense that you’re hovering in the clouds. It too is no cinch to reach. If you take the wrong elevator, you step out to find yourself amid dim lighting, botanical aromas and soothing music: the hotel spa. An attendant will shrug and sigh: she is accustomed to such intrusions. And she will send you back where you came from, so that you can meander through the confusing, multitiered lobby until you trip across the elevator designated for the rooftop bar, which reopened a few years ago, after a splashy redo, as the Salon de Ning.

But once you’re in the Salon de Ning: wow. The Peninsula’s Midtown location affords you, to the north, a sweeping view of the Trump Tower to the right, a sliver of Central Park going all the way up to the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) dead ahead; the sleek towers of the Time Warner Center far to the left. You can set your elbows and your drink on a ledge that’s not obstructively high and take it all in while the sun sets, the city’s night lights come up, the traffic below lightens, the sound of it grows fainter, and a breeze ruffles your collar. This is what rooftop drinking is all about.

For a view in the opposite direction, the Top of the Strand, a relatively new bar on the rooftop of the Strand Hotel, is hard to beat. It faces south and perfectly frames the Empire State Building, just a few blocks away. It is also among the least self-infatuated rooftop bars I encountered, the path to it obvious, the crowd managers relatively few. Perhaps because of that it seems to draw one of the most frumpily dressed, unglamorous crowds.

Rooftop drinking has its curiosities, like odd plastic receptacles on the tables that hark back to some little-remembered past. What could they possibly be? Ashtrays! Many outdoor bars still let you light up, so smoking is prevalent on rooftops that aren’t partially enclosed.

The dress code is different. Because some rooftop bars, like the Gansevoort Hotel’s in the meatpacking district, abut pools, your view may involve as much flesh as steel. This can be thrilling or galling, depending on the convention in town.

And you are likely to hear a particularly striking variety of languages and accents on rooftop bars, where the ratio of tourists to locals can easily reach 25 to 1. You are also likely to get awful service, in accordance with some managerial theory that open air obviates courtesy and efficiency.

A bartender at the Hudson Terrace on the West Side gave two friends and me the wrong drinks when we ordered our first round and the wrong check after we ordered our second. More proudly than apologetically, she explained, “I’m so hung over.” It was after 7 p.m.

The Hudson Terrace has all sorts of beams and woodwork that hinder glimpses of the river nearby. Not so a few blocks north at Press, the rooftop bar of the new Ink48 hotel. Press has loads of space, understated furniture, a decorative pool into which you can dip your toes, and a completely transparent glass perimeter that makes you feel almost as if you’re on a platform floating over the Hudson. The view goes far up the river in one direction, over to New Jersey in another, and Midtown looms spectacularly to your side. This is without question one of the city’s most attractive rooftop bars.

But the ultimate rooftop experience — one that simultaneously demonstrates the highs and lows of it all — is found at 230 Fifth, both the address for, and name of, a jarringly

sprawling deck near Madison Square Park with room for 600 people, easy.

It’s not coy. The path to the elevator is so prominently marked and frequently mobbed that it calls to mind a ride at Disney World. The elevator glows pink on the inside, like one of the planes in Virgin America’s fleet.

At the top, on the deck itself: a pink elephant statue; topiary in the shape of a giant cat; dozens of palm trees; giant yellow-and-white-striped umbrellas; small misting fans on the tables; and a menu of drinks with cutesy-poo names like Pair of Pears, Absolut-ly Peachy and Berry Berry Good. It’s a little bit beach club, a little bit country club, a little bit Vegas. And like Vegas it’s such a thorough, unabashed accretion of tacky and ridiculous effects that it achieves a florid poetry all its own, the kind that makes you groan and giggle simultaneously.

I giggled a lot, because I got lucky with the soundtrack on the night I was there, a trip back to the 1980s and their most gloriously cheesy: Missing Persons, Berlin, [Duran Duran](#). I felt briefly disoriented. And isn’t that really the point of the rooftop bar, at least in New York?

It’s an exercise in dislocation, in cognitive dissonance. Although you’re in a city of tight quarters and constant confinement, seemingly removed from the natural world, the rooftop bar gives you a blast of the great outdoors, a reprieve from your usual tethers and an outlook that’s suddenly expansive. The sky’s the limit.

Because rooftop bars often schedule private parties or may not be open to the public on a given night, it's best to call before you go. Here are the Manhattan bars mentioned in this article that are open to the public:

HOTEL ON RIVINGTON *Between Essex and Ludlow Streets, Lower East Side; (212) 475-2600; [hotelonrivington.com](#); cash only.*

MAD46 *At the Roosevelt Hotel, Madison Avenue at 46th Street; dress code; reservations recommended for large groups: (212) 885-6095; [mad46.com](#).*

GRAMERCY PARK HOTEL 2 *Lexington Avenue, at 21st Street; reservations recommended: (212) 920-3300; [gramercyparkhotel.com](#).*

SALON DE NING *Peninsula Hotel, 700 Fifth Avenue, at 55th Street, (212) 903-3097; [peninsula.com](#).*

TOP OF THE STRAND 33 *West 37th Street; (212) 448-1024; [thestrandnyc.com](#).*

PLUNGE BAR AND LOUNGE *Gansevoort Hotel, 18 Ninth Avenue, at 13th Street, meatpacking district; (212) 206-6700; [hotelgansevoort.com](#).*

HUDSON TERRACE 621 *West 46th Street; (212) 315-9400; [hudsonterracenyc.com](#).*

PRESS *At Ink48, 653 11th Avenue, at West 48th Street; (212) 757-0088; [ink48.com](#).*

230 FIFTH *230 Fifth Avenue, at 29th Street; (212) 725-4300; [230-fifth.com](#).*

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