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79th Street ***Geneva – Zurich Express***

“The best time to visit Lac Léman is May through October. These are the months when your chances of getting sunny weather to cruise, swim, sunbathe, water-ski, and to see distant snowy Alpine peaks clear as a bell, are highest. It's also when the CGN and other boat companies run full schedules, so you'll have the biggest selection of stops and themed cruises to choose from.”

Fodor's Switzerland

“Contemporary Zürich might still be home to the world's fourth-biggest stock exchange and remain Switzerland's financial engine, but it's also (whisper it softly) surprisingly vibrant and trendy. Located on a picturesque river and lake whose water you can drink, easy to get around and a stranger to the hassled lifestyle that defines bigger cities, this affluent, fashion-conscious place enjoys the finest things in life.”

Lonely Planet, Zurich

The Upper West and Upper East Sides are worlds unto their own in New York City. Outwardly, they look suspiciously alike, being both high-end residential neighborhoods where the wealthy and fabulous reside. As New Yorkers (and some non-New Yorkers) know only too well, the path through which the two neighbourhoods have attained this rarefied sheen of wealth and glamour has been completely different. It's a case of convergent evolution, where two entirely different ecosystems emerge to occupy similar but geographically separate regions. So a mammal-like creature in Australia, is not a mammal at all, but a marsupial; and by that similar line of reasoning, the upper classes in the Upper West Side, are not upper class at all, at least not by Upper East Side standards.



The Upper West Side is a working-class neighborhood made good through three decades of breakneck gentrification. Today, it plays host to the City's wealthy professionals – lawyers, advertising executives, fashion moguls, management consultants and the like – and some of the most expensive pieces of real estate. In contrast, the Upper East Side is old money – associated with New York's oldest and most illustrious families, the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers, the Kennedys. The air there is so rarefied as to be completely un-breathable, and everyone strides with their

noses resolutely upturned, if only so their nostrils are angled in a way to maximise air catchment.

Interestingly, a good half of the Upper East Side was once also a working-class neighborhood. This is Yorkville, which extends from 3rd Ave to Manhattan's Eastern waterfront, and was once home to a large German population in the late 19th and early 20th century. The landscape today would be unrecognisable to those turn-of-the-century Germans, having become...well, not quite as fashionable as the core of the Upper East Side, nor even the Upper West side, for that matter, but undeniably associated with those of the City who have "arrived," so to speak.



In between the Upper West and the Upper East Sides lies the phenomenon from which these neighborhoods derive their names in the first place: Central Park, one of the largest and most famous city centre parks in the entire world. Deliberately and painstakingly landscaped so it would look carelessly and effortlessly wild, the park's disorderliness is in stark contrast to Manhattan's tyrannical grid, and it provides respite from the largely "same-y" urban landscape that characterizes the two divergently evolved neighborhoods that flank it.

This “sameness” in the urban landscape is what is most remarkable about the walk along 79th Street – a main thoroughfare that cuts through the Upper West Side, Central Park, the Upper East Side, and Yorkville. Up here is where Manhattan displays the least diversity architecturally and sociologically: keeping up with the Joneses has meant everyone lives in more or less the same type of high-rise apartments and looks more or less the same.

I was reminded, very starkly, of Switzerland – a country with one of the highest GDP per capita in the world, to which, I think, average income levels along 79th Street would be largely comparable; a country which, though generally beautiful and elegant, is also (when one compares it against its immediate neighbours, France, Italy, Austria and Germany) mostly known for its wealth, efficiency, watches and army knives. In short: unremarkable.

The Tale of 79th Street, therefore, is akin to a train journey across Switzerland, from cosmopolitan Geneva, in the south west of the country, passing through mediaeval Lausanne, Bern and Lucerne in the central Swiss plateau, to modern Zurich, the country’s economic and financial capital, in the north east.

In between Bern and Lucerne, our train will take us through an extended tract of Alpine forest – a fairytale landscape of castles peeking through the green, and tunnels winding perilously through mountainous rock faces. This is the highlight of the journey, and the one most likely to leave a deep impression on the first-time visitor.

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