

All aboard the “International Express” to Queens

A trip through the most ethnically diverse county in America on its subway line, New York's 7 train

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AUGUST 5, 2012

Phileas Fogg needed [80 days and a 20,000-pound wager](#) to go around the world, but I plan to do it in six stops and \$2.25 on the New York subway. In less than a day, I'll visit China, Korea, India, Italy, Colombia, Tibet, Uzbekistan and more simply by hopping on and off [NYC's 7 train, known as the “International Express.”](#)



A range of ethnicities ride the 7 train daily, Queens, NY, June 19 2012 (Jocelyn Baun)

The 7 train connects Manhattan to Queens, the [most ethnically diverse county](#) in America. This wasn't true twenty years ago. Back then it was still the Queens of Archie Bunker, [America's most famous TV bigot](#), whose idea of diversity involved *Polaks, Krauts, Micks, Japs, Dagos, Chinks* and *Spics*. As in Archie Bunker's day, Whites are still the biggest ethnic group, but now they only comprise a third of Queens' 2.3 million residents.

So my trip from Grand Central Station under the East River to the first stop in Queens, Vernon Blvd/Jackson Ave., is a five-minute ride into America's future. A more optimistic America used to think of itself as a melting pot, but in reality, we've been more like an international tapas bar where different ethnic dishes refuse to share the same plate. The infamous comments about the 7 train made not that long ago by the then Atlanta Braves pitcher [John Rocker](#) are shared by more people than I'd like to think.

I used to get off at Vernon/Jackson to play tennis at the now defunct Tennisport. Back then, walking the two eerily deserted blocks from the subway to Tennisport was scary, even in daylight. Now, the stroller set and yuppies from many countries populate the neighborhood, many living in new glitzy new high rises with drop-dead views of Manhattan.



*Locally known as “La Pequeña Colombia” – Little Colombia – 82nd St/Roosevelt Ave is primarily Hispanic.
Queens, NY, June 19 2012 (Jocelyn Baun)*

I walk along the manicured, riverside Gantry State Park and meet two teen-aged Nepalese girls, who are sitting on the grass. They tell me they’ve been living here eight years and love Queens because they’re surrounded by so many different cultures. “We can learn to be open-minded here,” 19-year-old Sonam Lama says to me. On a nearby bench, a 20-something Afghani boy and a Chinese girl embrace. I can hear a woman speaking Spanish as she wheels a toddler in a stroller. A young Trinidadian mother walks along the edge of the East River, holding the hand of her nine-year-old daughter.

My [Jean PassePartout](#), Rob MacKay, Director of Public Relations, Marketing and Tourism for the Queens Economic Development Corporation is waiting for me in front of Café Henri. This French bistro has an American owner and kitchen staff from Belarus, Greece, Germany and Mexico, not surprising, as almost half of Queens residents are foreign born. MacKay, 44, grew up in Queens and lives in this neighborhood with his Indian wife and family. One of their daughters attends a bilingual school. “My eight-year-old has a Hindi first name, a Gaelic last name, and she speaks third-grade Spanish,” he says.

In Manhattan, I’m used to ethnic enclaves: Chinatown, Little Italy, Midtown’s Brasilia. Walking down Jackson Avenue, on a single block I see a Mexican bakery, a Chinese beauty salon, an Irish pub, a Thai beauty salon and an Ecuadorian restaurant. At 46th Street-Sunnyside, the old-time Irish community mingles with newcomers from Turkey, Romania, Bangladesh, South America and Korea; at 61st Street-Woodside we see Filipinos, Nepalis, and Eastern Europeans; at 103rd Street-Corona Plaza, Ecuadorians and Dominicans dominate a diverse Latino community, and Flushing, the end of the 7 line, is pan-Asian with Chinese, Taiwanese, Koreans, Thais and Indians.

There are still predominant groups in each neighborhood along the 7 line.

We’re at 28 countries when we get to the 74th Street/Broadway stop, “Little India”. Just two blocks long, you can buy everything from Indian spices and gold jewelry to silk saris and Bollywood DVDs. But trying on some gold bangles in one shop is a Brazilian, Anna Machado. “My son gets to travel the world just by living here,” she says. “He loves Indian music and Japanese food, and I love the way he interacts with everyone.”

At 69th Street/Roosevelt Avenue one strip has nothing but stores catering to the Filipino community. I learn that Filipinos have perfected sausage, *longanisa*, as a food. Each region has its own version: some are garlicky, others salty, some sour, some sweet. Pork sausage, chicken sausage, even tuna sausage — I'm in sausage heaven!

A world with no majorities

Much has been made of California heading towards having no ethnic majority population; Queens is clearly already there. I see almost no closed communities here; cultures blend in apartment buildings, churches, gymnasiums and schools. What's surprising to me is the blending.

Or maybe it's the peace. You would think it'd be a United Nations version of the Jets and Sharks in "West Side Story." But nine of the neighborhoods in Queens are among New York City's safest. Corona and Elmhurst, once considered dangerous, are now flooded with immigrants and émigrés from Manhattan. Flushing is about to surpass Manhattan's Chinatown in population, but minus the crime.

"If there were only two main groups in Queens, that could be a problem," Rob says. "Maybe, because there are so many people living together, it won't ever be one side against the other."



Women offering prayers at the Geeta Temple, Queens, NY, June 19 2012 (Jocelyn Baun)

At one point, we're in one of Queens' seven museums, MoMA PS1, an affiliate of the Museum of Modern Art. A white man who could almost be a double for Archie Bunker pipes up, "I was born here." I brace myself for a Bunker-like diatribe, but instead he says, "Queens has changed a lot, but I think the cultural diversity is a good thing because it creates more acceptance."

This is not to say that Queens is paradise. Queensbridge, just two subway stops from Manhattan, is the largest public housing project in the U.S., and has the requisite drug gangs. But they don't dominate the borough.

Mangoes and ethnic rivalry

In a Nepalese grocery store nestled amongst restaurants and stores from other South Asian cultures, a Bangladeshi man examines a box of mangoes. "Bangladeshi people like mangoes," he says, grinning. "Ours are better."

At last, some ethnic rivalry.

Phileas Fogg had adventures: a detective thought he was a bank robber, Indians attacked his train, and a captain coerced him into buying a ship for an exorbitant price. The people I've met have all been so positive about the advantages of living surrounded by diversity that I'm beginning to think they're all characters out of *The Truman Show*. Where's the real Queens? I tell Rob I want to see the neighborhood where the fictional Archie Bunker lived, so he takes me to 103rd Street-Corona Plaza, formerly an Italian neighborhood but now, primarily Dominican.



Rafael Aranbayev, owner of Bagelicious, a bagel shop in the Bukharan Jewish section of Rego Park, Queens, NY, June 19 2012 (Jocelyn Baun)

Even so, Mama's Backyard Café, on 104th Street continues to thrive. Archie Bunker could have eaten there, though he wouldn't have liked the working class Italian-Americans who still frequent it. Third-generation owner 3rd Irene DeBenedittis, serves me the Mama Special: pepper ham, salami, fresh mozzarella, marinated peppers and mushrooms on fresh-baked Semolina bread. I wash this down with the best cappuccino this side of Milan, then gorge on homemade Cannolis, Amoretti cookies, and fresh cream puffs.

So okay, Archie Bunker's neighborhood has gone Spanish and they all just get along. That's not entirely true, of course. On "Bukharan Broadway" (Forest Hills/Rego Park 108th Street), I don't see shops, or shoppers, from other cultures. Here, kosher restaurants run by Jews from Uzbekistan sell not chicken with schmaltz, falafel or borscht, but Central Asian cuisine featuring Glatt kosher kabobs. But it's clear that the spirit of Archie Bunker no longer permeates Queens. We hear so much about conflict amongst groups. But I've been around the world without having to cross the International Date Line (and without the jetlag). I didn't feel threatened, but encouraged. And, unlike Phileas Fogg, I can return whenever I want.