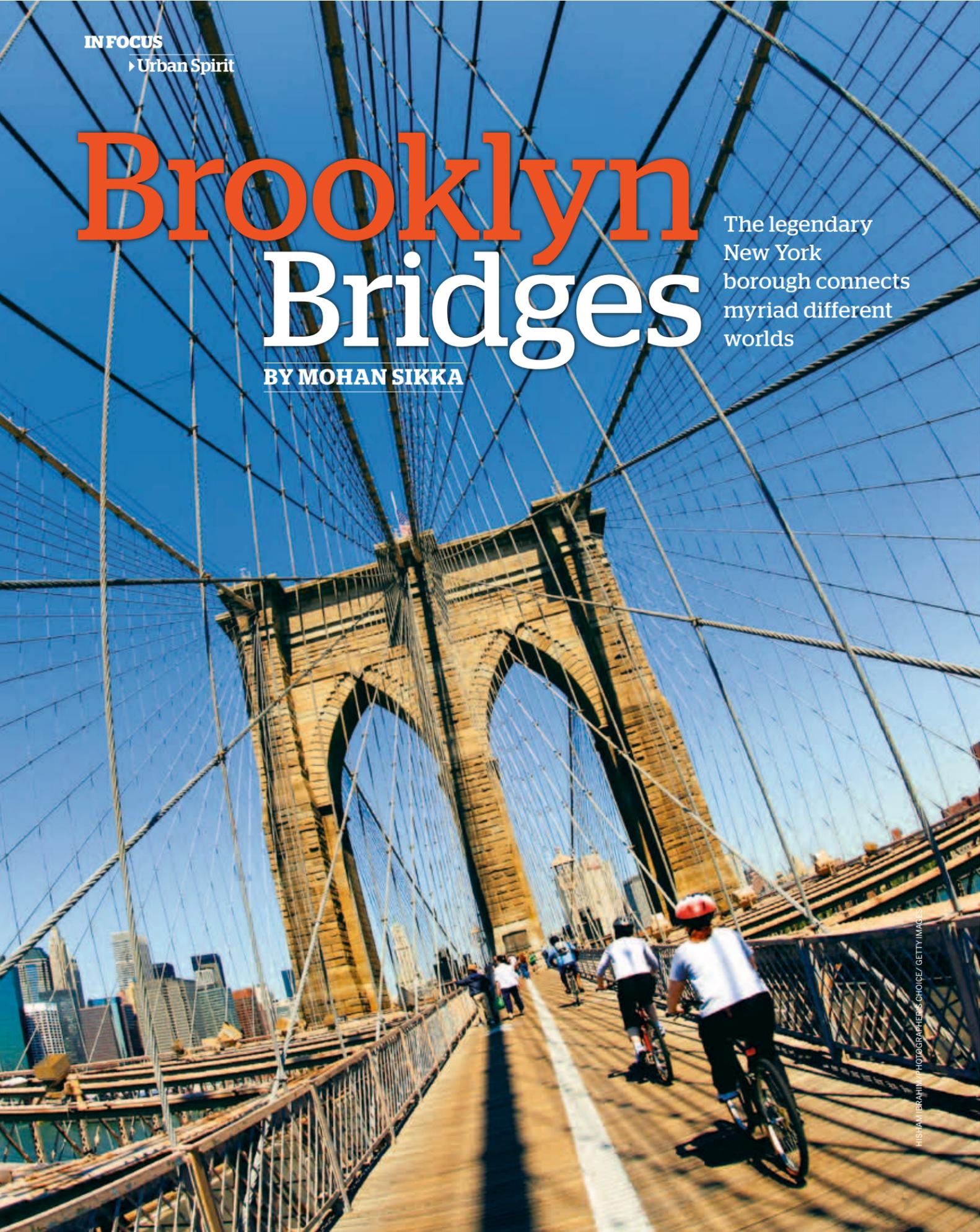


Brooklyn Bridges

The legendary New York borough connects myriad different worlds

BY MOHAN SIKKA



HISAM BRAHIM/PHOTOGRAPHER'S CHOICE/GETTY IMAGES

A few years ago, our beloved dog of 14 years died after an extended illness.

It was late January, the height of winter in Brooklyn, a bleak and biting season. The three-legged stool of our family unit had lost a leg. Walking the dog in Prospect Park, half a block from our apartment, had been our daily ritual. On weekdays, my partner and I alternated shifts. On weekends the three of us walked together, watching the kids on the softball fields of the Long Meadow, the power cyclists whizzing past on the circle drive, the Russian and Bengali families feeding swans on Prospect Park Lake. We would remark on the seasonal changes: the crisp light of fall, filtered through red and yellow leaves; the stillness of the first snowy day, our Billie romping through the white powder; the very different shades of spring, crocuses and early green peeking up through the dead leaves and mulch.



Late summer light reflecting off the East River makes all the sights look wondrous: Manhattan Bridge behind Jane's Carousel, Brooklyn Bridge Park. Cycling down Brooklyn Bridge's bike lane (facing page) is one of the best ways to enjoy a view of the Manhattan skyline.

MOHAN SIKKA

► Urban Spirit

But now, even as spring arrived, I did not go to the park. Walking there felt forced and purposeless. My partner and I began to spend more time at work in Manhattan, or afterwards, out with friends. Our Brooklyn apartment became a place to return to sleep. Neither of us would say it, but when we opened the door, there was the half-anticipation of a wagging welcome. The silent ether of the apartment pulsed and crackled. Our own home had become a bit forbidding.

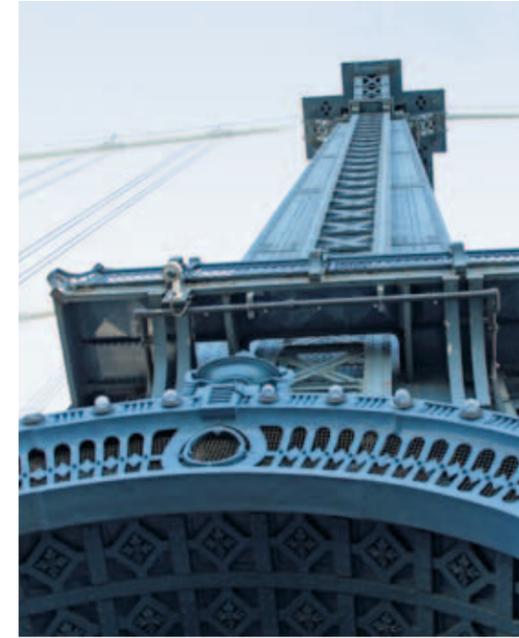
Something else was happening in my life at the time. I was becoming disenchanted with Brooklyn. We'd been living here for years, refugees from the overstimulation of Manhattan. We'd moved to a homey borough, where rents were cheaper, where weekend excitement meant stopping by stoop sales, chatting with neighbours, or having friends over for a lazy brunch. But all that began to change as the decade grew longer. Gentrification spread its tentacles through Brownstone, Brooklyn. Monstrous glass-and-metal condos appeared in working class communities. Artisanal restaurants sprang up, interesting at first, then quickly tiresome for their prices and pretension. Real estate prices went skywards. Manhattan's glitz and excess had infected us too. Then the great downturn hit, and we had less spending money in our pockets. Several times we thought about moving somewhere more affordable, like Philadelphia. We stayed partly because we didn't want to move the dog away from the park walks she knew and loved.

But now there was no dog. Our hearts were too raw to think about getting another. Was it finally time to say goodbye to Brooklyn?

Things came to a head the summer after Billie died. The mayor, Michael Bloomberg, an odd combination of hard-nosed capitalist and transportation maverick, decided he would support his transportation commissioner in laying down bike lanes across the city. One such protected lane was built along Prospect Park West. Much as I don't care for Bloomberg's policies overall, like his refusal to raise the minimum wage, this was one change I welcomed. Many of our car-owning neighbours, however, decided they detested the bike lane, for aesthetic and pedestrian safety reasons. The anti-lane forces prevailed on key civic and neighbourhood figures to declare the bike lane "a nuisance, an eyesore and an affront," according to a magazine report. A high-powered law firm agreed to litigate against the lane pro bono.

Frustrated that my driving neighbours were so proprietary about their precious streets, and spent their time demonising bikers as "renegades and high-speed killers", I joined Transportation Alternatives, a biking advocacy group. I began to use the lane every chance I got. I rode even when it became too cold to ride. It was a little silly, my one-man crusade, but it felt good.

The bike lane battle, here and elsewhere in Brooklyn, went on for months. The anti-bike lobby filled local papers and TV shows with their talking points. As the season changed, we heard that the mayor and transportation commissioner were standing firm. And then, to our great joy, the suit against the Prospect Park West lane was dismissed. After that, every ride I took on the saved lane felt like a victory lap.

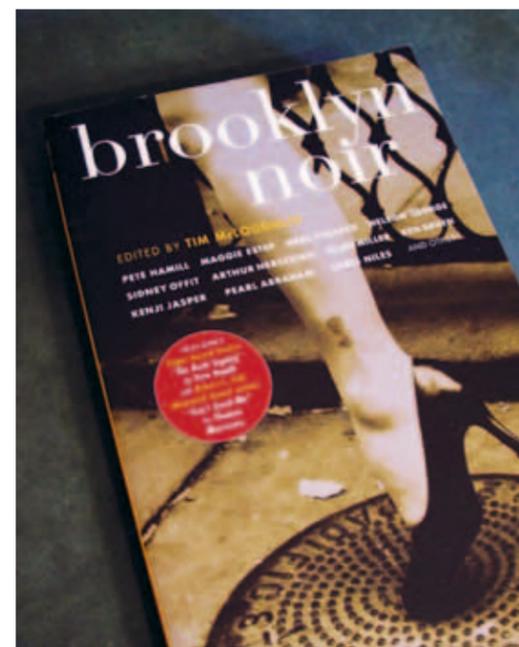


A BOROUGH FOR ALL THE SENSES
(clockwise from top left):
Late summer bounty at the Grand Army Plaza Farmer's Market; Avid aeromodellers flying their miniature planes at Floyd Bennett Field; Bike-eye view of Manhattan Bridge pylon; Every neighbourhood has its favourite pizza joint—in East Williamsburg it's Roberta's; A must-read before a visit, a collection of stories on the dark side of the borough; A chair with a message at the weekly Brooklyn Flea Market; Strolling across Ocean Parkway, you'll meet neighbours of every ethnicity and persuasion; Coin-operated binoculars offer a closer look at the Manhattan skyline.



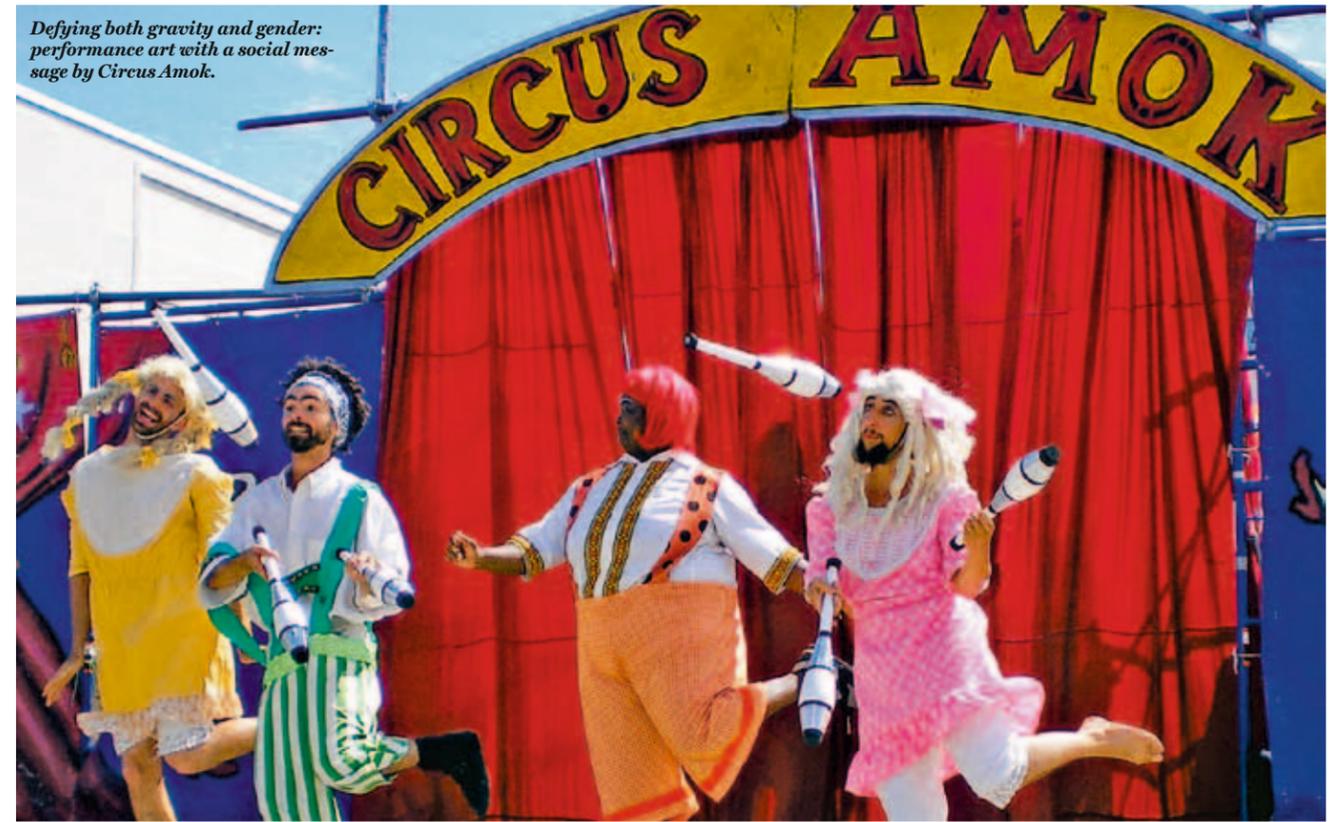
The back garden of the Juice Pedaler, a neighbourhood bike rental-cum-café. Get juiced up and geared up at the same time.

MOHAN SIKKA (JUICE PEDALER); VEGETABLES, MANHATTAN BRIDGE, PIZZA, BOOK CHAIR, JEWISH COUPLE, DAVID BOWLES (AEROMODEL), FOTO/GETTY IMAGES (COIN-OPERATED BINOCULARS)





There's art on every corner, and sometimes on the street itself. This mural is by artist David Ellis.



Defying both gravity and gender: performance art with a social message by Circus Amok.

What I loved about living here...was the very high tolerance to being shocked or surprised, a gut-level acceptance that no one looks or acts or imagines like anyone else.

In the midst of these developments, my membership in Transportation Alternatives, the grassroots advocacy group, was bringing me all kinds of goodies. I got a discount on my bike tune-up at a local bike store (more and more were cropping up). I got bike maps in the mail and reconnected to an old childhood fascination with marking trails through real and imagined places. I began exploring my own city, small trips at first, then longer ones. I started learning about Brooklyn in unexpected ways. One day, I commuted to work on my bike, and found the route over the Brooklyn Bridge a surprisingly straight shot.

The next time our friends Sam and Liza and their son James came up to visit from Philadelphia, I was ready with a biking adventure. I was a ten-year-old boy again, charting a treasure map. First, we equipped our friends with rentals from the new bicycle-cum-juice-shop around the corner. The Juice Pedaler is one of a growing number of concept stores in Brooklyn (wine tasting and chocolate; flowers and full bar; pizza and full bar). While the rest of the crew sampled their juice and coffee in the Pedaler's back garden, Sam and I took a short trek on the Ocean Parkway route (the first bike trail in Brooklyn, circa 1894) to Russian Homemade Cuisine, a traditional blintz/crepe factory in Kensington, a neighbourhood where you are as likely to see Punjabi ladies in *salwar kameezes* as an Orthodox Jewish family wheeling a stroller in their black-and-white ensembles. There we bought thin, light, delicious crepes by the pound.

Well stocked, we picked up our crew and hit the bike route inside

Prospect Park. The same public policy that created new bike lanes in Brooklyn has led to the drive inside Prospect Park closing to traffic all weekend, so that pedestrians, bikers and rollerbladers rule. We rode around the large man-made lake that anchors the southern portion of the park. Despite my many ambivalences about New York, I have to confess some satisfaction when people from abroad visit, and entering the gem of Prospect Park say, "All this is free?" The great civic projects of the 19th century—Central Park, Prospect Park, the boulevards of Brooklyn—were part of the vision of early city planners, and continue to this day to give shape to the democratic ideal of the open and accessible city. Even the park concerts have no charge.

Beyond the lake, we began to climb a section of the low hills that bisect the park. Huffing and puffing, we stopped at the highest point, just before the road emerges over the great expanse of the Long Meadow. Here, I showed my friends the monument and markers that commemorate Battle Pass, the site of the first major engagement of the Revolutionary War. This battle went badly for the Americans, and led to several losses for General Washington before the tide of the war turned. At the north end of the park, we came to the area known as the Grand Army Plaza, where a large arch commemorates the Civil War, another great American conflict. One could spend a whole day here: in close proximity are museums, the botanical garden, and the Brooklyn Public Library, its monumental front doors decorated with characters and luminaries from western literature.

MOHAN SIKKA

SHEHANI FERNANDO

But that day we'd come for something else: the legendary Saturday Greenmarket, where farmers and vendors sell produce and prepared foods all year long. It was the early harvest season, and the shades, shapes, varieties, and sheer abundance of tomatoes, eggplants, potatoes, greens, and berries was something to see. We bought fruit, honey and goat cheese to complement our crepes, and just-pressed apple cider to complete our brunch. I've never been here without running into friends, this market being a Brooklyn tradition and a microcosm of the diverse neighbourhoods that surround the park, and this day was no exception. Grabbing our well-stocked panniers, we headed over to the Park's Long Meadow. This is, in my opinion, the grandest natural vista in all of New York: the green, rolling turf stretching wide and long, carved first by retreating glaciers and refashioned by human hands. Kite flyers were out, taking advantage of the slight fall breeze, as were Frisbee players. Further south, soccer and softball games were underway. The Dog Beach was packed with owners letting their best friends get wet one last time before the weather changed. Picnic blankets were scattered like place mats on a vast dining table. We settled down in the glorious outdoors and fuelled up for the rest of our journey.

From Grand Army Plaza, we continued on bike lanes through Brooklyn's row-house neighbourhoods: Prospect Heights, Boerum Hill, and Cobble Hill, the names evoking the borough's old geography and the Dutch farming families that settled this area 300 years ago. At Ample Hill Creamery, the brainchild of a science-fiction movie writer looking for an alternative career, we sampled the locally-made ice cream, which is pure unadulterated non-fiction. The quote inside from Walt Whitman, about Brooklyn's ample hills, was a reminder of how much was flattened to shape the current version of this town.

At BookCourt, one of the last great neighbourhood bookstores, James spent a happy half hour in the kids' reading room, while the rest of us browsed the literature, mystery, and cooking shelves and, of course, the Brooklyn section. In this bookshop I've had the chance to hear both emerging and established writers read from their work, including people from my own writing group. Being a writer in Brooklyn has this beautiful dual quality: the sense of great privilege in being able to access resources like BookCourt (and the dozens of small presses, literary journals, writing groups and reading spaces), and the feeling that one's own ideas have room to grow in a place where creativity has so much nourishment.

After BookCourt we continued as far west as we could, and then we were in a whole new realm: the southern extension of the Brooklyn Bridge Park, a waterfront recreation area under development at the mouth of the East River. Old piers here are being converted to kid and adult play areas. There's a "pop-up" pool, a musical barge, concert space, a water park, and fake sand beaches with volleyball courts. At one of the piers, a non-profit runs a free boating programme. We exchanged our bikes for kayaks. The experience out on the water was magical. We were underneath the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, which open like two arms towards the city. The opulent skyscrapers of downtown Manhattan rose across the water like a glass-and-steel forest, the needle tips of the tallest buildings piercing the azure skin of the sky. Everything was oddly quiet, except for the splash of the paddles and the buzz of the bridges as we crossed beneath them. Such kayaking points can now be found all along the Brooklyn coastline, and getting in the water provides a fresh perspective on the cityscape. Afterwards, some of us rode on Jane's Carousel, which, in addition to its stunning restored beauty, is uniquely situated, flanked by the spans of the two bridges. Sam, not quite sated with adventure, took the bike path up to Manhattan Bridge for an aerial view of the cities, the parks, and the water. I spent a little time in the cobbled streets and galleries

of DUMBO, the rediscovered Brooklyn neighbourhood beneath the overpasses of the bridges, where artists have converted old warehouses into living spaces and studios.

For our reluctant return from this land of leisure, we took the path that brought us to Fort Greene, another downtown neighbourhood chock-full of cafés, bars and nouveau restaurants. It is well known as the stomping ground of artists and writers, especially a long tradition of African-American artists. Today, Jhumpa Lahiri and Amitav Ghosh live here too. Passing by Fort Greene Park, we ran into a public performance of Circus Amok, a self-described gender-bending performance art group led by famous bearded lady Jennifer Miller. In the audience were kids and families from the public housing across the street as well as from the middle- and upper-class brownstones south and east of the park. Watching their antics, the juggling and stilt walking and cartwheeling in drag, while conveying a social message against injustice and exclusion, it struck me what I love about living here. It wasn't just the diversity of Brooklyn that was on view. What was remarkable, I thought, was the very high tolerance to being shocked or surprised, a gut-level acceptance that no one looks or acts or imagines like anyone else. Living here one took this sensibility for granted, an attitude that quirkiness and personality was expected, almost mandatory. When you did something unique, no matter how zany your particular choice, people would stand to applaud, as they did now for Circus Amok.

Before we left Fort Greene Park, I showed my friends the Doric column on the highest point of the park, which commemorates the soldiers and sailors who died on British prison ships during the Revolutionary War. We left with the sense that we'd gone full circle in time and space, and taken a large tasty slice of the "everything bagel" that is Brooklyn.

In the evening, our partners and kid stayed home, while Sam and I hit Barbès, an eclectic neighbourhood bar where both the drinks and the performances are a bargain. Operated by two French musicians and long-time local residents, Barbès features eye- and sound-catching music, readings and films from Brooklyn and beyond. That evening we saw the Brooklyn Qawwali Party, which reimagines Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's music using an 11-piece jazz ensemble with horns, drums, harmonium, guitar and bass. In the small backspace of Barbès, the virtuosos brought listeners to their feet clapping to the heavenly music inspired by Nusrat. As we rode home slightly buzzed by the music and a glass of wine, I thought it was no accident that this borough was the place for this strange and beautiful confluence of styles.

Wealth of Experiences

I have more riding stories than one telling allows. I've been visiting different neighbourhoods searching for the old soul of Brooklyn, and its new incarnations. I've found there is a spark still, a sense that the spirit of Brooklyn hasn't been completely squeezed out or sanitised by progress, that eccentric pleasure and variety are still within reach. In Gravesend, I found the Russian Baths, where I sweated and steamed and pampered myself in inferno-like banyas and steam shitzes in the company of East European families—all day for \$35 (₹1,860). In Brighton Beach, a friend and I had a Russian food discovery day, loading up in a local supermarket with pastries, blintzes, dumplings, potato and vegetable pancakes, beet salad, smoked fish, and rye bread (for all of \$25/₹1,330). Watching the Russian and Ukrainian pensioners strolling and playing backgammon on the boardwalk, I thought I was in Odessa. In Sheepshead Bay, I found the best fried clams money can buy, and a place where scores of swans congregate to be fed by Turkish and Ukrainian families, an otherworldly sight. On Rockaway Beach (technically in Queens, but accessible via bike from Brooklyn), an old



With so much happening it's hard to choose some days: Should I do the gallery crawl (painter Christina Malfitano in her DUMBO studio) or go to a book release (Marie-Helene Bertino reads at powerHouse Arena)?



MOHAN SIKKA

IN FOCUS
► Urban Spirit

Discovering Bellocq Tea Atelier in Greenpoint, where the teas are blended by hand.



ANNA WILLIAMS

► New York

Cross over the Marine Parkway Bridge from Brooklyn and you're at wild beachfront.



DAVID BOWLES

seaside destination newly rediscovered, a friend took me to a stand that sells legendary tacos. Further up the coast line, I ride regularly to the food truck *mercado* in Red Hook, where the Salvadorian vendors dish out bargain-priced *pupusas* and *arepas*.

When food exploration is not my speed, I take my bike on the ferries that plough the New York waterways from the Brooklyn side. There is a free ferry to Governor's Island, a former army base that's now a car-free playground for the city. It offers great public art and astounding views of Lady Liberty. Another ferry takes you up to the neighbourhoods of Williamsburg and Greenpoint. I spent a great fall day there, exploring the world capital of hipsterdom and local brewing.

With the spreading bike lanes I even ride in the evenings now. One of my favourite things to do with friends is to go to outdoor film screenings in the summer. The Old American Can Factory in Gowanus has a great one on its rooftop, as do Brooklyn Bridge Park, McCarren Park, and many other locations. Another discovery was the burlesque show at Coney Island, where outrageous acts of fire-eating and sword-swallowing were performed in fishnet stockings and pumps and sometimes not much else, and the seamy setting provided a flavour of Brooklyn's old underworld. Leave the kids home for this one.

Deeper Connection

With so much to discover, in Brooklyn's heart and all its limbs and organs, I sometimes fantasise about quitting my day job and becoming a cultural tour guide on bike. My trips would have a heavy emphasis on food and forgotten history. I thought I might do a pizza and bagel tour of the borough, since almost every neighbourhood has its to-swear-by places. Of course I found that a pizza tour already exists, thanks to an enterprising resident, although he hasn't thought of the biking angle

yet. I still think I might do a tour of revolutionary sites, or an immersion tour of far-flung immigrant neighbourhoods. In the meantime, I take my friends to the places I've already discovered, along the routes I've taken. Seeing their curiosity and delight makes me feel connected to the borough in a fresh way each time, and reminds me why it fascinates me still. Brooklyn was made and remade by the confluence of such singular forces: glaciers, war, colonisation, wave after wave of immigration, industrial age city planning on a grand scale, globalisation, integration, urban decay and renewal, gentrification. An island, and yet not one. Which city offers so much material for the imagination?

One morning this fall, I was doing a park round on my bike and saw a dog just like our old Billie. I blurted out her name without thinking. The dog, on a long leash, came running to me. I stopped and petted him. He liked the back of his ears scratched, just like Billie did. The day was still, calm and cool, the sticky breath of summer gone. I patted his head one final time and got back on my bike. I had much ground to cover; after a spin around the park I was headed to see model airplanes flying over the old Floyd Bennett Field by Jamaica Bay. Avid hobbyists had created their own little airfield, complete with a miniature radio control tower, and traffic controllers. There was free kayaking here too, around the uninhabited islands of the bay, and a mysterious beach filled with antique bottles. Who knows what else I'd find?

As I rode away I heard the dog's owner say, "Stay. Good boy. Stay." I smiled. As I sped away I felt an old pang, and also the peace of knowing where home is, of riding like the wind with a slowly beating heart. ■

Mohan Sikka is a writer and non-profit consultant who lives in Brooklyn. His story The Railway Aunty (Delhi Noir, HarperCollins India) was adapted into the award-winning feature film B.A. Pass.



The Coney Island Circus Sideshow was where the famous escape artist Harry Houdini, met his wife Bess, a fellow performer.

LAURE LEBER AND CONEY ISLAND USA