

What You'll See From Atop New World Trade Center – Tallest Building In U.S.



A visitor to One World Observatory looks down upon Manhattan in New York. The observatory atop the 104-story One World Trade Center opened in late May. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

By Susan Glaser

NEW YORK CITY – On this day, we couldn't See Forever. We could barely see the building next door.

Perhaps we should have guessed – standing nearly 2,000 feet below, staring up at the massive glass tower disappearing into a thick layer of stratus white – that the views wouldn't be great.

My friends and I went up anyway. It seemed important.

Earlier in the day, I had made my first visit to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, a sobering, deeply moving space that left me profoundly unsettled.



On a clear day.... you can See Forever (or at least to New Jersey and Connecticut) from atop the new One World Observatory atop the World Trade Center in Manhattan. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

I needed a place to lift my spirits – and I figured a trip to the top of the Western Hemisphere's tallest building would do the trick.

One World Trade Center rises a symbolic 1,776 feet tall from the site of the original World Trade Center complex, destroyed by terrorists on September 11, 2001. The new building, the first of several to come, opened to tenants last November.

Last month, the building's observation deck -- One World Observatory – became New York City's newest blockbuster attraction, 102 floors above the streets of Lower Manhattan.

Its motto, "See Forever," is meant both literally and figuratively, according to a spokesman. The experience is intended to deliver a message of resiliency and rebirth, as well as some spectacular views.

Alas, during my visit last weekend, low cloud cover hindered those spectacular views.

I would have to settle for a different experience.



One World Trade Center, the first of several buildings planned for the site of the original World Trade Center complex, opened in November 2014; an observation area recently opened atop floors 100, 101 and 102. It is the Western Hemisphere's tallest building. (AP Photo/Craig Ruttle, File)

After entering the building, visitors are funneled downstairs, through security, and then lined up for one of five high-speed elevators.

The elevator queue snakes through a cave of plastic rock meant to connote the real bedrock the building's foundation is set into.

More authentic: the video recordings of workers who built the skyscraper, talking about what the project means to them. ("My kids can tell their kids, 'My dad did that'"; "I want to make America proud.")

The high-speed elevator ride – 47 seconds to the top – features a terrific video that chronicles the development of Manhattan Island over the past 500 years, from swampland to first buildings to bridges and skyscrapers to today.

A second video, with scenes from contemporary New York City, is shown upon arrival to the 102nd floor – after which the skyline is dramatically revealed (on clear days, at least), via 30-foot, floor-to-ceiling windows.

The observatory is spread across three floors – 102, 101 and 100, with a large gift shop, several places to eat, and a spot to get your photo taken (with the building's exterior magically added to the backdrop).

At times, the experience feels more Disney World than Architectural Digest:

* A circular glass floor shows real-time scenes from the streets below, via live feeds from a camera atop the building's spire (because of cloud cover on the day of our visit, however, a recording was used).

* Two City Pulse stations on the main observatory floor feature NYC experts offering a window-front overview of the city below, aided by 10 frenetic video screens set up in a frame around them. Among the topics covered while I listened: the history of pizza in New York; the Harlem Renaissance; and the possibility that the Stonewall Inn and other gay-rights sites might become a national park.

* For \$15, visitors can rent an iPad loaded with information about buildings and sites that can be seen from on high. Just point the computer in any direction, touch the screen, and key details are revealed.

I declined the opportunity for an electronic tour guide, figuring that seeing the United Nations building pop up on a computer screen wouldn't mitigate my disappointment at not seeing it for real, through the window.

I knew what I was missing in the distance: the Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty – parts of five states, up to 50 miles in any direction.

The windows on the west side of the building offered the clearest sights during my visit, across the Hudson River and into New Jersey. I could also see straight down, just making out the outlines of the September 11 museum and the memorial's twin reflecting pools.

Interestingly, the tragedy of September 11 is barely mentioned atop One World Observatory. Several of the workers included in the video interviews allude to the tragedy; and in the elevator movie tracing the evolution of Manhattan, the original World Trade Center appears, then eerily disappears.

In an interview shortly after the observatory opened, David Checketts, the CEO of Legends, which runs the attraction, said the experience is intended as a forward-looking, metaphorical "fist pump" of American promise.

This building, of course, was not without controversy – prolonged design and construction phases featured disputes over the building's cost (\$3.9 billion), security (including the 185-foot concrete base), and aesthetic (the building was described as "the worst project in a generation" by Slate's Kriston Capps).

The controversies have largely subsided, however, as the building takes its glittering place in the New York City skyline (it's mesmerizing at night).

The attraction is expected to draw between 3 and 4 million visitors during its first year.

Indeed, I may be counted twice.

After a fruitless attempt to part the clouds, I descended, ears popping, captivated by another cool elevator video, this one a flight simulation around the building.

Before exiting, I discovered that guests with timed tickets are able to reschedule their visits within 14 days, if the weather is lousy enough. It's a policy that wouldn't have helped me, though, because I was heading home to Cleveland the next morning.

Still, I may be back in New York in a couple of months.

And if Mother Nature cooperates, perhaps I'll get to See Forever then.

COMPARING NYC OBSERVATORIES

One World Observatory

Observatory height: 1,250 feet (100th floor) and higher

Cost: \$32

Current hours: 9 a.m.-midnight

Outside viewing: No

Empire State Building

Observatory height: 1,050 feet (86th floor)

Cost: \$32 for main deck (add \$20 to also ascend to 102nd floor)

Current hours: 8 a.m.-2 a.m.

Outside viewing: Yes, main deck

Rockefeller Center/Top of the Rock

Observatory height: 850 feet

Cost: \$30

Current hours: 8 a.m.-midnight

Outside viewing: Yes

TALLEST BUILDINGS IN THE U.S.

The Chicago-based **Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat** is the international nonprofit that ranks the world's tallest buildings. The group's decisions are not without controversy. In the matter of One World Trade Center: Should the building's 408-foot spire count toward its height? In late 2013, the council said yes – which knocked Chicago's Willis Tower off its tallest-in-the-U.S. pedestal.

1. **One World Trade Center**, New York City, 1,776 feet
2. **Willis Tower**, Chicago, 1,450 feet
3. **432 Park Avenue**, New York City, 1,396 feet
4. **Trump International Hotel and Tower**, Chicago, 1,389 feet
5. **Empire State Building**, New York City, 1,250 feet
6. **Bank of America Tower**, New York City, 1,200 feet
7. **Aon Center**, Chicago, 1,136 feet
8. **John Hancock Center**, Chicago, 1,128 feet
9. **The Chrysler Building** , New York City, 1,046
10. **The New York Times Building**, New York City, 1,046 feet
22. **Key Tower**, Cleveland, 947 feet