

Dyker Heights Audio Tour

Intro and Getting there

Hello Traveler and welcome to Free Tours by Foot's Dyker Heights tour!

We will be guiding you from the R train station at 86th street and 4th Avenue to the lights in Dyker Heights. The only subway that runs directly to this stop is the R train. If you are coming from midtown Manhattan, you can take the R train directly there- no transfers. You can make the trip a little shorter by first taking the N train to the 59th St station in Brooklyn and then transferring to the R train. This will cut the travel time by about 10-15 minutes. Depending on where you are starting, there are several other lines that will intersect with the R at various points, so you may want to work in a switch. However, if you are a subway novice, or just dont want to mess with the transfer, you can take the R train straight there from Midtown. Either way, prepare for a little bit of a journey- travel will take anywhere 50-75 minutes from Midtown Manhattan.

A couple of important things to know before you go

There are a few things that you should know before heading out to Dyker Heights.

The first and most important is that you will be outside for a while, and it can be pretty chilly at this time of year. Make sure you are dressed to be comfortable outside for a little while. Dyker Heights is an extremely popular place to visit, and it is busier on the weekends. If you are able to get there on a weeknight, you might want to consider it- it will be less crowded! While some residents have their

displays up right after Thanksgiving in late November, not all of them do. For the maximum number of decorated houses, you will want to go in December- closer to Christmas. It is very important to keep in mind that this is a residential area and the buildings you will be seeing are people's homes. Lights will usually go on as it gets dark- between 4 and 5pm, and they are shut off when the homeowners are getting ready to go to bed. Many will start going off around 9pm. So plan your visit accordingly! Lastly, it is a great idea to bring some cash with you- preferable small bills. You will sometimes be able to buy something hot to drink there in the neighborhood, and some families put out a box to collect for various charities.

History

You can listen to this clip as you are on the way there! Dyker Heights famed Christmas Lights have been an annual tradition for close to 30 years now and attract over 150,000 visitors a year. Dyker Heights is a community that was built to enjoy the new wealth that was emigrating in from people tired of overcrowded areas of Manhattan and Brooklyn and wanted a quieter life while still living near the city in the 1890's. Walter L Johnson - often named the godfather of Dyker Heights-was a real estate developer that tried to create a luxury dwelling similar to other neighborhoods forming nearby with sweeping views of the nearby Verrazano Narrows. Many Italian Americans moved into the area, and they are largely credited with starting the tradition of the Dyker Heights lights around 30 years ago! One woman in particular, Lucy Spata, is said to have been the first homeowner to

create an over-the-top holiday display. We will visit her house later! There is a large shopping district that you will walk through on the way to Dyker Heights with some department stores. In the mid-20th century, this stretch would have been heavily decorated at the holidays. Many locals point at the department stores that they remember from their childhoods as a big inspiration to do large lights because the lights in the neighborhoods and household decorations were modest and even tame compared to the department store's impressive displays. In today's Dyker heights the opposite is true as the homes are often more elaborate than the stores.

Arriving

When you arrive at the 86th Street Station, you may want to take a quick look around you. There are several restaurants and cafes right in the vicinity, and it may be a good idea to stop. Dyker Heights is a very residential area, so there will not be any public restrooms once you are in the neighborhood. You will also have a little time outside, so grabbing something hot to drink is highly recommended! You are going to begin walking East down 86th Street. As you walk, the avenue numbers should be getting larger. You are making your way to 86th street and 10th Ave. This will take you about 15 minutes from the subway station.

- As we go along 86th street headed east and the Avenue numbers rise we are also hitting the largest shopping district in Bay Ridge and nearby Dyker Heights. Though the numerous large department stores along this section of 86th street are not quite as large as some in Midtown Manhattan along the 34th street and 5th Avenue corridors this area has been renowned for its large and colorful window displays from as far back as the 1940s and 1950s to locals. Many locals shop here and rarely go into Manhattan to shop as they have some of the same stores and quality of goods. This is the very same shopping area that is said to have inspired the home decoration in the area. Many of the stores are different now, and the holiday displays are very tame compared with the nearby houses. Residents who remember the earlier decorations in this area describe vibrant store windows, overhead banners and electricity and telephone poles dressed up as candy canes.

Verrazano Bridge at 85th and 5th

- As you approach 86th Street and 5th Avenue you can catch a look at the Verrazano Bridge connecting Brooklyn and Staten Island. The bridge is named after Italian explorer Giopvanni de Verazano who was the first European to see New York Harbor in 1524. This bridge was the largest suspension bridge in the world from 1964 until 1981. The NYC marathon famously starts over it and you saw it at the end of the Saturday Night Fever, the classic disco movie with John Travolta. The neighborhood that

Travolta lived in is just past Dyker Heights and is also a heavily Italian-American neighborhood named Bensonhurst.

10th Ave

Once you arrive at 86th street and 10th Avenue, you will take a left- you will see the beginnings of lit homes in this direction. Next to you is the Dyker Heights golf course and the first small of decorated houses. These first homes are modest in lights and in size and many are hand decorated by the owners themselves. One of the ways that you can always tell the difference is how linear the lights look and how they are wrapped around bushes, shrubs and trees. Often homeowners do a good job but they are just not as smooth and linear as a professional landscaper. Also it takes a landscaper in a truck to go up a tree 15 and 20 feet and add lights going all the way up the tree and all over the roof also! Homeowners simply don't have time, patience, and tools to do all of this. But you will see some beautiful homes along this stretch as you walk down to 84th street. This street is a great example of the small modest lights at the edges of the neighborhood. When You get to 11th and 12th Avenues from 82th to 84nd street the lights are much larger, brighter and more spectacular.

8407 10th Ave is a crowd favorite! This house features a bubble maker that is turned into a makeshift snowblower- it gives the effect of snow blowing out into the street! On the 82nd street side of the house there are blue snowflakes and white lights, and a projector image of Santa sneaking into the house!

82nd street

While you are on this corner- it is worth a quick peek further down 82nd street- there is a wonderful display with life-sized elves and a North Pole setting!

There is also a house with a beautiful, classic display on 82nd closer to 11th Ave- for anyone who feels that the Dyker Heights lights are a little over-the-top for their taste- make sure you check out this beautiful house!

From here, you can make a right and walk down 11th Ave to 84th Street, then make a left on 84th Street. You can listen to these next two clips as you walk

Start down 84th Street

You are now heading into the area where many of the displays have been done by professionals- you can always tell which ones they are, and even which specific company did the work. you just have to keep an eye out for the yard signs. There are two companies that do some of the larger lighting displays in the neighborhood De Megglio and B&R decorations. De Megglio means the best in Italian and they are certainly one of the oldest designers doing it for 30 plus years. The story as we have been told is that one particular customer wanted to really impress the neighbors and knew the owner of De Megglio and insisted that he help decorate the home being that he is a landscaper. De Megglio did such a good job that it was not long before other people began to call for his services.

B&R entered later but today they have the single largest number of clients in the neighborhood of Dyker Heights. You can see signs for both De Megglio with the Grinch and B&R scattered wherever they have designed lights throughout the neighborhood as a way to take pride in their work and advertise for other potential clients too! Some of the displays you will see in this area can cost up to \$20,000!

Design and planning and storage

There is nothing random about the lighting. The lights are selected and concepts are communicated between the companies and the clients for weeks and months before they are ever placed up. If you were to walk the neighborhood just weeks before the Holiday lights season begins in early December we have witnessed the Christmas decorators talking over lighting plans and doing a walkthrough with the homeowners on some of the elaborate lights and making last minute alterations. Though some of the more elaborate displays have not changed in a few years the client and designers still speak. The larger displays can have up to 12 workers working on the exterior so communication is key! We hear this question a lot and no, the lighting companies do not keep the lights the clients are responsible for storage on a yearly basis. It would be too large of a task for the landscapers with all of these homes and the additional storage space

required to keep these lights. Many houses with lots of decorations keep them in the basement and/or a storage unit.

1145 84th Street- Polizzotto House

While this house at 1145 84th does not have the elaborate look of some of the others you will see, it was an important spot in Dyker heights for many years. This was the home of the Polizzotto family, who's over the top display involved giant animatronic nutcrackers and a giant Santa. Alfred Polizzotto was one of the early adopters of this tradition after the Spata family. He commissioned his first display in 1988, while in remission from cancer. the display here became one of the main attractions in the neighborhood. After he passed away in 2001, his wife Florence continued on with the displays. When she dies in 2019, her children put up one last display in memory of their parents. But then the house was sold, and sat dark for a couple of holiday seasons. But now the current owners are starting to get in the spirit- while this is a very understated display for the neighborhood, it is great to see the lights back on here!

1135 84th St Saitta House

Another house with a very muted display but worth a look is the house at 1135 84th Street. This house was built in 1899 for the Saitta family, and is a great example of Queen Anne style architecture. It is 8,000 sq feet, or 700 sq meters, and cost

\$14,000 to build in 1899. This is considered one of the best examples of the early look of Dyker Heights- back when it was a turn of the 20th century suburban development. This house was built by Italian craftsmen who lived on site throughout construction, and the home retains most of its original features to this day. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. So while it isn't an example of over-the-top lights in Dyker Heights, it is a great piece of neighborhood history and worth a visit!

1152 84th Street

While you will see many elaborate displays, this house at 1152 84th Street is the one that started it all. This is the home of Lucy Spata. She and her husband Angelo are said to have started this tradition of over-the-top displays. When they moved to this house in 1986, she said they were disappointed by how underwhelming the home decorations were in the area. Lucy said she came from a family who loved Christmas and decorating, and so she and Angelo decided to do something to raise the decorating bar in the area. She said that the first display was much more understated than what you see today, but that for the area at the time, it was a lot. It continued to get more elaborate from there. When her husband passed away a few years ago, she promised him that she would keep the tradition alive. She says the key to keeping the electricity bill reasonable is LED lights and a timer, and that she has decorations stored throughout the year in every spare storage space in her house. Lucy PSata says that there have been

times where she has considered scaling back- But she says that it is important to keep this tradition alive because it is a wonderful way to keep the magic of the season alive for children.

Mangano House

When you arrive at 84th Street and 12th Ave, take a left and walk down to 83rd Street. Take another left, and walk down to 1023 83rd street you will find the home of Frank Mangano. This house, nicknamed the Believe House, has over 50,000 lights in its display, and has become one of the highlights of the neighborhood! After you have looked at this house, you can head back to 12th Ave. Take a look at 8301 12th Ave, right at the corner!

12 Ave

12th Ave is also home to some great displays. While these are sometimes a little smaller or more understated, they are still worth checking out. 8301 12th ave, at the corner of 83rd street, has beautiful lights. Unlike many of the displays on these blocks, this one is carried out by the homeowner's son (a man in his 20s)- he says that he starts working shortly after halloween each year, and that the display can take up to a month to complete!

Diagonally across the street you can see 8214, with its dazzling display of blue lights- one of the only houses in the neighborhood to exclusively use blue. There are also two larger than life poodle figurines by the door! This is a great time to

note that you should always stay off of the properties themselves- this is not a time to go right up to the poodles for a picture, or onto the property of any of the other homeowners for that matter. In recent years, there have been some issues with people trying to get right up to decorations for pictures- please don't!

84th and 12th Ave

The house at the corner of 84th and 12th ave is known for its large nativity scene as well as its lights. The nativity is on a scale that you might expect to see at the large cathedral. This house also has other large figurines, like Frosty the snowman. The house next door features a lot of large wrapped gift decorations and red and green laser lights. While you are here, consider going just one more block down to 85th street. At 1170 85th Street is a beautiful "hidden gem" house. In addition to the beautiful lights on the house and in the yard, there is a ballerina spinning up on the second floor of the house. It is well worth a visit! After you check out these houses, head to check out the houses on 84th st between 12th and 13 aves.

84th Street between 12th and 13th ave

While not every house on the street has the history of the Spata and Polizotto houses, plenty of them have great displays! Though the bulk of the displays are typically between 10th and 12th avenues, several houses past 12th have gotten into the spirit! You will definitely want to walk down 84th between 12th and

13th avenues to visit 1270 84th street, with a brilliant flashing light display, as well as 1225 and 1238 84th. They have great displays this year!

Closing

In general, the recommended area for lights is between 11th and 13th avenues, from 83rd to 86th. While most of the more famous houses are on 84th, it is worth it to explore this whole area for a bit while you are out here, and see which displays are your favorites! If you are here later in December, it is not unusual to have street vendors selling snacks and hot drinks. When you are finished, you can head to the subway to get back to Manhattan.

While you can go back the way you came, it may be easier to catch a different subway for the trip back. Most people end up closer to the 79th street Station, between 16th and 17th avenues, at the end of their visit to Dyker Heights. This is a D train stop, which can not only get you back to Midtown Manhattan, but connects with many other lines along the way.

