



WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO ON THE CONEY ISLAND STEEPLE / GO AND HAVE A GOOD TIME / WE'LL TAKE THE SUBWAY RIGHT DOWN TO

THE ROLLERCOASTER, YOU & ME

THE FUN, THRILLING AND BIZARRE CAN
ALL BE FOUND AT NEW YORK CITY'S
EVER-CHANGING CONEY ISLAND.

BY SAM POLCER



While the “Steeple” mentioned in the Velvet Underground’s song may no longer be there (the amusement park closed in 1964), a good time can certainly still be found where the F train meets the sea. And while Steeplechase Park was an integral part of this fascinating beachfront area’s long and storied past, it is by no means the only attraction to have come and gone on Coney Island, which was first called Narrioch (“land without shadows”) by its Native American residents. This year, it will say goodbye to yet another group of amusements with the year-end closing of Astroland Amusement Park (www.astroland.com). Many of the rides and games will be dismantled to make way for a new real estate development. While Astroland was billed 45 years ago as a futuristic “space age” theme park, the end of this summer may be the last chance for visitors to take a step into Coney Island’s past.

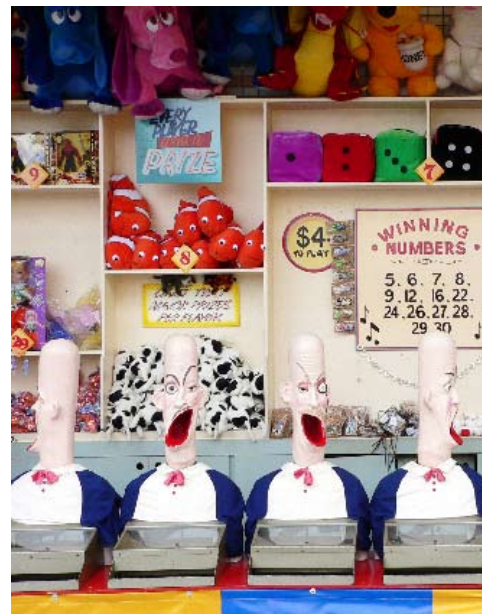
OLAND

OLONE



FUN AND GAMES

From left: The Cyclone debuted June 26, 1927; one of Coney Island's many amusing games.



But rest assured: There is still, and perhaps always will be, fun and magic by the seashore. Astroland may be closing, but many other opportunities for thrills, excitement and wonder will remain.

Topping the list: the infamous Cyclone rollercoaster. With nine adrenaline-pumping drops and six turns that whip riders around its wooden track, the Cyclone was once the subject of a successful grassroots preservation campaign when the nearby New York Aquarium set its sights on the property for an expansion. Today, it is owned by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, and remains Coney Island's No. 1 attraction.

Other notable landmarks include the gigantic steel Ferris wheel, **Deno's Wonder Wheel** (www.wonderwheel.com), and the Parachute Jump, which is inactive but remains a towering, recognizable fixture. **KeySpan Park** (www.brooklyncyclones.com), with its view of the Parachute Jump, has been home to the New York Mets-affiliated Minor League Brooklyn Cyclones since 2001 and hosts the occasional stadium rock concert.

Around 1870, a German immigrant named Charles Feltman began selling sausages in rolls on Coney Island. While Feltman is credited with inventing the hot dog, it was his employee Nathan Handwerker who opened Coney Island's **Nathan's Famous** (www.nathansfamous.com) in 1916. The original restaurant, which sold hot dogs for a nickel, still exists on the corner of Surf and Stillwell avenues.

And, of course, don't forget the beach and the boardwalk. Both are two and a half miles long, connecting West 37th Street and Manhattan Beach. On hot days, the Atlantic Ocean is filled with swimmers and waders, and the amusements that line the boardwalk for a few blocks near the rides provide a lively atmosphere.

CONY ISLAND CULTURE

Coney Island has rides, sure, but in the age of Six Flags and Disney World, one rollercoaster, a Ferris wheel and a few other carnival-esque rides does not a theme park destination make. For many visitors, what defines this place above all else is its celebration of what some describe as a "honky tonk subculture." It is with the preservation of this contribution to culture in mind that **Coney Island USA** (www.coneyisland.com) was founded.

The nonprofit organization "offers a growing panoply of arts events and exhibitions rooted in the traditions of P.T. Barnum, vaudeville and Coney Island itself." Its "Sideshow By the Seashore" is open weekends and is the only true remaining "10-in-1" circus sideshow in the nation. The group even offers a sideshow school for budding freaks, performers and banner painters.

Upstairs, check out the small but fascinating Coney Island Museum, filled with vintage bumper cars, an old Steeplechase horse, funhouse distortion mirrors and antique souvenirs. Through September, the exhibit "Wild Kingdom: Mermaid Parade Photographs" will be on display. Every June, Coney Island USA hosts the Mermaid Parade, the country's largest art parade, which pays homage to Coney Island's forgotten Mardi Gras, which lasted from 1903 to 1954.

In addition to its Saturday night film series (upcoming movies include campy classics like *The Terror of Tiny Town* and *Big Top Pee Wee*), the popular **Coney Island Film Festival** (www.coneyislandfilmfestival.com) runs September 28-30 to raise funds for Coney Island USA. ✂

SEA CIRCUS

THE NEW YORK AQUARIUM IS A SIDESHOW LIKE NO OTHER.

Step right up, folks, and behold Ayeq the walrus, who comes from the Bering Strait and weighs more than 1,200 pounds—and is still growing! Marvel at the strange waterworld of "Alien Stingers" (the New York Aquarium is one of the only aquariums in the world to permanently feature jellyfish)! And, of course, be astounded by the boneless giant octopus—a creature with 30-foot arms that can squeeze itself through an opening the size of a soda can!

All these wonders and more can be found one block from the Cyclone at the New York Aquarium. Home to more than 8,000 specimens representing 350 species of aquatic wildlife from all over the globe, the aquarium has been located on its 14 beachfront acres since 1957, when its collection was moved from the Bronx Zoo. Originally opened in Battery Park in 1896, it is the longest continually operating aquarium in the US. www.nyaquarium.com