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TRAVEL BASICS

## New York's Penn Station Gets a Bright and Shiny Companion

**BY SUSAN BRESLOW** -- It's been just over a year since the \$1.6 billion Moynihan Train Hall opened in Manhattan, across Eighth Avenue from Amtrak's Pennsylvania Station, the low-ceilinged panhandler magnet that is nevertheless North America's busiest rail station.

It may come as a surprise that [Moynihan Train Hall](#) didn't replace woefully inadequate Pennsylvania

Station, which is decades overdue for replacement. Instead, the clean, bright, 31,000-square-foot facility operates in tandem with Penn as a single complex atop existing railroad tracks. From here, trains depart to upstate New York, New England, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington and 500 other cities. Amtrak riders can now board and disembark trains in both facilities. The Long Island Rail Road, the nation's busiest commuter network, also uses both Penn and Moynihan. However, there's no direct access to New Jersey Transit from Moynihan. NJT travelers still must pick up their service in Penn Station.

Moynihan Train Hall 360 Virtual Tour



Moynihan Train Hall stands inside a century-old Beaux-Arts landmark designed by McKim, Mead & White. Converted by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill from

the mail-sorting area in the city's main Post Office, the fresh interior quickly won praise from architecture critics who lauded the 92-foot-high skylit atrium over the Amtrak and Long Island Rail Road boarding concourses.

To some degree, Moynihan *does* alleviate the crowding that plagues Penn Station, which was stuffed under the Madison Square Garden sports arena in the 1960s. The new space allows room for travelers to stand physically distant from one another--yet train passengers still scrunch together as boarding commences.

First-timers will appreciate Moynihan's spotless bathrooms and admire the cube-shaped analog clock in the center of the hall, perhaps New York City's latest meeting spot. And as a new-build, the Hall is accessible for passengers of all abilities and offers multiple displays of train information.

Moynihan's 255,000 square feet of retail space recently opened. A few shops, including a Walgreens and several places to grab coffee and snacks, already are serving customers. The Food Hall and Bar, with an

Italian sandwich shop, pickle vendor, Middle Eastern grill and outlets for pizza, burgers, sushi and ramen, should be fully operational this month. A newsstand/bookstore is due to open imminently.

Moynihan's most enviable passenger feature is the [Metropolitan Lounge](#). Located on the mezzanine with a long balcony that overlooks the Hall, the lounge resembles an airline club and serves certain Amtrak Guest Rewards members and premium-class passengers. Pre-packaged food and non-alcoholic beverages are complimentary. Beer from New York breweries, wine, cocktails and hot food have been added to the menu, but there's a fee for those. Not an elite Amtrak traveler? No worries. Day passes are available for \$50 for Business Class passengers. Coach passengers can gain entry by redeeming 5,000 Amtrak Guest Rewards points for a packet of five passes.

The Hall also features a handsome general waiting room with sinuous walnut benches and 300 seats for customers. Alas, the area is confining rather than open and few spots overlook the boarding area. Across the avenue, Penn Station's recently refreshed and attended

Ticketed Waiting Area boasts a more generous 476 seats.

## **TIPS FOR INFREQUENT TRAIN RIDERS**

✔ **Check out Moynihan Hall at least once.**

Admire the soaring ceiling, the spaciousness, the cleanliness. But do bring your own reading material as no newsstands are yet open.

✔ **On your next trip**, consider boarding from Penn Station instead. On recent visits, it's been the less crowded facility. There are ample well-established eateries and newsstands to grab something before boarding. And there's the roomier, well-lit waiting area.

✔ **The best time to book** a trip on Amtrak is early. You'll save money because fares increase closer to departure date. A capacity indicator on the booking site reveals how full a train is at the moment.

✔ **Amtrak is waiving change fees** for reservations made by April 30. Anyone who desires greater social distancing can switch to a less crowded train when the departure date is imminent.

✔ **Bring a charger.** Amtrak has overhauled its aging trainsets and every window seat now has a power outlet. Alas, Amtrak WiFi is dependent on capacity. You

may do better accessing your own hotspot.

☑ **Want extra legroom** and reserved seating?

Book a Business Class ticket. On non-Acela trains, those passengers are also entitled to complimentary soft drinks. Amtrak Rewards members will get a 25% bonus on points.

☑ **Be prepared for confusion** when you arrive in New York. Signage on the platform as to which train hall a passenger will end up in is often unclear. An escalator at one end of the platform will lift you into the Moynihan Train Hall. How you get into Penn Station is a crapshoot. There are several egresses. The unfortunate will end up on the Long Island Rail Road concourse, a low-ceilinged mezzanine with boarded-up retail space that may one day be renovated. Should you end up in that ghostly warren, keep walking and remain calm. You'll ultimately find an exit.

If you live long enough, if stakeholders and government agencies agree, and if funding comes through, New York Governor Kathy Hochul's \$7 billion plan to totally overhaul Penn Station will eliminate that purgatory and provide passengers with a thoroughly modern, world-class train complex. Until then, consider

Moynihan Train Hall a shiny new part of a work in progress. (*Posted on February 3, 2022.*)

## **ABOUT SUSAN BRESLOW**

Susan Breslow is the author of *The Complete Guide to Vow Renewals*, available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). She most recently wrote about [falling standards](#) at high-end hotels.