

FROM GRANGE TO NEW YORK

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You cannot fail to see them; they are as much a part of New York City as the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. Parked day-in, day-out, alongside the entrances to Central Park and sometimes venturing down to the upper reaches of Fifth Avenue, they entice and cajole wide-eyed tourists to go for a trip in their famed horse-drawn carriages

But the glamour of black felt top hats and wide-spoked plush carriages aside, to be one among their number, you must be a horseman, businessman and entertainer, all rolled into one. That's according to Jim Campbell, who has been in New York's horse and carriage business for twenty years.

Joe Hourigan, a tall, burly lad from Grange, prepares his eye-catching white hooded carriage for the day ahead. Pulled up across from the Plaza Hotel and armed with a bucket of soapy water in one hand and a much-used cloth in the other, he sets off on a meticulous cleaning mission that leaves no part of his blood-red upholstered carriage untouched.

Cleaning, chatting, he still manages to keep a well-trained eye out for passing trade. Then, after a good hosing down and a feed of oats, the brass buckled and leather harnessed, Waldo and his partner head up to Central Park for the day.

Driving horse-drawn carriages six days a week for the past three years, Joe's daily routine changes little. At nine o'clock each morning, he collects his beautiful bay Belgian bred horse, Waldo, from one of the city's five stables.

Generally, either Irish or Italian family-run businesses, the stables usually train the horses for the job. Drivers either work for the companies or else buy their own carriages, using the stables only as a bed and breakfast facility for the horses. However, every carriage driver must have a medallion and every horse worked must have a licence. Both are issued by the city authorities and must regularly be renewed.

Driving betwixt and between hooting drivers, daredevil cyclists and impatient bus drivers poses little problem for the blond Joe, who, with a mighty grin, maintains that "They're used to it by now, although the first day alright, I was nervous with the horse".

After that, it's either take one route round the park or the other. "The regular ride takes about a half-hour and it brings you around by the carousel, the ice-rink which is used for roller skating during the summer, up along by the chess and checkers house, the dairy and the recently opened zoo", says the well-versed Joe.

Facts and figures about the park and its history come easily to Joe: “The Park was designed by Olmsted, who also did Hyde Park in London. It is six miles wide and covers 865 acres of the richest real estate in the world. It took three thousand men, most of whom had left Ireland during the famine, to develop the park in 1862. The horse and carriages have been here more or less ever since”, says the Limerick man, who is now in full flight.

Meanwhile, Jimmy, who tells me that he was once described as a “specialist with a wheelbarrow”, joins the chat. Bedecked in a straw hat with a black ribbon, he is an old hand at the trade and, needless to say, has a few anecdotes to pass on. “The park was totally hand-made, even the Horseshoe Lake where they go boating now. It was all solid rock and so had to be drilled and blasted into shape.” At this stage, both of them salute a passing Kerry man, who is heading up towards the park gate with an obviously out-of-town troop, made up of Ma, Pa and offspring.



Dolores, Sinead and Kieran Hourigan in horse-drawn carriage in New York with Kevin Hourigan at the reins.

Among those ferried by Joe are musicians Carlos Santana and the Monkees as well as fellow Irishman, actor Peter O’Toole. “They are usually very nice but like everyone else, they prefer to get a guided tour instead of having a chat”, he adds, matter-of-factly. Besides being the owner of well-known faces, customers can be memorable for other reasons. “I once had a couple who asked me if they could do anything they

wanted in the carriage. I was sure that they wanted to smoke pot! After a while, I turned around and there they were...” recalls Joe, still speechless with disbelief.

The longer run around the park for other customers includes Columbus Circle, the Horseshoe Lake and the Sheep’s Meadow. And although people are usually eager to see the New York City Marathon finish line, as well as scenes used in movies, Joe maintains that the firm favourites are, without a doubt, the Dakota building where John Lennon lived and fell victim to an assassin’s bullet, as well as nearby Strawberry Fields, erected in his memory.

At the evening’s end, Joe hands over his carriage to his partner, who ferries mostly couples to and from the theatre, as well as circling the park, which according to him, is safe enough at night; though he says, “I won’t walk in it”. Meanwhile, with his top hat perched on his seat at the ready, he hails passers-by. After all, there’s work to be done and a living to be made.