Since the 1920’s New York City’s Harlem community – a few blocks north of Central Park, has served as a residential, cultural and business hub for countless African Americans. Originally a Dutch village formally organized in 1658, it is named after the city of Haarlem in the Netherlands; and to a considerable extent Harlem is not only a community etched with African American vastness, but a place of cultural identity as well.

The community has produced jazz greats, political giants and sports heroes; and is notably home to literary giants such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, music impresarios Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday and social change agents, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey.

Harlem is well known for soul-stirring gospel choirs, nourishing southern-style food, throng of street vendors and African markets. Throughout the years, the neighborhood has managed to reinvent itself with a new crop of enterprising and revolutionary leadership, reasonably priced housing accommodations and innovative and tempting tourists fascinations.

The community’s rich history and modern-day leanings have both been defined by a series of economic boom-and-bust cycles, but has managed to largely shaken off the
stigma of urban decay. And although Harlem has existed as one of the most celebrated names in black American culture, the trend lines of diversity, identity and cultural expression have been moving for decades.

As reported in the New York Times a few years ago, African-Americans are no longer the majority of the population in greater Harlem. Even in the smaller area known as central Harlem, the African American population is lower now than at any time since the 1920s, when an influx of African Americans dramatically altered the racial dynamics of the community. Additionally, according to the 2008 United States Census, for the first time since the 1930s, less than half of residents are black, and black residents now only count for 40% of the population.

Regardless of the trends or the reports, New York City’s Harlem community is one of the city’s hottest areas to reside, visit or party. There’s endless energy, animated activities and scores of attractions and allures. In Central Harlem on 125th Street, the street pulsates with its own human parade, countless bootleg mixtape promoters and tempting corner food trucks serving anything from fried fish to falafels. Annually, millions of visitors explore the area's cultural legacy by visiting some of the most historic and iconic attractions in New York City.

If you’re looking for a powerful spiritual message, or moving gospel selection, there’s no greater place to visit than Abyssinian Baptist Church.
Abyssinian Baptist Church, known for its community outreach, activism and spiritual renewal, is the first African American Baptist church in the state of New York and one of the oldest in the United States. The church was founded in 1808 when a group of black parishioners parted ways with First Baptist Church of New York due to racially segregated seating restrictions. From its beginning, the church became the community’s go-to place for vibrant leaderships, energetic community outreach and spiritual revitalization.

Under the leadership of Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. the church experienced precipitous growth with its message of social justice and quest for community empowerment. Upon the retirement of Reverend Powell, Sr., his son, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. assumed leadership of the church and grew the congregation to nearly 14,000.

Today, Abyssinian Baptist is under the leadership of Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts, III and continues to provide for the needy and has extended its religious and social programs to include international outreach. Under the current pastorate, the church established the Abyssinian Development Corporation, which is a nonprofit entity, designed to stimulate economic development throughout Harlem with an emphasis on providing affordable housing for the African American community.

In 1993, the church was designated as an official city landmark by the New York City Landmark Preservation Commission. If you want attend a service at Abyssinian, you would need to arrive early, as the church draws thousands of international tourist and local worshippers.
Only a few short steps away from Abyssinian Baptist Church, you’ll discover another Harlem gem – The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is a research unit of The New York Public Library system; and consists of three connected sections – The Schomburg Building, the Langston Hughes Building, and the Landmark Building. The center has been honored as one of the leading institutions in the United States that solely focuses on African American history, the African Diaspora and scores of historical experiences unique to the African and African American experience.

The center collects, preserves, and offers access to materials documenting black life in America and throughout the world. In 2015, the center won the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, and remains a place that promotes the need to preserve cultural heritage and is a resource for educational exploration.

After you’ve thumbed through the historical archives and marveled at priceless artifacts, no Harlem journey is complete without visiting, Sylvia’s Restaurant, Harlem’s world famous restaurant, named in honor of the “Queen of Soul Food” Sylvia Woods.

Since 1962, Sylvia’s iconic restaurant has welcomed countless dignitaries and everyday people from around the world to taste her famous fried chicken. The restaurant has attracted a range of clientele from Presidents Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Nelson
Mandela, Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton and countless other well-known figures.

To many, Sylvia’s is more than a renowned eatery, but a gathering place for the African American community. The restaurant is located between 126th and 127th streets and occupies the entire block. Besides Sylvia’s mouthwatering fried chicken, hot water cornbread and appetizing collard greens, the restaurant also offers prepared foods, beauty and skin care products, cookbooks and children’s books.

If you can muster up enough energy after leaving Sylvia’s Restaurant, pausing by Harlem’s unique and underappreciated Hotel Theresa should be high of sites to visit.

Located at the corner of 127th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, the 13-story hotel was once a hub for African-American life during the 1040s and 50s. Although the luxurious hotel was built to cater to New York City’s elite white clientele; however, just as soon as the final brick was placed, its lobby was filled with famous African-American athletes, entertainers, political leaders and international dignities choosing to reside at Hotel Theresa over other establishments in Manhattan.

Many of Hotel Theresa’s most notable guests include: Muhammad Ali, Jimi Hendrix, Lena Horne, Ray Charles, Little Richard, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. In October of 1960, Eleanor Roosevelt and other key authorities within the Democratic Party visited the hotel along with John F. Kennedy, during his campaign for President of the United States. And in 1960, during the opening session of the United Nations, Fidel
Castro and more than 80 members of his delegation were guests at the hotel after storming out of Hotel Shelburne in Manhattan due to that hotel’s manager demanding cash payments from Castro and his entourage. The Cuban delegation rented out 80 rooms for $800 per day.

After salivating over Hotel Theresa’s exceptional place in history, just around the corner you’ll discover another Harlem gem – the Apollo Theater.

Situated in the heart of 125th Street, Harlem’s Apollo Theatre is by far the most famous performance venue associated with African American entertainers. Built in 1913, the theater rapidly became the largest urban black entertainment venue in the United States, and for many years was the only venue in New York City to hire African American entertainers.

The theater has a seating capacity of 1,506 and features an “amateur night” contest where many well-known African American entertainers gained fame. Over the years, prominent African American figures such as Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Bill Cosby, Moms Mabley, Luther Vandross, Lauryn Hill and Mariah Carey have all debuted. Today, the theater holds a historic landmark designation from the United States government, the State of New York and the City of New York and welcomes more than 1.3 million visitors to its internationally syndicated show – “Showtime at the Apollo.”

To many Harlemites (a native or inhabitant of Harlem), Harlem is more than a community sectioned on the northern edge of Manhattan. It is a place bursting with
purpose, inflexible ambition and unwavering vitality. A neighborhood unlocked to cultural expression and ethnic identity. To some Harlem is a person, to others Harlem is a thing, but to many Harlem is a place.

Although Harlem has its roots deeply embedded in African American culture and experiences, its rich legacy is quickly dwindling. It wasn’t all that long ago, when a community such as Harlem was a place that certain people not only feared to venture into, but found no justifiable reason for venturing at all. However, that is certainly not the narrative today. In recent years, scores of diverse young professionals have taken up residency in Harlem and has changed the complexion of the community.

With property values generally lower in Harlem than other areas in New York City, gaining a property that’s a few blocks from Central Park and Columbia University has come as a bargain to many. The community has come to serve as a model for the changing social, political and cultural demographics that are being witnessed within historic African American communities.

Although Harlem is an undeniable gem tucked away just north of Central Park, the community is now lined with fancy restaurants, upscale bars, organic supermarkets and bazaars that many traditional locals cannot afford. However, due to the shifts in demographics, Harlem manages to shake the stigma of urban decay and remains as one of New York City’s trendiest neighborhoods to live, work, or play.