

How to find a cheap apartment in NYC

Ten tips for finding a cheap apartment.

By Marisa LaScal



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Make direct contact

The easiest way to save money is to avoid paying a broker's fee. "Look for a building with a rental office directly on site," suggests architect Hayes Slade, whose Slade Architecture firm knows something about affordable housing (it won an award for its design of a Brooklyn housing project in 2010). "That way you can negotiate directly with the landlord and skip a real-estate agent fee." In order to ditch online searches, Slade recommends walking the streets of your desired neighborhood and looking for offices and for rent signs. That's how investment banker Jessica Gutierrez found a studio she loves in Battery Park City. "Ask doorman," she says. "I would first ask if this a condo or is there a leasing office. If it was a condo, I would ask if they had a list of owners renting out their apartments. At the ones that did, I would leave my business card, and I got a lot of callbacks from owners renting their apartments themselves." Victoria Hagman, president of the Brooklyn-focused agency Realty Collective, hit the pavement too. "When I was looking for an apartment," she says, "I would go to moving sales every weekend and ask, 'Has your landlord found someone to take your apartment yet? Can I see it?'" For more tips, look for Realty Collective's new apartment-hunting classes at the Brooklyn Brainerly (brooklynbrainerly.com; next class May 16, \$10).

Look at bigger apartment buildings

"A good way to find an affordable apartment in Manhattan is to look in buildings that have between 15 and 30 apartments," says Joshua Price of the Price Law Firm LLC, which specializes in landlord-tenant representation. Odds are good that if the building has rent-stabilized apartments, they will stay that way. "In those buildings, it's less likely that, when an apartment becomes vacant, the landlord will expend the enormous amount of money necessary to deregulate an apartment. Generally an investor with a ten-unit building is trying to deregulate every unit and then sell the building. Someone with a 30-unit building is more likely to be thinking to hold it and not spend as much money on each vacancy."

Face something ugly

None of us dreams of gazing out our windows and seeing on-ramps and toll booths, but it might be better for your bank account. "Proximity to generally undesirable transportation facilities can be a money saver," says Ryan Harris, a city planner and a local representative of the American Planning Association. "Look for areas near elevated train lines, highways, or bridge and tunnel entrances to be more affordable than those even one or two blocks away." Harris himself has a colleague who pays \$1,850 for what he calls a "very comfortable" one-bedroom right by the

Midtown Tunnel—when the median rent for one bedrooms in the rest of that section of Murray Hill is, he notes, \$2,295.

Buy earplugs

"Apartments that face noisy construction sites or other noise-generating operations can be a deal if you are willing to put up with it," says Morgan Turkewitz of Citi Habitats. "Apartments above restaurants or bars tend to be less expensive, as are buildings located along busy avenues." City planner Harris agrees, adding that "for those not bothered by noise and disruption, construction of the Second Avenue subway will continue for another four-plus years, and I suspect it will depress prices along Second Avenue to some degree." In fact, it did for Jessica Samakow, a 21-year-old intern at an online company who moved into a studio on the Upper East Side last August. "The broker I dealt with said the normal price for my apartment was around \$1,600," she says. "But because I'm right near the Second Avenue subway construction, I got the construction discount and now pay \$1,300."

Wait until May

Lorraine Nadel, senior attorney at **Nadel & Associates**, a midtown firm that handles real-estate issues and landlord-tenant litigation, recommends watching for a change to the city law that will go into effect on May 1. The new edict will require that apartments in most buildings with three units or more be occupied for more than 30 consecutive days. "This means that it will be illegal to rent out apartment units for short-term stays," she says. "This should increase the supply of available apartments, which should in turn cause rents to drop, since apartment units can no longer be kept off the market to be operated as if they were hotel rooms."

In fact, wait until winter

Typically, fewer people move in the winter, making landlords ready to deal. When designer and home stager Susan Goldstein was in the market for a new place, she contacted landlords between Thanksgiving and Christmas. "We looked at buildings that offered incentives," she says. Her broker, David J. Bucci of A.C. Lawrence & Co., reports that Goldstein was able to get one month of rent free, and the building paid the broker's fee. "The majority of leases turn over during the summer, so the inventory is high, but so are prices and the number of people looking increases dramatically," he says. "If you are looking for a deal, the winter months are the way to go."

Throw in a little elbow grease

"Most landlords are happy to share the cost of certain repairs and deduct the cost from the rent," says Candice Vilaire of Brooklyn Heights Real Estate. "Taking care of the property—painting, recycling, snow-shoveling, vacuuming the hallway—is a good idea to get a reduction on the rent, especially in smaller buildings." Vilaire once negotiated an annual rent reduction of \$2,500 for an architect client who was willing to redo some outdated kitchen cabinets for the landlord. "The rent was decreased by about \$200 a month, they lived with a beautiful kitchen, and everyone was happy."

Find a low-key neighborhood

"Check for neighborhoods that are never mentioned in the real estate section of *The New York Times*," says Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at NYU Wagner. "Look

for industrial areas where there are no Internet cafes or health-food markets." His suggestions: Ridgewood, Queens, and East Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Watch for extras

Utility bills can quickly add a hefty bump to your monthly outlay. For example, while landlords typically pay heating costs, electricity may come out of your pocket. "One thing renters should watch for: older buildings that are converted to electric heat," says Nancy Rankin, an architect with John G. Waite Associates, a firm that specializes in historic architecture. "Usually the installation costs are much cheaper for the landlord, but the monthly electric bill to heat the apartment will be very high."

Rise up

As many of us already know from personal experience, the rent really is too damn high. "There are no affordable apartments. Not in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens or anywhere upstate," says Jimmy McMillan, the man who has run for mayor and governor on the Rent Is Too Damn High ticket. "The buildings are crumbling but the landlords keep making the rent go up and up and up." So what can you possibly do to lower your monthly fees? McMillan knows: "The young people have to rise up and overthrow the votes of their parents. They must rise up like the young people in the Arab world and across the country. But they must rise up using democratic means, rise up through their votes and vote smarter." So if all the above tips, don't work, you know what you have to do.

"How to find an apartment wait till May" By Marisa LaScala, TimeOut New York, April 25, 2011