

December 11, 2005

10 New York Hotels for Under \$250 a Night

By DENNY LEE

SANDWICHED between an Indian and a Chinese restaurant, the new Holiday Inn Express near Times Square is the brand's first foray into Manhattan. Opened two months ago, the 125-room hotel is on a busy stretch of West 45th Street where trucks double-park, sidewalk peddlers hawk old magazines and office smokers huddle.

But it's a different world inside. With its low-grade veneered plywood furniture and its vending machines, there is little distinguishing this property, between Fifth Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas, from the 1,400 other Holiday Inn Expresses found along highways and nameless suburbs. Muffins are baked by the food conglomerate Sysco. Floral prints are bolted to the wall. The bathrooms are a study in beige.

You could be in Anywhere, U.S.A. That is, until the bill arrives. The price for a standard room, with a broom-size closet and views of a grimy alley: \$299, not including taxes.

New York is no bargain. Its portfolio of luxury hotels rivals that of any major city; the penthouse suite to open this spring at the Four Seasons, for example, will cost around \$30,000 a night (yes, that's four zeros). But the sticker shock these days is no longer confined to the high end. During the first nine months of this year, according to PKF Consulting, which specializes in hotels, the average price of a hotel shot up to \$225.07, from \$194.73 last year, and, by year's end, is likely to break the all-time high of \$239.90 in 2000.

"Without question, New York is the most expensive venue in the United States," said John A. Fox, a senior vice president of PKF Consulting. "In the rest of the country, \$225 will get you a very good four- to five-star hotel room. But in New York, for \$225, you'll get a small room in a low-quality three-star hotel that was not necessarily recently renovated."

And the view? "You'll get a brick wall."

That's assuming you can get a room. Hotel occupancy rates have risen to 85.4 percent, up from 81.4 last September, according to PKF. "New York is essentially sold-out until the end of the year," Mr. Fox said.

Tourists can thank themselves. NYC & Company, the city's visitors and convention bureau, estimates that a record-setting 41 million people will visit the city this year. Meanwhile, the city's supply of hotel beds - 63,000 now - fell slightly during the past two years, with marquee properties like the Plaza Hotel and Regent Wall Street going the way of yet another luxury condominium.

So what's a budget traveler to do when budget hotels like the Holiday Inn Express cost more than the Ritz-Carlton in St. Louis (\$259 a night)? Airport hotels are tempting, as long as you don't mind the long adventure to and from Manhattan. Flophouses are another option, but penny pinchers should first poke around tripadvisor.com, the online travel forum: it's creepy how often mice - even rats - are spotted scurrying inside the city's moderately priced rooms.

If that doesn't keep you homebound, take heart. A wide-ranging search of Manhattan's 230 or so hotels uncovered places that are not only easy on the wallet but also clean, well maintained and even homey. With some digging, you can get a good night's sleep, a hot shower and a place to secure your shopping bags - all for under \$250. Just don't expect deluxe accommodations and top-notch service. At most of these places, amenities are limited to fresh towels, clean sheets and a room key. And don't expect to do much entertaining. Think of your shoebox as a taste of how some New Yorkers really live.

HOTEL QT

Not long ago, a low-budget bed in Times Square meant only one thing. But there's nothing sleazy about André Balazs's hip version of a Super 8. Situated on a touristy block within screaming distance of MTV's studios, Hotel QT keeps prices low by masking the lack of frills (and good service) with lots of designer touches.

The smallest room, labeled an "F" (perhaps for "frugal"), starts at \$125. For that price, you get roughly 200 square feet that barely fits a queen-size bed. Those units sell out fast, so when I stayed there several weeks ago, I booked a larger "B" class for \$225. Check-in was confusing: the front desk looks like a newsstand (complete with magazines, candy and beer), the clerk couldn't work the computer, and the room I was assigned, 701, was under construction - 10 months after the hotel had opened.

The delay was hard to appreciate. None of the polish that went into the lobby swimming pool (seen in countless design magazines) was evident in my eventual room, 1606. Walls had a single coat of putty-gray paint, tiles were misaligned, and the floors were warped. The open shower in

the doorless bathroom may appeal to exhibitionists, but that doesn't explain the absence of towel racks, hooks, alarm clocks and chairs. It was clear where the money had been spent, and it wasn't in the spartan rooms.

Nevertheless, there are enough unexpected frills to recommend the hotel. The platform king was plush, the Egyptian cotton bedding soft and the closet spacious. The room was also equipped with free WiFi and a large flat-screen television. There were free coffee and bagels in the morning, as well as a tiny gym. The views aren't bad either. As night fell, and I got bored spying on the offices across 45th Street, slivers of Times Square reflected off the glassy canyon like a mile-long pinball machine.

For the first time in years, I felt like a tourist in my own city. Maybe I should catch a Broadway show. Or check out the new Teri Hatcher wax figure at Madame Tussaud's. But alas, QT does not have a concierge. And it started pouring. So I joined a group of guests in their 20's and 30's in the lounge, next to the pool and sauna, as the nightly party got under way.

GERSHWIN HOTEL

Those seeking cookie-cutter comfort should opt for the Hampton Inn in nearby Chelsea. But if you want to mingle with bohemians, friendly weirdos and lots of European backpackers, look no further than the [Gershwin](#), on East 27th Street. Despite the bumbling staff and stag party vibe, I found myself lulled by the Gershwin's carefree and unpretentious air.

Decorated with funky artwork and mismatched furniture, the Gershwin feels like a throwback from that East Village touchstone, "Rent." But it's off Fifth Avenue, in the shadows of the Empire State Building, and within easy walking distance to Midtown and Lower Manhattan.

The 13-story Greek Revival building is splattered with huge podlike sconces that suggest a haunted playhouse. Inside, [Andy Warhol](#) is the resident spirit, with each floor given to a different artist. The wannabe-Factory aesthetic might have seemed contrived in the 1980's, but it feels charmingly dated today.

Standard rooms (starting at \$119) are homey and even spacious, in a first-apartment-after-college kind of way. (For those on a tighter budget, a bunk in the hostel dorm rooms on the lower floors starts at \$33.) There are hardwood floors (rare among the city's hotels), rusty radiators that clank (i.e., no thermostat) and windows that look directly into other people's apartments, furthering the tenement effect.

Basic amenities are extended, but only half-heartedly. Cable reception is fuzzy, calls to the front desk take 10 rings to answer, and the WiFi is spotty at best. Luckily, the full-service neighborhood makes up for the shortcomings. There's a terrific 24-hour deli around the corner, Cafe 28, where you can get anything from sushi to e-mail. For \$20, guests have full use of the Gym, a health club across the street. And around the corner is Madison Square, a great park for writing postcards and people watching.

The nightclub-style lobby, however, does have a concierge desk, staffed with young transplants who will happily answer questions about nearby places to buy skateboarding gear and video games.

AFFINIA DUMONT

This is a hotel that few New Yorkers know about. There is no trendy designer to name drop, no rooftop pool to pose around, and its biggest offense: it's in a sleepy neighborhood with no claims of hipsterdom. And that's a shame, because the Affinia Dumont may be one of the city's best-kept hotel secrets.

Set on East 34th Street, near one of the entrances to the Queens Midtown Tunnel, the Affinia is designed for jock-minded business travelers. There are a well-appointed 24-hour gym, a spa and minibars stocked with energy bars and the like. But cost-conscious tourists will find that it suits their needs as well, especially on weekends, when rates drop significantly. The all-suite, pet-friendly hotel typically starts at \$329, but rates this holiday season can be found for as low as \$199.

For that price, you get a roomy "studio suite" that could be described as urban contemporary: tan leather headboard, dark-wood-veneered mirror and stainless-steel sconces. It is equipped with a kitchenette (full-size by Manhattan standards), an extremely comfy bed with high-thread-count sheets and lots of residential touches like dimmer switches and throw pillows. Today's wired traveler will also appreciate the number of electrical outlets, easy Internet hookup (\$9.95 a day) and Aeron ergonomic chair. My south-facing suite on the 24th floor offered clear views of Lower Manhattan and the East River.

But where the Affinia shines is its service. Guests are greeted by name, housekeeping calls (for a dead light bulb) were addressed promptly, and the morning paper arrived before I finished brushing my teeth. And instead of the hodgepodge of takeout menus typical of most cheaper hotels, the Barking Dog restaurant downstairs offers room service. But don't expect a silver trolley: breakfast, ordered the night before, arrived in a plastic "I Love New York" bag.

I enjoyed the stay so much that I asked for a late checkout. The request was eagerly accommodated.

CHELSEA HOTEL

With its decrepit beauty, ornate bones and storied ghosts, the [Chelsea Hotel](#) still casts a long shadow on Gotham's cultural psyche, long after

Nancy Spungen was stabbed to death in Room 100 by Sid Vicious. After eyeing it from afar since my clubbing days, it was time to check in.

The shabby-chic lobby is a beehive of nervous creativity. Art portfolios whiz back and forth. Laptops are sprawled across couches. Party invitations spill from mail cubbies. After a quick check-in - the avuncular manager uses a pencil and eraser - the bellhop escorted me to my room, 915. Ethan Hawke, looking disheveled, joined us part of the way up. (About half of the 400 units are occupied long-term by artists, writers and other creative people.)

The marble hallways are wide, like a schoolhouse's. The lacy ironwork that graces the Victorian Gothic facade also creeps up the grand spiral staircase. Like the Guggenheim Museum, the corkscrew is lined lobby to rooftop with original artworks, some of them once contributed in exchange for rent.

In terms of space, the single (starting at \$195) was not bad. It had new, though poorly arranged, furniture including a desk, matching nightstands and a dresser. The white-tiled bathroom was large, the ceilings high and airy. But the place could have used a good scrub. The mint-green carpeting was frayed. The molding was badly scuffed. The window was caked in soot, darkening the views of King Kong's former perch.

Knowing that each room is different, I asked about other vacancies. I took the elevator to 622, a junior suite. There was a fireplace, hardwood floors and a Chippendale-style sofa. In other words, it was drop-dead gorgeous - the type of place you instantly imagine yourself living in, if only to provoke apartment envy among friends. It is also twice as large and, unfortunately, nearly twice as expensive as my single, to which I skulked back, and began rearranging the furniture.

For a hotel that turned 100 this year, the Chelsea could use a refresher course on hospitality. There are bare bulbs, little security and no information about the hotel inside the room (unless you pay \$7 a day to get Web access in your room). Even the television remote lacked a battery cover. But if the choice were between the Chelsea's grungy elegance and the soulless architecture of a Holiday Inn, I would choose the Chelsea any night. And if an apartment were to open up, perhaps 622, I'd check in permanently.

Big City, Light Wallet

To find an affordable hotel room in Manhattan, do your research and book early. Rates vary wildly, depending on the season and availability. Prices tend to be highest in the fall, when conventioners converge on the city, and again in December, when holiday shoppers bump elbows. Special events like a United Nations meeting or the New York City Marathon can also jack up prices dramatically. Like air fare, a room that goes for \$199 one night can jump to \$399 the next.

Deals can sometimes be found through Web discounters like Hotels.com, Expedia.com and Tablethotels.com. If rooms are sold out online, call the hotels directly and ask about last-minute cancellations.

Travelers should also budget for city, state and occupancy taxes, which come to 13.625 percent, plus \$3.50 a night. The rates below - some from the hotels, some from online reservation services - were for fall, before higher holiday rates kicked in, and were for the least expensive room, single or double.

Affinia Dumont, 150 East 34th Street (Lexington and Third Avenues), 212-481-7600; www.affinia.com. From \$199. A business and pet-friendly spot with gym and spa.

Chelsea Hotel, 222 West 23rd Street (Seventh and Eighth Avenues), 212-243-3700; www.hotelchelsea.com. From \$195. The storied bohemian landmark.

Doubletree Metropolitan, 569 Lexington Avenue (51st Street), 212-752-7000; www.metropolitanhotelnyc.com. From \$159. A recently renovated Morris Lapidus landmark.

Excelsior Hotel, 45 West 81st Street (Central Park West and Columbus Avenue), 212-362-9200; www.excelsiorhotelnyc.com. From \$229. Cozy Upper West Side elegance, steps from Central Park.

Gershwin Hotel, 7 East 27th Street (Fifth and Madison Avenues), 212-545-8000; www.gershwinhotel.com. From \$119. Hotel-cum-hostel popular with young Europeans.

Hotel QT, 125 West 45th Street (Avenue of the Americas and Seventh Avenue), 212-354-2323; www.hotelqt.com. From \$125. A cheap chic hotel by André Balazs.

Hotel Stanford, 43 West 32nd Street (Broadway and Fifth Avenue), 800-365-1114; www.hotelstanford.com. From \$189. The staff at this Koreatown hotel speaks Korean and English (and Spanish).

Hudson Hotel, 356 West 58th Street (Eighth and Ninth Avenues), 212-554-6000; www.hudsonhotel.com. From \$199. A former Y.W.C.A. redesigned by Philippe Starck.

Off SoHo Suites Hotel, 11 Rivington Street (Bowery and Chrystie Streets), 800-633-7646; www.offsoho.com. Economy rooms from \$199 (sharing kitchen and bath with another room); suites from \$189. Euro-style suites between SoHo and the Lower East Side.

The Time, 224 West 49th Street (Broadway and Eighth Avenue), 877-846-3692; www.thetimeny.com. From \$189. Another hip, high-concept hotel in Times Square.

DENNY LEE is a frequent contributor to the Travel section.