

Travel

East Side Story

Michael Coplans takes a tour of a revived Lower East Side in New York — and tries out Manhattan's 'first kosher hotel'

Ten years ago, the Lower East Side was about as popular a tourist destination as Baghdad is today. Years of neglect, urban decay and evidence of rampant drug addiction kept all but the most gritty "NYPD Blue" film crews, away.

All that changed under Mayor Giuliani's robust stewardship of Manhattan. And, with the opening of the Tenement Museum in 1994, a tourism renaissance also began.

I had come to explore a neighbourhood that, more than any other place in the world, came to symbolise the Jewish exodus from Eastern Europe. My own family should have ended up there but, separated from the main family caravan somewhere in the East End, our mob wound up in Canterbury rather than Manhattan.

The best way to appreciate a neighbourhood is to immerse yourself in it and I was fortunate that a new

hotel had just opened in the Lower East Side. The Blue Moon, opposite the Tenement Museum on Orchard Street was initially billed as the first kosher hotel in Manhattan. Actually, it is a boutique hotel that happens to have a charming and committed Jewish owner, Randy Settenbrino.

Randy, whose great grandfather once owned the popular Half Moon Hotel in Coney Island, is from Brooklyn but worked and attended yeshiva in the Lower East Side. He originally trained as an artist, which might explain his meticulously authentic restoration with some inspired artistic touches. All 22 of the rooms and suites have been named after popular vaudeville stars associated with the neighbourhood.

In common with many other Lower East Side properties, the building's upper floors had been boarded up since the 1930s, when legislation made it prohibitively ex-



New York's teeming Lower East Side and the Williamsburg Bridge

pensive to rent out residential space. This resulted in the property becoming a time capsule for over 60 years and when Randy bought it in 2000, he stumbled upon a treasure chest of abandoned memorabilia. The walls of the hotel now display framed period sheet music, newspaper and other mementos in English and Yiddish.

From my balcony I had great views

of the Williamsburg Bridge and, if I strained my neck, I could spot the Empire State Building, some 40 blocks uptown.

A kosher restaurant is due to open in the hotel and if the quality of the food is anything like that which Randy's wife cooked up for us one Friday night during my visit, guests are in for a treat. In the meantime

there is no shortage of kosher, non-kosher and kosher-style eateries in the surrounding streets.

The history of the immigrant experience is brilliantly chronicled in the Tenement Museum, across the road from the Blue Moon at 97 Orchard Street. It is the only preserved

Continued on the following pages

East Side story

Continued from the previous page

home of immigrants in the United States and the excellent guided tour brings early 20th-century New York to life. One could almost hear the pushcarts groaning, as peddlers made their way through the teeming cobbled streets, vying for space with butchers, bakers, pickle packers and bagel sellers.

Standing in one of the apartments, it was easy to imagine what life must have been like for immigrants escaping the pogroms of Eastern Europe: 22 apartments were squeezed into a plot sized for a single family.

The apartment that caught my attention had belonged to Abram and Zipe Heller who made the perilous journey from Lithuania to New York in 1901. En route, their name changed from Heller to Rogarshevsky and, once in America, to Rosenthal. Likewise, on the perilous journey from Lithuania, our family name changed from Novikovich to Koplanski before becoming Coplans.

Enthused by the stories of the suffering and triumphs of these brave inhabitants, I decided to delve further into the rich and fascinating history of the neighbourhood. I joined a walking tour with Mark Levy, a luxuriantly bearded extrovert from Brooklyn who, with his equally extrovert son Matt, runs The Levy's



Manhattan's kosher Blue Moon hotel

Unique New York tours. Mark is one of those few naturally gifted guides who can bring a neighbourhood to life. He painted Lower East Side life on a large and vibrant canvas that would make E. L. Doctorow proud. We visited Straus Square, once the hub of Jewish life in Manhattan, and Seward Library, on Seward Park at East Broadway. Such was the passionate thirst among the immigrants to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to pursue the American dream, that the library had to impose a three-hour time limit on patrons.

The success of the Jewish community in the Lower East Side ultimately spelled its end as a Jewish neighbourhood. As they reaped the rewards of the American dream, they pushed north to the Upper East Side and the suburbs beyond.

Katz's deli, on the corner of Houston, where Meg Ryan demonstrates how to fake it (there is a sign pointing out the table where Harry met Sally) is still there, but as the area gentrifies

itself into one of New York's most sought-after neighbourhoods, many others are shutting up shop.

I spent much of my time in the Lower East Side just wandering its cramped streets. On Delancey Street — where much of "Crossing Delancey," that wonderful 1988 movie about Jewish life, was filmed — I ate bagels large enough to satisfy a predator Michael Winner and discovered hip cafes, cool bars and ethnic restaurants like the Paladar on trendy Ludlow Street. Rivington Street is now co-named Rabbi Yaakov Way — and, if you don't know who Rabbi Yaakov is, then consult the billboard on Delancey which advertises the Ask the Rabbi website.

I took a stroll down the Bowery where, less than a decade ago, the sane and the virtuous feared to tread. Dinky tenement buildings are being transformed into dazzling, mil-lion-dollar condominiums and dime store shop-fronts are reborn as hip-cool bars. The Bowery bums have



Heimische New York: a billboard on Delancey

been replaced by willowy uptown girls, strutting down the street in their Jimmy Choo's with equally willowy boys in J Lindberg jeans.

I walked south to Chatham Square, where the "Lower, Lower East Side" — or LoLES if you're in the real estate business — collides with an ever expanding Chinatown. Here, nesting on a busy intersection is the tiny First Shearith Israel Graveyard, the oldest Jewish cemetery in New York. It was to this little oasis that my uncle, the artist John Coplans, would escape from the city frenzy in his latter years.

I sat in its tiny leafy compound and shed a tear for the extraordinary man, who inspired me to abandon a well paid "career" in sales for the less lucrative world of writing. His words echoed from his nearby Bowery studio: "My boy, our family were not

destined for the business world, they are artists. Live your dream, don't waste your life chasing dollars!"

The Lower East Side is remarkably well placed for trips to many of New York's attractions. It borders Little Italy, Chinatown and the East Village and is in walking distance of Soho, TriBeCa, Nolita and Wall Street.

For shopaholics, Macy's is just five stops from the Delancey Street subway station and the shopping mecca of Fifth, Madison and Lexington a couple of stops further. The Lower East Side has its own retail attractions, designated a bargain district.

After a few days in the Lower East Side I couldn't help but speculate that, but for a twist of fate, I could have grown up on these crowded streets and this could have been my 'hood.

travel facts

America As You Like It (020 8742 8299; www.americaasyoulikeit.com) offer a three night break at the Blue Moon Hotel (www.bluemoon-nyc.com; 001 212 533 9080), flying MAXjet, the all-business class carrier, from £1,135; or flying Virgin, from £620. Rates per person, based on two sharing. Best Guide: New York City (Lonely Planet) £10.99; www.nyvisit.com

Jewish New York City

■ New York City has a Jewish population of around 972,000
 ■ Manhattan has around 32 synagogues, of every denomination; and hundreds of kosher restaurants (www.nachas.org/BethYehuda/kosher.html);

■ Jewish programmes at Jewish Cultural Centre (www.jccmanhattan.org); Jewish Museum (www.thejewishmuseum.org); Tenement Museum (www.tenement.org); www.vintagenytours.com; www.asktherabbi.org