

Out and about:
On Williamsburg's
waterfront



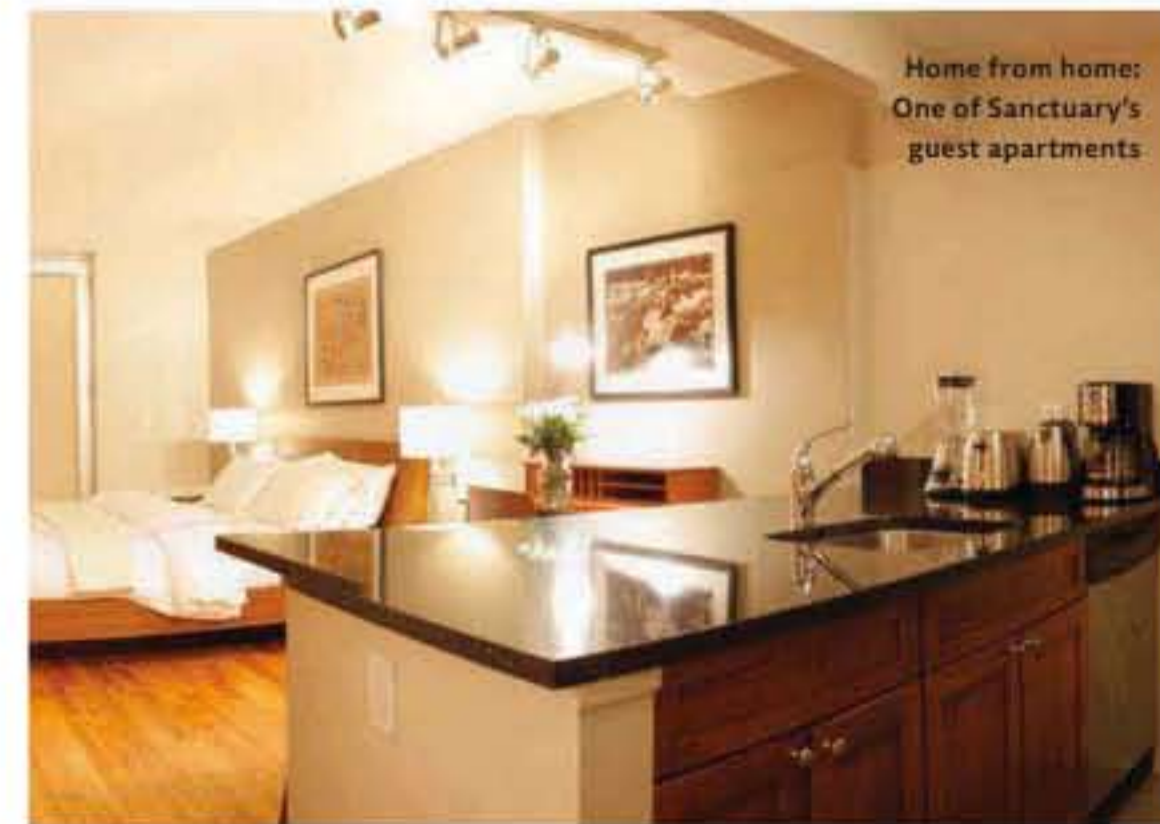
Peace in the city:
Sanctuary Guest
Suites lobby

New York SPIRIT

JANE CZYZSELSKA GETS TO THE SPIRITUAL CORE OF THE BIG APPLE

Drop your preconceptions – New York is more than a materialist's Mecca. The city's shops, bars and clubs may be open from dawn to dusk, using seductive tricks to make you part with your cash, your time and your sanity in the brash Big Apple. But there's another side to the city that never sleeps, a quieter side where visitors and locals experience some of the mellower qualities of urban life. As a frequent visitor to Manhattan, I've grown tired of the clubs, bars and shop-til-you-drop vibe so in my quest for a more meaningful experience, I booked a few days at the Lower East Side holiday apartments called Sanctuary Guest Suites. Holiday accommodation can set the emotional tone for a vacation and Sanctuary was no exception. Walking into the peaceful lobby on Stanton Street (similar to London's achingly hip Shoreditch High Street but more spacious and with less ache) after a walk through the busier streets of Manhattan, I felt a zen-like calm.

General manager Zach Jackson explains Sanctuary's ethos as "beyond sense gratification"; in contrast to the city's unrelenting work-play-sleep cycle, Zach and his team offer the Bhagavad Gita, rejuvenating activities such as optional daily yoga and meditation classes to help you feel more centred, community film nights with funds raised going to their Food For Life project – guests are invited to help feed the neighbourhood's poor and homeless during their stay – creating a generous atmosphere unlike the typical NYC bolt-hole. On hearing about my quest to discover "spiritual Manhattan" before my trip, Amy Lamé told me about St Luke In The Fields, and described it as "the gayest church in the West Village". She was right. After delicious coffee and cake at the quiet East Village cafe Atlas, we walked across town to meet Amy's friends, Anne and Brenda, two lesbian parishioners, at the Maundy Thursday service, where Anne informed me that the congregation was "replete with lesbians". Replete it is,



Home from home:
One of Sanctuary's
guest apartments

too, with traditional liturgy, choir, plainsong and intoxicating clouds of frankincense. What does Anne's faith at St Luke's bring to her life in the city? "A feeling of family and belonging that helps me to be more fully me and to have a truer relationship with God." As for me, despite being an atheist, I was blown away by the lesbian and gay-friendly church-goers, the sight of a lesbian cleric leading

"St Lukes in the Fields church is replete with lesbians – clergy, chorists and parishioners alike"


prayers, a humble and reflective sermon about speaking truth to power, and the fabulous health food shop over the road where I bought some tangy kombucha (fermented tea) on our way back east. En route to the Sanctuary we were drawn to Mast Books, a bright, dust-free second-hand bookstore where we found a \$7 Nietzsche compendium. The epitome of godless spirituality and the search for meaning, his famous book Thus Spoke Zarathustra seemed a fitting literary companion for our quest in Gotham. On day two, we headed across town via the Little Creative Garden, an oasis of calm and tranquility, full of birds, created by locals for everyone to enjoy. We stopped there a while to savour the peace and soon continued on to Souen, the macrobiotic Japanese foodie haven for some delicious soul food. Strolling through the East Village and Soho we made our way up to the genius west side regeneration project. The Highline has transformed a disused railway line over 19 blocks into an overhead urban garden. After walking the full length, admiring the shiny new office blocks that curved to frame the saplings planted next to the wooden walkway, it was time to whizz over to the Center, the city's LGBT community hub. A meeting-point for LGBT spiritual, community and activist groups and events, the Center also offers low-cost drop-in counselling every weekend from 6-8pm as well as every kind of 12-Step meeting you can imagine, and then some. So if you're in town and need a shoulder to cry on, or just fancy meeting local spiritually-minded queers, do what we did and head for the Moonfire ►



Parklife: Urban regeneration on the Highline

meeting, on Saturdays at the Center, where metaphysical counsellor Amethyst has been running queer spirituality groups for over 10 years and will welcome you with open arms.

Day three saw us stock up on some tasty vegan dumplings and fresh sushi at a budget mini-mart on St Mark's place. Later we drove with our friend Justine across the Williamsburg bridge to "Billyburg", where we ambled around the northernmost tip of Brooklyn on the Williamsburg waterfront (pictured) taking in the East River and a bracing view of the Lower East Side. Another friend had mentioned a great artisan market, Artists and Fleas, where it was hard to resist hipster Mammon. Walking around the quiet streets we chatted to queer locals and took in the small-town feel of the low-rise apartments, shops, cafes and pop-up galleries. After a starter of delicious kale salad with lemon and tahini dressing we sampled a brown rice and tempeh, squash and spring greens main at Bliss cafe. Next, it was back to Manhattan to join an energising hour-long flow yoga class at the Laughing Lotus, run by the dynamic Dana Flynn. I walked several feet taller – taking in the tranquil and beautiful Rubin Museum of Himalayan art on the way to join a group of LGBT meditators at Queer Dharma in Chelsea. There we partook in sitting and walking meditation, and afterwards we were invited to share about how we felt. It was touching to hear strangers talking honestly about their struggles and joys in the small things and the changes that meditation has helped them to make in their lives. Nancy, who shares the running of the group told me, "Manhattan has something for everyone. It is very stimulating but you can also retreat if that is what you choose. The variety of people, cultures and economic differences really touches me. I enjoy being on a subway, looking around and wishing that all those on the train will be able to live with ease. I also am aware of so much suffering and want to help in small ways, even if it is just a smile and a bit of kindness".

At the end of our trip I felt like I'd been touched by the people I'd met and energised in the city that can often feel exhilarating but draining. Like Nancy, who told me she doesn't focus on being "spiritual" per se, I learned that for me meaning comes from trying to live life paying attention, trying to be mindful of what is happening when it is happening and trying to do the right thing. Yoga, meditation and quiet helps me to do that. The final word goes to Nancy who says of her life in New York: "I try to accept the truth as best I see it and work with it. Finally I try to be kind and generous to everyone and when I'm not, acknowledging that." 



Church-goers: Brenda, Henry and Anne in the St Luke's garden

DIGS

Sanctuary Guest Suites Seasonal rates on apartments from \$150-\$499 per night, sanctuaryguestsuites.com. Sanctuary Suites are proud to be featured on furtherafield.co.uk, a worldwide collection of hand-picked gay and lesbian friendly hotels and accommodation.

FOOD

St Mark's Market 21 St Mark's Place, East Village
Souen souen.net
Bliss Cafe 191 Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg
Atlas Cafe 73 2nd Avenue, East Village

VISIT

The Highline thehighline.org
The Little Creative Garden littlecreativegarden.org
Mast Books mastbooks.com
Williamsburg waterfront North of Kent Street
Artists and Fleas artistsandfleas.com
Rubin Museum of Art manyc.org

LGBT

Laughing Lotus Yoga laughinglotus.com
Queer Dharma meditation queerdharma.org
Moonfire Queer spiritual group at the gaycenter.org. Email amethystsylviachild@gmail.com for meeting dates and details.
St Luke in the Fields stlukeinthefields.org