



New York City: Quintessentially American - Where else can everyone have it all and aspire to be more?

June 24, 2013 - New York City

My wife and I are fortunate and adventurous enough to travel abroad as often as we can, especially now that our children are (somewhat) grown and on their own. Whenever people ask our nationalities I puff out my chest and proudly proclaim for both of us, "We are New Yorkers."

I was born in Manhattan and, except for a brief stint away to attend college and law school, I've lived here my entire life. My wife and I raised our two children in New York City; I've built a business here, play tennis in Central Park, and rode my bike all over town. I know every inch of this city and love all its neighborhoods, from the high rises of Midtown to the dense cobblestoned streets Downtown.

With the kids gone, my wife and I occasionally talk about retiring and moving south. By south we mean to downtown Manhattan from the Upper East Side. The thought of leaving New York is akin to betraying a member of my family. Whenever I'm away from the city—and "the City" says it all to another New Yorker—I get itchy to return home. The thrill of the Manhattan skyline as it first comes into view after a long trip never diminishes.

I've tried to explain to outsiders what it is about living here that causes such passion. Talk to any New Yorker. My feelings are not unique. There is the feeling that no matter how long you've lived here or how much time you spend exploring different parts of the city, when you walk out the door something new and unexpected waits. Of course, we have a lot of options for the new and unexpected to appear: New York is a city of 20,000 restaurants, 138 live theaters, nine major league sports teams, over 80 museums, hundreds of nightclubs, more than 3,500 retail stores, and eight million people.

New York is more than a melting pot. It is a giant swirling cauldron of diversity. In a few-block stroll down nearly any street in Manhattan you'll hear a variety of languages other than English. Over 300 distinct languages are spoken here. Every religion—along with every kind of sect and cult—are observed here, openly and freely. You can be anonymous, or you can become famous, though that is much harder. But if you can make it here, as the song goes, "You can make it anywhere." And if you make it here, you won't need to leave.

For all its diversity, and sophistication, and access to everything any time of day or night, New York is a city of small towns. Every eight-block square neighborhood has its own character, architecture, history, dry cleaners, shoe repair shop, nail salon, bodega. You know the delivery guys by name, and they know your order and apartment number by heart. Each succeeding generation welcomes newcomers with, if not open arms, at least with barely a shrug, as long they don't walk too slowly four abreast and stop en masse and point upward.

Yet we wish everyone who arrives on our 2.5-mile wide by 10-mile long little island the success they have the right to earn. We, who've been here for a while, are generous in our embrace of the immigrant. We had better be, our ancestors were welcomed into the harbor of New York by the

Statue of Liberty and these words of hope and promise inscribed on her base:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

But let's not get sentimental, time's a wasting and you better keep up because New York City won't wait for you. We are smart, in a hurry, know everything, and are brash. And, of course, we are very funny. Think: The Marx Brothers, Mel Brooks, George Carlin, Penny Marshall, Billy Crystal, Woody Allen, Whoopi Goldberg, Jerry Seinfeld, Adam Sandler, and Saturday Night Live, and the list goes on.

We have to laugh; living in New York is not for the faint of heart. If you arrive here after college with nothing but your dreams, you'll live in a one-bedroom apartment with 37 roommates, and pay more in rent for your share than your parents paid for their mortgage back in Ohio. And you'll be grateful for the opportunity. Once you've made it, you will join the ranks of those of us who have been here our whole lives and judge people by their accomplishments—and nothing more and nothing less.

So if you are smart, tough, and willing to work hard chances are good that you will succeed. If you're not, the city will chew you up and spit you out. But if you are down and out, whether after a man-made or natural disaster, you can count on New Yorkers to rally round and help its own like no other place on earth. In addition to everything else we may be, or not be to the outside world—patient, easy-going, quiet, free of hand gestures—we are, above all, resilient.

Does everything we are make New York an American city? Does the fact that 38% of our population are immigrants, that we attract foreign investors, that 53 million tourists visit each year, that we admit foreign students to our universities and colleges, that our street signs are written in Spanish, or Korean, or Russian depending on which neighborhood you're in make New York anything less than the quintessential American city? Our country was founded on the principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Where else but in New York City can everyone have it all—and aspire to be more—no questions asked?

James Wacht is president of Lee & Associates, New York, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540