



Renting a Private Apartment 27

A fairly small agency with just two full-time employees, one part-timer, and a stable of approximately 50 apartments, City Sonnet picks its hosts with care, and checks up on them at least once a year. "We don't take on a place unless we'd like to stay there ourselves," says owner Margaret Borden. "If the apartment is ugly or the host seems weird or unfriendly, we simply don't work with them." As City Sonnet does not work with a large number of apartments, it's necessary to call at least a month to a week in advance to reserve a place. Then it can take up to a week of phone calls and e-mails to complete the booking, as the staff here sees the process as one of "matchmaking." "There are bookings we won't make," says Borden. "If we feel that the guest really needs the services of a hotel or a facility that we don't have, we'll refer them elsewhere. We want to make sure that each guest has a quality experience."

For unhosted stays mainly

• **NY Habitat** (☎ 212/255-8018; www.nyhabitat.com) is one of the oldest and largest of the vacation rental companies—so big, in fact, that it's branched out to cover stays in Paris, London, and the French Riviera. For New York alone it lists approximately 350 apartments at any one time (out of the 1,200 it has in its database); there are seven full-time staffers who inspect these apartments (generally once every 2 years) and follow up on complaints. These busy folks also take the pictures and write the dry but accurate descriptions you'll find on the NY Habitat website. Approximately 85% of NY Habitat's listings are for unhosted stays. Half of these come from huge companies that rent out dozens of furnished apartments at a time. As you might expect, these are not stylish, unique digs—some of these big companies even rent the furniture they use, adding just one more layer of corporate blandness to the enterprise. That being said, the apartments are clean and utterly uncluttered. Unlike other agencies, NY Habitat offers a large number of oversized one- and two-bedroom apartments, perfect for families. Many of these can house four, six, or eight people quite comfortably (though Junior may have to sleep on a fold-out couch). NY Habitat also works with individual owners who may rent their apartments for a few weeks when they leave town. This doesn't, however,

NY Habitat, in Brief

PRICES: For studios, a few in Brooklyn and Queens will cost as little as \$60 to \$80 a night, but in Manhattan these will usually rent for \$125 to \$165. One-bedroom rentals, including those that can sleep up to four, run \$135 to \$225. Two-bedroom rentals, including those that can sleep up to eight, run \$200 to \$375. **TIP:** Because NY Habitat charges a higher-than-normal 35% commission, its prices can sometimes be higher than the competition's. But like the other agencies, the staff here is willing to bargain, so give it a try (they have a lot of apartments to move). **EXAMPLES OF AVAILABLE RENTALS:** A high-rise two-bedroom with river views and polished wood floors in the East 50s, corporate decor, sleeps up to six. Or a Theater District two-bedroom that sleeps up to eight people, four on fold-out couches located in the dining room and living room. Clean and roomy with a large balcony; bland-looking furnishings. Or an East Village one-bedroom walk-up, home of a stylish "performance artist" with silver taffeta drapes, quirky antiques, and a bathtub in the kitchen. **PLUSES:** Excellent customer service; large number of units available at any one time; a higher-than-average percentage of family-sized apartments and uncluttered corporate-style apartments. **NEGATIVES:** Steeper-than-normal fees (35% commission); many apartments on the far east and far west sides of Manhattan.

seem to be the primary focus of their business, especially since NY Habitat has now instituted a policy of only working with hosts who can be upfront with their landlords or co-op boards about accepting short-term "boarders." It's a controversial issue (and I'll note at this point that NY Habitat is the only company in town with this policy). While hosting guests is not illegal (owners pay taxes on these stays, after all), it is frowned upon in some buildings, which is why other agencies will ask guests to be discreet when first checking into the B&B. The folks at New York Habitat refuse to do that. "I'm not going to ask someone to lie and say they're visiting a friend," says Nick Borg, manager. "I don't want one of my clients to get booted out mid-stay because a co-op board finds out about their presence in the apartment." In practical terms, this policy relegates NY Habitat to apartments that may be in the less attractive, less central neighborhoods on the eastern and western fringes of Manhattan, as these areas are less likely to be dominated by co-ops (many of which have house rules forbidding boarders).

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