

You Wouldn't Expect Manhattan's Best New Hotel to Look So Much Like a Hostel

By Hannah Walhout



The only New York City entry on the 2019 It List isn't a sleek skyscraper from an international hotelier, or a newly renovated grand dame on Central Park South. In fact, you might not want to call Freehand New York [this link opens in a new tab](#) a hotel at all — it's trying to shrug off the connotations of conformity in a number of small ways.

The 395-room property, which opened in the Flatiron last year, is the fourth outpost of the creative-minded, budget-conscious hospitality brand, following hostel properties in Miami, Chicago, and Los Angeles [this link opens in a new tab](#). But unlike its predecessors, there are no shared quarters here. Hostels are illegal in Manhattan per municipal law, so accommodations — many under \$200 per night — range from spartan twin beds and four-person bunk rooms to modest suites.

But what Freehand lacks in grandeur, it makes up for with moxie.



TRAVEL+ LEISURE

March 11th, 2019



Hotels often describe themselves as “art-filled,” but Freehand truly is. You'll see what I mean if you walk up the steps from the lobby: the walls of the chandelier-crowned stairwell, painted a bright peacock blue, are so crowded with frames that you wonder how they even *found* so much art. Each room is decorated with a unique hand-painted mural (mine had a plume of swooping black lines, like a wisp of smoke, above the bed) and other works for purchase by Bard College art students. And in addition to collecting and commissioning art, Freehand New York also has a hand in its creation — thanks to the [Freehand Fellowship](#) this link opens in a new tab, which offers residencies for artists of various disciplines to live on property, work in their rooftop studio space, and exhibit throughout the hotel.

The location inside a historic Flatiron boarding house lets Freehand's youthful spirit shine. Opened in 1929 as the George Washington Hotel, the building's Jacobean lobby and Italian-Renaissance architectural features have been consecrated in a new renovation by Roman and Williams. The original spaces have been messed with minimally; parquet floors and intricate moldings have been restored, played off against brightly painted walls and sheepskin rugs. Rooms are compact but lively, with custom ceramic lamps, geometric textiles, and delightfully 70s bathrooms with avocado-tone tiling and flannel shower curtains.

In keeping with its indie aesthetic, the clientele is mostly twenty-somethings and young families eager to go out and explore the real New York. Luckily, real New Yorkers are not hard to find. (In more ways than one: Keep an eye out for back

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/hotels-resorts/hotel-openings/freehand-best-new-hotel-hostel-new-york>

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

March 11th, 2019

issues of “The New Yorker” in every room. Mine were from 2005. One of the bathroom hallways is practically plastered with them.) The hotel’s shared spaces are open to anyone, making this the most beautiful co-working hub in the city.

In the lounges on the mezzanine level, laptops abound — you’ll see people posting up for hours among the abundant ferns and fiddle-leaf figs. This is Studiothis link opens in a new tab, an all-day café by veteran NYC restaurateur Gabriel Stulman that is, in many ways, a distillation of what Freehand is trying to do here. It’s a pleasingly seamless mixture of old and new: stately caryatids, original to the building, watch over the foyer area, lit by massive, irregularly shaped paper lanterns. In the lofty main room, painted in that same arresting peacock blue, tourists sit alongside the so-called digital nomad crowd, ordering Moroccan-ish small plates and inventive pastries from James Beard Award nominee Zoe Kanan.

In fact, it’s the restaurants that have made Freehand such a fixture in the neighborhood already. The rooftop tiki bar, as crowded on a February Friday as it is on a summer evening, is the New York outpost of Broken Shakerthis link opens in a new tab — the James Beard Award-nominated Miami bar that started as a pop-up in the Freehand property there. The New York City location serves up tropical drinks made with freshly squeezed juices, as well as Caribbean snacks like pikliz and plantain chips.

In addition to Studio, Stulman also oversees the program at the George Washington Barthis link opens in a new tab, a moody, dark-wood haunt so named for the 1920s copy of Gilbert Stuart’s portrait painted directly onto the far wall. It was the library of the old George Washington Hotel, and looks the part. Head here for no-nonsense cocktails (the menu dusts off classics like the Martinez and the Last Word, in addition to a very good martini) and a more subdued crowd than upstairs.

The main culinary attraction, though, is Simon & the Whaletthis link opens in a new tab — the ground-floor restaurant where executive chef Matt Griffin packs tables with an unfussy, Mediterranean-inflected menu. The pastas are reliably delicious, as is the burger, but don’t sleep on the creative salads, plated like colorful collages of bright, crunchy goodness. Another must: the “black bread,” which comes as a starter with cultured butter and taramasalata. You will leave wanting the recipe, but knowing you’ll never be able to bake it quite as well as they do.

Doubles at Freehand New York start at \$199. With all that this hotel can be — a more affordable, art-filled hideaway; a gathering place; a writing room; a sexy destination for a night on the town — the “hostel” atmosphere might not be such a bad thing.