



# An American Story

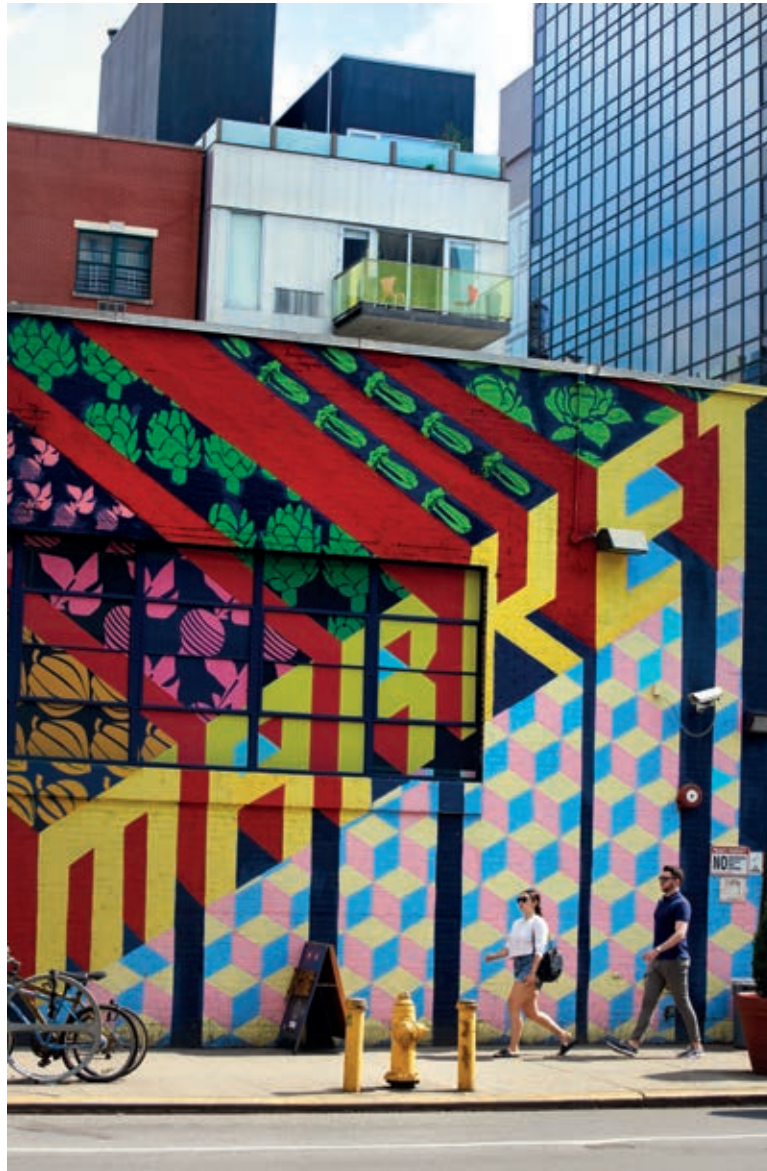
*words & pictures*  
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**I emerge from the subway station to see a hipster** in a yellow fedora sauntering past, a skateboard cradled under a tattooed arm. Across the street an old Hasidic tailor is fashioning his side curls around a pencil, twirling away while he scours the streets for possible customers.

I've arrived in the Lower East Side where I'm spending the day exploring one of New York's most exciting and diverse neighbourhoods – a fast-gentrifying corner of the city that remains the very epitome of the American ethnic melting pot, a place where, despite rapid change, a rich heritage can be seen in vibrant detail on almost every street corner.

"In many ways, the story of modern America began here," says local guide Maia Plantevin. "The 'Great Migration' into the Lower East Side was one of the formative moments in the history of the United States, marking the beginning of two centuries of people coming from all over the world to create new lives here."





**Opening Page:** Historic tenement buildings of the Lower East Side.

**Above:** Essex Street Market, a fixture of the neighbourhood since the 1940s.

**Opposite:** Detail, Katz's Delicatessen, founded in 1888 beautiful.

Together we set out to wander the area once known as Klein Deutschland, or Little Germany, where Europeans arrived en masse. We stop outside 97 Orchard Street, a five-storey building dating back to 1863, which over the decades was called home by a total of 7,000 immigrants from 20 different nations.

"In the mid to late 1800s, New York became an exciting harbour city with growing construction and garment industries. It was a symbol of opportunity for the so-called huddled masses and many of them ended up here, living in tenement housing," Plantevin explains.

Passing through the intricately restored rooms, now part of the Tenement Museum, the immigrant story is told in such atmospheric detail that you can almost sense the families close beside you in the cramped conditions, fresh off the boat and anxiously unpacking their suitcases full of precious possessions and hopeful dreams.

By 1910 the Lower East Side had transformed once more into the largest Jewish city in the world, the immigrants leaving an indelible footprint with their pickle shops and pastrami delis, which still grace the locality's streets alongside their glorious houses of worship.

The grand facade of the Eldridge Street Synagogue provides a suitably ornate prelude to the many treasures inside, where the midday sun floods through stained-glass windows, highlighting sparkling candelabras and splashing palettes of colour across pews carved in rich walnut.

As one of the earliest American purpose-built religious buildings, it's a breathtaking memorial to the early devout settlers from Eastern Europe, whose rocking during prayer services is forever commemorated in grooves marked deep in the antique floorboards.

Around the corner stands the equally magnificent Bialystoker, a former church where the original Methodist occupants hid runaway slaves as they passed along the 'underground railway' from the South, before the building was sold on to Jews from Poland in 1905.

The incumbent rabbi, Zvi Romm, welcomes me with a warm smile before giving a tour and sharing his thoughts on this unique neighbourhood. "Many people who came here as immigrants were taken in by relatives or complete strangers. When people take care of one another, it ensures a real, lasting sense of community," he says. "Even now, you can see the full, beautiful mosaic of the human experience here. This area remains a melting pot, it's still a place for dreamers, a place to find acceptance."







**Above:** Eldridge Street Synagogue, a National Historic Landmark, built in 1887.

**Opposite:** The Back Room speakeasy.

Come late afternoon, the ceaseless rush of the Lower East Side is spilling down Essex Street and into the indoor market where the colourful aisles ring with accents from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, many belonging to 1980s arrivals from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

Across exotic pyramids of soursops and custard apples, I chat with Sobeida De La Cruz, a 40-year old Dominican transplant whose family have been selling tropical produce to locals for decades.

“Even though there’s a lot of change going on, this is a neighbourhood rooted in tradition,” she tells me while stacking a pile of waxy, brown *mapuey* roots, a key ingredient in *sancocho* – a hearty, starchy stew that is popular with Latinos right across the Americas.

“Food plays a big part in that tradition,” she says. “We Latinos like to gather to eat together. And rather than have pizza and burgers, it’s important for us to keep alive the old recipes and eat dishes from our homelands.”

Outside the sun begins to fall behind distant towers of glass and steel and the streets around the market fill with beautiful people enjoying the Lower East Side’s lively nightlife, which gained renewed vigour in the 1990s as retro clubs and stylish eateries began to pop up in the many vacant lots.

I head down a dimly lit alleyway and enter a historic drinking den, The Back Room. This is one of only two speakeasies in New York still going strong since it opened in the Roaring Twenties, when mobsters Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky ran their bootlegging business from one of the tables in the bar.

“This whole area was gangster turf,” manager Megan Bones tells me, pointing out the escape routes where revellers would run to evade arrest during police raids – up to the roof, or down into the potato peeling area of the adjoining kosher restaurant.

She pours me a Prohibition-era Mary Pickford cocktail into a white teacup – a tradition of the era of temperance to disguise the consumption of alcohol. “It was also the dawn of the cocktail era,” she continues, “with fruit and bitters added to mask the flavour of hooch which had been made in New York bathtubs.”

Passionate about the neighbourhood, which she claims is “like another character in your life, a part of your being,” Megan is equally enthusiastic about the bar’s long history. “It’s important to preserve what’s gone before, in order to understand who we are now,” she says. “Places like this bar help us remember our short but incredible history – and remind us where America really came from.”

