

If You're Thinking of Living In/Astoria; Accessible, Affordable and Highly Diverse

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ASTORIA, across the East River from Manhattan on the northwest tip of Queens, always has been a neighborhood of affordable beginnings. William Hallet, a 17th-century English immigrant, is said to have secured his 1,500 riverside acres in exchange for 7 coats, 14 kettles, a blanket and some beads. Waves of Germans, Czechs, Irish, Italians and Greeks followed, working-class folk who bought into the American dream and local real estate.

Today, the immigrant pool includes Russians, Arabs, Middle Europeans, South Asians, East Asians, Latin Americans and young Midwesterners who think they have discovered Europe in the coffeehouses and bakeries. Few neighborhoods, even in New York City, have such ethnic diversity.

"We're all together here; we all look after each other," said Tasos Sakkas, a chef who immigrated from Greece in 1971. Now manager of the Symposium restaurant near Columbia University, he bought his two-family house near the 65-acre riverfront Astoria Park in 1994 after renting in the neighborhood for more two decades. "I love Astoria. I love New York. I love the U.S. That's why I stay."

Astoria was a separate village until 1870, when it became part of Long Island City, which in turn was incorporated into New York City 28 years later. It is "one of those neighborhoods almost too good to be true," said Bob Singleton, president of the Greater Astoria Historical Society. "Everyone in the neighborhood gets along. It's not a place where social status is terribly important."

But Stephen A. Halsey, a fur merchant, had another future in mind when he developed the village in the early 19th century. Naming it after John Jacob Astor, whom he hoped would become the village's patron. Astor made only a small donation to a women's seminary, but the nub of land that pokes out into the East River west of 21st Street between Broadway and Astoria Park, did become a summer retreat for the wealthy from Manhattan.

Some antebellum mansions survive and a 23-floor high-end condominium has been built on Shore Boulevard, but Astoria is mostly a hodgepodge of six-family apartment houses and two- and three-family row houses, built after the bridges, tunnels and elevated trains of the 20th century put Astoria within easy commute of Manhattan.

The slogan "only 15 minutes from Bloomingdale's" describes location, not shopping habits. As the essence of a working-class neighborhood in the 1970's, at the height of Greek immigration, Astoria was home to TV's Archie Bunker. Despite an influx of young professionals, musicians and actors seeking refuge from Manhattan prices, and a nudge toward the chichi with two Starbucks with wireless connections, shops like Victoria's Secret and a vibrant night life, Astoria still has blue-collar roots.

"It's the bedroom community of all hotel and restaurant workers," said Demetrius Partridge of Partridge Realty, established by his late father in 1957. Harry Partridge, a Cypriot immigrant who Americanized his name when he arrived in the 1920's, worked as a Hotel Pierre cook before buying a rooming house, which he leveraged into several hundred apartments.

Location, location, location is the real estate mantra, but in Astoria it is not street address but commuting convenience that counts. The elevated N and W trains run like a spine up the center of Astoria, ending at Ditmars Boulevard. The R, V and G stop at Steinway Street, named for the piano company headquartered in Astoria since the 19th century. The M60 bus makes for an easy commute across the Triborough Bridge and to La Guardia Airport. Apartments close to the train rent for 10 to 20 percent more, local realtors say.

EASY access to Manhattan is but one draw. In the same breath, most people mention food. Costco, the warehouse club, has opened in Astoria, but many local residents still prefer to buy their lamb chops at neighborhood butchers and handpick their produce out of vegetable stalls. And if kitchens are too small or work schedules too hectic, there is always some place to eat out or take out. "My wife and I never eat in, maybe once every three or four months," said Daniel O'Shea, a doorman at Lincoln Towers on the Upper West Side. "We eat very well."

Astoria is a family-oriented place where three generations in Sunday best dine out after church and afternoon birthday parties feature Snow White costumes and pony rides up a leafy street. Schools, where new immigrants often make up more than 10 percent of the student body, have been overcrowded, but new construction has helped somewhat. Public School 234 and Intermediate School 235 (the Academy for New Americans) opened this fall on 29th Street.

Neighborhood public schools score higher than city averages on standardized tests. P.S. 85, the Judge Charles J. Vallone School, at 30-15 29th Street, for instance, had 70.7 percent of fourth graders passing language arts tests and 71.6 percent passing math. Astoria also has Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Islamic schools.

At the secondary level, the Frank Sinatra High School of the Performing Arts, promoted by Tony Bennett, who was born Anthony Benedetto in Queens, is temporarily housed in Long Island City until a multimillion facility can be built adjacent to the Kaufman-Astoria Studios.

Another plus residents often cite is security. "I feel safe here," said Karen Imas, publication manager of the Council of State Governments eastern region, who moved to the neighborhood a year ago after growing up in Forest Hills. Statistics from the 114th Precinct confirm that crime reports so far this year are down 7.65 percent from last year and 65 percent from 10 years ago.

Not that Astoria is without problems. Noise and pollution from power plants are the top complaints received by City Councilman Peter Vallone Jr., whose father served on the council before him and whose grandfather was the judge. The mayor kicked off a citywide noise reduction campaign, Project Silent Night, in Astoria Park last year. The governor has promised to replace the aging Charles Poletti Power Project on the northern end of the community by 2008.

Bounded by 34th Avenue, 49th Street, the East River and Bowery Bay, Astoria today is a renter's market, long on apartments but short on houses to buy. What co-op apartments are to be found in Astoria are usually one-bedrooms in converted rental buildings. One weekend this month, an open house for a post-war, two-family brick attached home for \$449,000 was the only offering in the New York Times classifieds. It drew more than 60 shoppers despite a rainy Saturday.

Before the Sept. 11 attack, Astoria was touted as "New York's undiscovered neighborhood" and the rush was on. "About three years ago, it was crazy," remembered Grace O'Sullivan of Grace Realty. "If I had an apartment to rent in Astoria, it went in five minutes with a first, last and security deposit. Now it's security and first month's rent, and it takes longer to rent." She sees a good supply of one-bedrooms on the market with \$1,000 to \$1,100 bringing high ceilings, wood floors and other amenities. A plus for renters in older buildings is that heat and hot water are usually included in the rent.

Carlton Vann, a program coordinator with the Social Science Research Council in Midtown, considered New Jersey, Brooklyn and Manhattan before settling on a large one-bedroom apartment for \$1,000 a month on Astoria's border with Long Island City. "Large is the key," he said. "The bedroom is probably as big as a studio in Manhattan." He immediately felt right at home with "the fishmongers and cake shops," after spending nearly eight years in Japan.

The housing stock has expanded in the last few years with new construction, mostly small-scale projects by local entrepreneurs and builders. Joseph Pistilli of the Pistilli Realty Group in Astoria is betting that a new wave of immigrants -- from SoHo, NoHo, the Upper West Side and Brooklyn -- will buy into two conversions his company is readying for 2004-5. The old Eagle Electric Company near Astoria Park will be refurbished and enlarged to create 188 co-op apartments, studios to three-bedrooms and including lofts. The former Stern's warehouse on Ditmars Avenue, once part of the piano factory, will be transformed into 200 condominiums with retail space and a 260-car parking garage. Prices will be "market value," Mr. Pistilli said.

"Ten to 15 years ago, we didn't know where Astoria was going," said Mr. Vallone Jr., whose family arrived from Sicily by way of Manhattan more than 70 years ago. Today, he sees a new vitality in the conversion projects, new clubs opening weekly and new businesses and banks on Astoria's shopping streets. "Now you can't get a spot on the commercial strips," he said.

What has sustained Astoria has been the creative energy brought by the immigrants. Germans built the gold standard in pianos at Steinway; Italians made violins. The J. D'Addario Company, a Long Island musical string maker, began in a tiny garage behind a home on 14th Street in 1918. Local celebrities in addition to Mr. Bennett include Christopher Walken and the late Ethel Merman.

The village rivaled Hollywood in cinema's early days. Astoria Studios, established in 1920, accounted for a quarter of all films produced in the country in 1921 to 1927, with stars like Rudolph Valentino and the Marx Brothers on the lot. Later on, "Sesame Street," Woody Allen's "Radio Days" and hits starring Harrison Ford, Meryl Streep and Al Pacino have been filmed at what is now Kaufman-Astoria Studios, which also has a multiplex movie theater.

Astoria has become a tourist destination, with the film studios, the American Museum of the Moving Image, the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum (temporarily in Sunnyside), Socrates Sculpture Park, St. Demetrius Cathedral, Bohemian Hall, the Lent Homestead and 300-year-old Riker Burial Ground among the attractions.

The best way to explore Astoria is to wander, pausing in Greek food shops to consider 16 kinds of olives and 12 varieties of olive oil, sampling apple tobacco filtered through a water pipe in an Arab cafe on upper Steinway and buying freshly made mozzarella. When feet and palate grow tired, contemplate the statue of Socrates in Athens Park at 30th Street and 30th Avenue and see a microcosm of Astoria and America chatting away on the benches.