

## **A. Richard Langley**

### **A Not-so Traditional Christmas in New York City**

My Christmas 2013 gift to my girlfriend was a one-week trip to New York City—our first visit over Christmas.

Six weeks prior, I started researching independent boutique hotels in Brooklyn based on criteria such as room size and appearance, amenities, location, and online reviews. I chose Brooklyn because it always intrigued us, and we had previously visited Manhattan twice.

One week later, I picked a charming five-story, 50-room hotel in a non-trendy part of Brooklyn. I did a final check of the online rates and then called the hotel for prices. They had better rates, so I booked a room—on a non-refundable basis—with them.

I emailed my girlfriend the exciting news and a link to the hotel, and asked her to research round-trip flights from Atlanta to NYC.

She called me a few minutes later—not with flight reservations, but with questions. Was the reservation refundable? I told her no and there was a long pause. Had I viewed the exterior of the hotel using Google Earth? I told her the only exterior shots of the hotel I had seen were on its website. She said the area around the hotel lacked the tree-lined streets, charming shops, and cozy eateries she associated with Christmas in NYC.

Then she chuckled and noted my biggest booking faux pas. In my haste to plan a memorable Christmas, I had booked a hotel in the heart of one of Brooklyn's major Hasidic neighborhoods. She laughed and said that she wanted to visit Brooklyn—but not for our entire vacation.

Over the next month, her outlook on the trip was warm and positive, but it was bitterly cold in NYC when we arrived on Christmas Eve. We had diligently researched the NYC weather forecast, but we still didn't have the proper attire—especially thermal underwear. Fortunately, the hotel's website had accurately captured the warmth and intimacy of its staff, interior, and rooms. The hotel was primarily used to accommodate extended family who visited relatives in the neighborhood.

The next morning, when we walked in the neighborhood, the locals—fast-walking men, women, and children dressed in traditional Hasidic garb—scrutinized us. Our attire of colorful sweaters, sweatshirts, hoodies, and sneakers branded us as tourists—and we weren't acknowledged, even when we nodded or said hello. And personnel rebuffed us at every business we tried to enter.

But if we wanted to stay warm—on the neighborhood streets or on daily trips to Manhattan—we needed thermal underwear. To get it, we had to break the cultural ice with the locals and enter a store.

We finally did. And today I'll tell you that overcoming your anxiety to connect with the locals in a Hasidic neighborhood during winter will help you find thermal underwear. I'll prove it by showing you how tactful persistence and positive presence helps break down suspicion. By connecting with the locals in a Hasidic neighborhood in Brooklyn during the winter, you'll stay warm—and expand your cultural horizons.

Early that first afternoon, after many unsuccessful attempts to find a neighborhood business that welcomed us or had thermal underwear, we found an old-world shop on a side street that catered to women and children. We entered and immediately drew the attention of four Hasidic women. One of them approached us and warily asked what we wanted. We told her that we were cold and wanted to buy thermal underwear. She had trouble understanding us, and called someone from a rotary phone at the register.

Moments later, an older gentleman in Hasidic attire appeared at the register, looked us over, and asked how he could help us. We answered with deference and he silently led us to a section in the back of the store. The women briefly eyed us but stopped after the man nodded at them. He showed us the thermal underwear, helped us make our selections, and led us back to the front register. After we paid and thanked him, he opened the door for us.

We understood his behavior and that of the locals. We didn't look like them, act like them, or share their cultural and religious beliefs—and they surely wondered why we were there during a holiday they don't celebrate. We knew we had been lucky to find someone in a neighborhood store who trusted us enough to help us get warm.

Returning to the hotel, we eagerly put on our new underclothing. It kept us warm during our walks in the neighborhood, which we appreciated and understood more—especially since our legs weren't frozen.

Even if you spend your Christmas vacation in a Hasidic neighborhood in Brooklyn and you aren't Jewish, you can have a rewarding time if you show deference, keep an open mind, and have an understanding heart.

And always research hotels thoroughly when planning for a vacation. If you have any doubt about your taste or capability, let your loved one book it.