

# IN THE NEWS



## Sports

Larchmont author knows ins, outs of Manhattan's parking garages, 7C



INSIDE:

## Business

## The Journal News

### Larchmont woman offers guide to NYC parking spaces

*Alison Bert  
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If you've ever returned to a Manhattan parking garage only to find your car locked in overnight, or had the attendant ring up a bill that was twice as high as you expected, or circled the block for half an hour trying to find the entrance to that convenient garage your friends told you about, then Margot Tohn of Larchmont has the book for you.

Her new guidebook "Park It! NYC 2007" contains details of Manhattan's 1,113 garages, including hours of operation; hourly, daily and monthly rates; special discounts; and maps that show the street entrances and exits and proximity to landmarks like hospitals, museums and tunnels. It's designed to save time and money and provide convenience in the often daunting undertaking of parking in the city.

The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, which licenses parking facilities in the city, received 274 parking complaints from consumers in fiscal 2006, said press secretary Shira Krance. She said her agency requires garages to be licensed and recommended that consumers check for the license and price list, which must be posted.

"We always recommend that you get and keep your receipt," added Krance, a former Valley Cottage resident who lives in Manhattan. "Make sure the receipt has the correct address and license number of the parking garage just in case there are any problems later on."

Tohn's guide attempts to make the process of parking hassle-free.

"I tried to think of all the things other than rates that really could make your life much easier if you knew them ahead of time — if you could plan," she said.

For example, the guide indicates:

- When a driveway is steep, narrow or very long. Knowing this allows you to drop someone off at the top of the driveway if they have trouble walking.
- Rates with the city's 18.38 percent tax added in.
- Vehicle dimensions that typically require you to pay a large-vehicle surcharge.
- Security gates at the entrance to make late-night returns safer.
- Cash-only garages.

Tohn plans to revisit the garages for the 2008 edition. She also plans to do other cities, the next being Boston.

For now, she produces custom editions with a company's name, logo, Web site and contact information on the cover.

She's also developing software called Park It! On Your Website that will allow businesses to display information about nearby garages on their Web sites. In addition, she's looking into teaming up with companies that produce global positioning systems for drivers.

Tohn is doing these things through the publishing company she created in 2005, called Park It! Guides. It's the second of two businesses she runs from her basement. In 2003, she left the corporate world, after serving as marketing director for The Charles Schwab Corp., Westpac Banking Corp. and Murdoch Magazines. She runs a marketing business, called Marketing Solutions, for financial service providers. Her experience with project management gave her the skills to produce a detailed parking guide.

Her background goes beyond the realm of business. She has a linguistics degree from Cornell University in Ithaca and an MBA from the University of New South Wales in Australia. She has worked as a jillaroo (cowgirl) on an Aussie ranch, learned to make her own wine, traveled throughout the Asian Pacific region and sailed on a racing yacht from the United Kingdom to France.

In fact, one of the things she had yet to do was to visit every parking garage in Manhattan. Twice. "Because it's on the highlights tour," she said, with her trademark wit.

### **How she did it**

Tohn hired a driver to take her around for three weeks in the dead of winter last year.

"We drove every single street in Manhattan from top to bottom and side to side," she said.

After entering the information into an Excel file, she hired a graphic designer. Using map software, he added arrows to show entrances, exits and the direction traffic flows on one-way streets. Tohn returned to the garages in August to update rates.

Now, she makes daily trips to the post office to send out orders.

### **Parking's not boring**

She's quick to point out that many people assume — wrongly — that parking is a boring subject. But once she starts talking about parking, people's ears perk up.

She points out that prices vary widely, with an evening's parking ranging from \$10 to \$35. Costs tend to be higher closer to the center of the city. The cheapest monthly rate is \$99, at a garage at 547 W. 48th St. between 10th and 11th avenues; the most expensive is \$925 at garages on the Upper East and West sides.

In addition, many people have encountered the unexpected when navigating these labyrinths.

### **Parking pitfalls**

More than a third of garages close overnight. When planning a late night, Tohn said, ask the attendant just in case the posted hours of operation have changed.

She also recommends walking around your car with the valet when you drop it off to note its condition in case it gets damaged. Under city law, garage operators are responsible for negligence that results in damage.

A common error is misinterpreting the posted rates. "Early bird" or "evening" specials typically require drivers to arrive and leave by a certain hour or stay for a certain amount of time. People don't read the signs carefully, so they get stuck paying the hourly rate, which is much higher.

"Little words like 'by' and 'before' and 'after' make a difference," Tohn said. "By 7 p.m. is different than after 7 p.m."

Her advice: When in doubt, ask.



Margot Tohn of Larchmont is the author of "Park It! NYC 2007," a guide to every parking garage in Manhattan.

## Choosing a garage

Some people look for convenience and the closest location, while others look for the cheapest rates. Here are other factors you may not have considered:

- **Security.** You may feel more comfortable parking in or walking late at night to a garage that is well lit on the outside and inside, and where the valet booth is located near the entrance.
- **Reliability.** The larger companies most likely have employee standards that provide for a more enjoyable parking experience and some recourse if you have a complaint. This is not to say an independent garage owner would not strive to deliver superior service.
- **Discounts.** Sometimes larger garage companies offer discounted rates for frequent customers.

## Avoiding extra charges

The best way to avoid unexpected charges is to read the posted rate signs and to confirm the rate before you leave your car. Other ways are:

- **Read the claim check.** Confirm that the time stamped on it is the actual time you parked.
- **Overnight.** Some garages charge the overnight rate only if you keep your car there until at least 5 or 6 a.m.
- **Leave your key.** Forget to leave it and the garage may charge you from \$25 to the full towing fee.
- **Large-vehicle surcharge.** With vehicles that exceed certain dimensions, you will typically pay an extra \$5 to \$10 to park.
- **Event rates.** Garages have a range of rates for conventions and large events. Confirm the rate before you park. On major holidays or festivals, consider parking farther away and taking public transportation or walking.
- **Know the times.** Most rates have a clearly posted entry time, but sometimes the exit time will simply read 9 p.m. Be sure to ask if these times require you to leave “before” or “by” the posted time.

## Tipping

- **Why tip?** The average parking attendant earns \$21,000 - less than half of the average salary in New York City. Also, attendants surveyed by Park It! Guides generally indicated that they would be inclined to “go the extra mile” for a consistent and good tipper.
- **When to tip.** Most people tip when the valet retrieves their car. Some garage companies suggested that customers tip when they drop off their cars as a way to ensure that the valet will take particular care when parking their vehicles. Also, valets who work during the day may not benefit from the tips customers give when they pick up their cars. However, most larger garages with multiple valets pool tips either by shift or for the entire day.
- **How much to tip.** Most people tip \$1 to \$2. Some monthly parkers give a holiday tip, with the average being \$48, according to New York magazine.

Source: Margot Tohn, author of “Park It! NYC 2007”

## The book

“Park It! NYC 2007” is \$13.95 at [www.parkitguides.com](http://www.parkitguides.com). It’s also available at Anderson’s Book Shop in Larchmont and at Barnes & Noble starting next month.

## Parking garage complaints

The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs licenses the city’s parking lots and garages. Consumers can contact the agency with complaints. Fill out the complaint form on its Web site ([www.nyc.gov/consumers](http://www.nyc.gov/consumers)) or call 311 in the city or 212-639-9675 outside the five boroughs.

## Have your say

What parking-garage pitfalls have you fallen into? Join the conversation on:

- The “Open” forum: <http://forums.lohud.com>
- Alison Bert’s blog, The Cost of Living: <http://costofliving.lohudblogs.com>

## By the numbers

**1,113** - Number of parking garages in Manhattan

**104,768** - Number of spaces in Manhattan’s garages

**\$33** - Most expensive rate for an hour (2 East 60th St., off Fifth Avenue)

**\$2** - Cheapest rate for an hour (627 West 131st St., between Broadway and Riverside Drive)

**65** - Percentage of garages open 24 hours

**16** - Highest number of garages on a street (East 80th)

**3,500** - Number of spaces in largest garage (Pier 40/West Street)

Source: Margot Tohn, author of “Park It! NYC 2007”

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