

The best rooftop bars in New York City

By Ambia Staley

New York's density of tall buildings makes it uniquely suited to rooftop bars in a way that few other cities can match. A rooftop that would offer generic city views almost anywhere else provides a specific, layered panorama of skyline, river, and neighborhoods here. The competition among venues to offer the best cocktail program alongside those views has produced an unusual rooftop bar scene. The bars on this list span multiple boroughs and neighborhoods, from a Financial District skyscraper 64 floors above the streets to a two-story Bushwick natural wine spot where the low altitude is part of the point.

3. Ophelia Lounge in Midtown East has exceptional cocktails



Credit: Ophelia Lounge

Ophelia Lounge is on the 26th floor in Midtown East, and its appeal lies partly in the quality of its cocktail program and partly in the sense that it remains less discovered than its quality warrants. The bar is decorated for the season, which gives repeat visitors a reason to return throughout the year, and the cocktail menu is creative without the affectation that sometimes accompanies novelty-driven drink programs. A Lonely Planet staff member describes it as a place that feels “hidden and special,” and the grand bar at the entrance, often elaborately dressed for whatever season it’s presenting, adds to that specific pleasure of arrival.

The banana old-fashioned variation mentioned in the source review is one signal of what the kitchen team is doing with the cocktail menu: familiar formats executed with unexpected ingredients in ways that reward the curious drinker without alienating anyone who just wants something straightforward. The 360-degree views from the bar’s position among the Midtown skyscrapers give the experience a unique urban immersion that rooftop terraces with more exposure don’t offer in the same way.

Ophelia is worth the trip from any neighborhood, specifically for the cocktail program, making it the bar on this list that functions most as a pure drinking destination independent of the view. Booking a table is advisable for weekend evenings, when the bar draws visitors from across the city, specifically for the experience. The Lexington Avenue subway lines, which run near the Ophelia Lounge’s Midtown East location, make access from both the Upper East Side and downtown Manhattan straightforward, which reduces the friction of visiting a Midtown bar from either end of the island. Ophelia is on the 26th floor of the Archer Hotel at 45 West 38th Street, which is close enough to the Grand Central area and the Empire State Building that visitors spending time in those areas can add it without a significant detour. The cocktail menu at Ophelia changes with the season and the kitchen’s creative development, which means the specific drinks available on any given visit are worth examining before defaulting to a familiar classic.