



News | Business | Sports | Entertainment | Living/FYI | Classifieds | Jobs | Cars | Homes

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

- Metropolitan
 - City
 - Blue Springs
 - Blue Valley & Leawood
 - Independence
 - Lee's Summit
 - Liberty
 - Northland
 - Olathe
 - Platte County
 - Shawnee & Lenexa
 - Shawnee Mission
 - Southland
 - Wyandotte & Leavenworth
- Politics/Elections
- Business
 - Workplace
 - Moneywise
 - STAR 50
 - Technology
- Sports
 - High Schools
- Opinion
- FYI
 - Food
 - TeenStar
 - Faith
 - Home & Garden
- Arts
 - Books
- Preview
- Travel
- Columnists
- Obituaries

Search for

[Back to Home](#) > [Kansas City Star](#) > [Business](#) >

Sunday, Sep 28, 2003

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

Moneywise

Posted on Sun, Sep. 21, 2003

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

FAMILY MONEY: Apartment shoppers need to do their research

By MIKE GLYNN
Special to The Star

With vacancy rates at their highest levels in a decade, Kansas City apartment complexes are rolling out the red carpet like never before to woo new tenants.

Many managers are dangling a month's free rent, waiving application fees and giving away mountain bikes, DVD players and rounds of golf.

Sounds sweet, but even with the freebies and glut of apartments, many renters still stumble through the search phase, local real estate experts say.

Chuck Carlin was one of them. He and his girlfriend last spring drove from Fayetteville, Ark., to Kansas City nearly every weekend for two months hunting for apartments and talking with property managers.



Chuck Carlin's apartment search led him to a two-bedroom unit at the Camden Passage Apartments north of the river. - Keith Myers/The Kansas City Star

"It got really frustrating," he said. After spotting picturesque

Shopping

- [Find a J](#)
- [Find a C](#)
- [Find a H](#)
- [Find an](#)
- [Classifi](#)
- [Shop N](#)



▶ [Loan](#)

▪ [Pur](#)

▪ [Refi](#)

▪ [Hon](#)

▪ [FHA](#)

▪ [VA](#)

▶ [Toda](#)

Loan T

State

Points

Mort

? AP

What's Use ou to learn mortgage

▶ [Calcu](#)

▪ [Mont](#)

▪ [Payr](#)

▪ [Rent](#)

▪ [Fixer](#)

▪ [15 or](#)

▪ [Refi](#)

▶ [Find](#)

Zipcod

complexes in a magazine or on a Web site, the couple would show up and discover the places were less than inviting.

The couple finally turned to an apartment-locating service, which steered them into a two-bedroom apartment north of the river, replete with a fully equipped kitchen and garden-style bathtubs. "It's a gorgeous property," said Carlin, who later was hired by the locating service.

Learn the market

It's a renter's market, but apartment shoppers also face a jungle of choices.

To navigate it, apartment-locating services and managers say consumers need to mix shopping basics with real estate cunning.

Learn the market first. Get a feel for price ranges and the typical specials or incentives offered by apartments where you want to live. Naturally, you'll also want to think about amenities important to you.

Where do you get such info? For many Kansas City area shoppers, the bible of apartment hunting is *Apartments For Rent*, a free magazine available at most grocery stores.

Like Carlin, you also can turn to the Web to narrow your search. A variety of sites list apartment statistics, such as rates and amenities, and give "virtual tours" of the facilities. Some of the top sites: www.apartments.com, www.homestore.com, www.apartmentguide.com and www.moveforfree.com.

"For most apartment shoppers, their first visit to an apartment complex is a virtual tour," said Lisa Trosien, an apartment industry consultant in Chicago. She said some property owners are using new software that allows them to update their rates and incentives faster, and to take renters' applications online.

You can also go to the Web to see what current tenants think about their apartments, or at least that's the idea. The leading such Internet bulletin board is www.apartmentratings.com.

But beware: Postings typically are anonymous, and many seem to be written either by tenants with an ax to grind, or others -- maybe even the apartments' own managers -- gushing about their communities.

During your search, examine the amenities offered and weigh which ones are truly important to you. For some renters, acres of free parking, 24-hour maintenance and self-cleaning ovens are vital. Others crave a gleaming exercise room, massage therapist and chic cafe in the clubhouse.

"A lot of people come in and say they're not sure what they're looking

Stocks

Enter symb

for," said Sarah Storie, property manager at Province of Briarcliff in North Kansas City. On the other hand, shrewd shoppers "have done the research, they've made the calls, driven by the communities and they know what the market is."

Take note of specials and incentives. Some apartment managers change them monthly, and the discounts often are more lavish for bigger apartments and longer leases, such as 14 months.

While incentives are a big draw, Cynthia Klein at The Plaza Living Center Inc. offers this warning: They help defray your initial rental rates, but will you still be able to afford the place once the special has expired?

Here's a tip to make better use of a typical incentive: Let's say you find a cozy one bedroom at \$600 a month for 12 months, with the first month free. It might be smarter to prorate those savings throughout the lease, trimming your monthly payment to \$550. When the lease expires, if you've been a good renter, chances are your rate will be raised to just \$575, rather than the full \$600.

You can even find incentives on individually owned property rentals, such as condos, duplexes and conventional rental homes.

Even so, compared with the apartment glut, the market for rental homes isn't nearly as weak, said Diane Bruns at Apartment & Rental Connections in Kansas City. That's because many of those private rentals, amid low interest rates and swelling home prices, have been bought by new owners and taken off the rental block.

Bruns said prices typically range from \$550 to \$900 a month for a two-bedroom townhome, depending on its location and condition, and \$900 to \$1,400 for a three-bedroom townhome.

Amenities are much different in private rentals, of course. Attached garages, washer-and-dryer hookups and yards are common (some come with yard-maintenance services).

Whether you're searching for a private rental or apartment, pay attention to utilities. Some apartments pick up the tab for all of them, while others pay for several utilities -- such as trash, water and heat - - and some complexes don't pay any. Ask the manager or property owner what the utilities typically cost; the difference can mean \$100 or more to your monthly expenses.

Look for quality of life

Despite all the attention renters give to apartment rates, don't let them dictate your search.

"Too many apartment hunters use price and specials as the driving factors," said Trosien, the Chicago consultant. Pay attention to

quality-of-life factors, such as floor plans, how well the buildings are maintained and how the staff treats you in the office.

That was the case for Gail Wasserman. After scouting the *Apartments For Rent* magazine, she found Deer Creek Apartment Homes in Overland Park. Beyond the apartment community's convenience factors, such as a concierge, she was wowed by the "classy" demeanor of the workers.

"You have to look for the right atmosphere. Do you really connect with the people who manage it?" said Wasserman, who moved to a two-bedroom last December.

Use a professional?

Naturally, apartment-locating firms tout their services. (A handful of them are listed at the start of the apartment section in the Yellow Pages.) They operate much like travel agents, determining what their clients want -- price ranges, location, amenities -- and hooking them up with apartment complexes that meet those criteria.

Especially important, the service is free to apartment shoppers. The locators' fees are paid by the apartment managers and typically amount to 50 percent to 70 percent of one month's rent for each client they place at that complex.

Most services say they work with hundreds of apartment communities in the area, receiving faxes daily from managers on changes in rates and incentives. They contend they have market insight that most consumers lack.

Many apartment shoppers, however, "don't know how to look for locators. They don't know we even exist, or they think it will cost them money," said Bruns at Apartment & Rental Connections, who finds apartments for more than 200 clients a year.

One drawback to using a locating service, said Storie of Province of Briarcliff, is that most of them work only with apartment managers they have contracts with. That means the apartment that's best for you might not be on the locator's list.

What's more, even if they receive several complaints from former tenants about an apartment complex, some locators admit they'll still refer clients to that place -- so long as the apartment manager continues to pay their fee.

Bottom line advice, said Storie: if you work with a locator, use them in addition to your own search.

Apartment shoppers who do decide to go it alone should stiffen their backbone and be persistent, Bruns advised.

If you've zeroed in on an apartment complex but there's nothing available, keep calling back each week. Remember, leasing associates can get bogged down, or maybe they're having a bad day and don't have time at that moment to look into your special requests. Ask for the manager.

"They really want to close you, especially in this market," Bruns said.

Another mistake shoppers often make, she said, is getting tired of looking and settling for a place. If you're dreaming of a loft downtown but can't find one for \$1,000, keep asking around; you can probably get a studio in that range.

Visit the place

Beyond the nifty virtual tours and splashy magazine photos, you need to drive through the complex -- several times if possible, preferably over the weekend and during the evening.

Take note of the parking lot. How crowded is it, what types of people are hanging out there and what kinds of cars do they drive? Those are telltale signs to the type of neighbors you'll have, said Storie.

Chances are the way the place looks now is what it will look like when you're living there, despite what the landlord says about plans to recarpet all the units or to install a putting green at the clubhouse. If those improvements are critical to you, get the manager to sign to them in the lease, said Dan Kelly, an attorney at Muller & Muller in Kansas City who specializes in landlord-tenant issues.

And don't let yourself get won over after visiting that stylish model the manager showed you. "Demand to see the apartment that you'll move into," said Barbara Dunlap at Apartment Finders in Belton.

Timing is everything

Most renters move in the spring and summer, followed by another surge in October before business slows during the winter. So if you want a short-term lease, do your apartment hunting in the early spring or summer. Many managers don't want that lease to expire in the dead of winter, when they know it will be tougher to fill the apartment, said Jennifer Shorrock, leasing associate at Kelly Crossing in North Kansas City.

Likewise, if you have to break your lease, managers are more likely to waive the penalty in the spring and summer, when shoppers are more abundant.

Leverage your clean application

If you have clean credit history, solid rental and employment background and a good income -- a monthly salary at least three

times the apartment's rate -- managers will treat you like royalty. Use that as leverage.

No, it's unlikely they'll agree to a lower rental rate, which would violate fair-housing rules. But you can still ask for special perks, such as waiving the application and transfer fees, as well as obtaining a shorter lease agreement if you don't want to be locked in for 12 months. Maybe you can get them to swing for things like a lower security deposit, new carpeting or a better paint job in the apartment, too.

And speaking of credit applications, ask to see a copy of the apartment complex's screening process for new renters. The more sophisticated it is, chances are the more professional the place will be run and the better your neighbors will be, said Storie.

Walk-through: Look for defects

Most new renters are in a cheerful mood during the walk-through. They're optimistic and don't scrutinize the apartment.

Instead, approach the walk-through with a skeptical eye. Is the oven clean and does it work? Do the windows seal and lock? Is the carpet stained? Document all those flaws. (The Web site www.apartmentliving.com contains an array of walk-through tips.)

"When you look at the apartment, look at the condition. If something needs to be fixed, get it in writing," said Klein at Plaza Living Center. "Most property managers will say 'I'll fix this and that,' and most of them will. But on occasion they might not."

Even better than writing down all the defects, said Kelly, the attorney, is to use a video camera and make a running commentary of the blemishes you see.

Kelly said the main culprits in lost security deposits are dirty ovens, fridges and showers. And once you start renting, he said, it's important to follow those verbal complaints to the landlord with a letter recapping important points that were discussed, such as when the hot-water heater went out and when the landlord pledged to fix it.

"Landlords are like everyone else," Kelly said. "Some are very good, and some are trying to make as much money as possible."

Study the lease

You've found a great place and taken the walk-through. Don't start loading the moving van just yet, however.

Sit down with the lease and give yourself plenty of time to read it word by word. Many apartment managers will make you mark your initials at key points in the agreement.

Some important matters to watch: what happens if you pay your rent late; what is the "buy-out" clause if you have to break the lease -- especially important for young business professionals who might get relocated; and how much notice must you give before you move.

Dunlap at Apartment Finders said many renters mistakenly think they can simply pack up and move when their lease expires. Most rental agreements, however, stipulate the renter still must give 30 or 60 days notice before they leave, even if their lease is ending. (A couple of Web sites with good information about leases: www.about.com's apartment section, and www.rentlaw.com.)

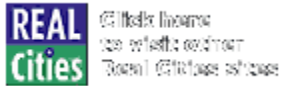
When hunting for an apartment "the most important thing is to compare and really shop the market first," Dunlap said. "Second thing: Read the lease carefully. If you have any questions, ask."



[email this](#) | [print this](#)

RELATED LINKS

- » [For short-timers, renting may be smarter than buying](#)
- » [A look at the KC apartment market](#)
- » [Apartments.com](#)



News | Business | Sports | Entertainment | Living/FYI | Classifieds | Jobs | Cars | Homes
About KansasCity.com | About the Real Cities Network | Terms of Use & Privacy Statement | A
Ridder | Copyright