

OBSERVATION (2)

# Dab hand

New York's whacky mystics are clinging on to real estate in a changing city. Ed Stocker tempts fate by visiting a palm reader.

By Ed Stocker  
Photography Timothy O'Connell

"Nothing negative, please," I say, offering a hand. It's the first time I've done anything like this; I'm sceptical and slightly nervous. Money has been exchanged – \$40 (€36) for a 10-minute palm reading – and the offer of tarot cards and crystals politely declined. "Some people think they're making the building shake," says palm reader Apollonia Eli as the floor rumbles. "But that's just the subway."

New York is often derided as a homogenised metropolis that lost its edge to big money. But look around Manhattan carefully enough and you'll find tiny reminders of just how odd this place is. Shops in neighbourhoods as diverse as Murray Hill, Chelsea and the East Village advertise the wares of psychics and spiritual healers. So why are there so many mystics in New York? "It's like asking why there are so many therapists," says Eli.

I'm in Zena Clairvoyant, which is tiny even by Manhattan standards. Its triangular three-storey building occupies a coveted space in the West Village. Despite development and rising costs, palm readers and their ilk have survived and even thrived. For Zena Clairvoyant – with an illustrated palm on its façade and a neon sign in the window that says "Psychic" – owning the building is a gamechanger.

We settle around a table upon which are tarot cards and a crystal ball. Eli meets my gaze. My energy, she says, shows that I am on the brink of a new chapter (she could be right), about to make a lot of important decisions (again, it's possible) and will have three healthy children (interesting). I also like to be in control and tell people what to do (my partner would agree). Detractors argue that palm readers



1



2

(1) Zena Clairvoyant's prime New York location (2) Mid-reading

are deliberately vague, their utterances easily malleable to anyone's life. And the scandals in the Big Apple don't help. In 2013 Sylvia Mitchell, a Zena Clairvoyant employee, was convicted for stealing \$138,000 from clients. Eli is keen to point out that Mitchell was the only person outside the family that they'd ever employed, also calling her "gifted" and "innocent". In a more recent case, a psychic on the Upper West Side called Kitty Mitchell (no relation, we assume) cheated vulnerable people out of cash.

For psychic and astrologer Melissa Townsend, a former New Yorker who now works in San Francisco, it's easy to understand the appeal of a fortune teller. "In cities like New York there are powerful, driven people with inherent anxiety and a desire to know, 'Am I doing the right thing?'" she says. "There may be more of a tendency for people to look for something to provide answers beyond the rational."

My brush with palmistry left me curious about back pain, a future book deal and a propensity for thinking negatively. Perhaps I'll try the tarot cards. — (M)