

Living ^{Well} on Less

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Apartment hunting simplified



There is nothing I hate more than the instability of moving, and I especially hate the long, arduous process of finding a new place to live.

I'm not usually a procrastinator when it comes to this sort of thing. But we'd just moved, spent two weeks in Europe, and I was struggling with morning sickness and pregnancy-induced laziness, so I decided the apartment search could wait until after July 4th. It is now July 7. We're moving in 3 weeks. Yikes.

Sadly, I've run out of procrastination time. So tomorrow we're heading up to Fort Wayne to scope out some apartments. We'll hopefully have a lease signed and a move date set before we come home.

This isn't the first time I've used my abbreviated method for apartment hunting. We drove to North Carolina and chose our apartment in two days last time we moved, and it ended up working for us for three years. Hopefully we'll be that lucky this time. Here's how I'll be spending my day today and tomorrow:

Scope out apartments online before visiting.

If you're moving to a new city, this step is crucial. But even if you're making a local move, you can save yourself a lot of time by eliminating apartments or rental homes that won't work for you. There are many online services that allow you to search apartments by price, amenities, and other features. My favorite is Rent.com, because they offer a \$100 bonus if you tell your landlord that you found the apartment on the site. (We moved into a place in August, and received our bonus in November.)

Make an itinerary based on locations.

If you're traveling to a new city to look at apartments, take the time to map out the places you want to see. Visit them in an order that makes sense to save yourself time and gas mileage. There's no sense criss-crossing the town three or four times to visit multiple apartments.

Ask to see the actual unit.

In some states, landlords won't show you an actual unit until the previous tenant has moved out and you're ready to move in. If this is the case, don't sign a lease until you've

seen the unit. It's easy to dress up a model, but you need to see where you'll be living to make sure any problems will be fixed before you move in. If you can't see the unit until the tenant moves out, but you have a really good feeling about the place, see if you can put down a deposit to hold it until the tenant moves out and you can inspect the unit.

Negotiate before you're ready to decide.

The time to strike a deal with the landlord is during the apartment hunting process before you've made up your mind. Leasing agents are anxious to fill empty units, and they're often willing to make a deal to entice you to choose them, especially if you're a reliable renter with good credit history and income. We've negotiated new appliances, new carpeting, reduced rent for the first month, reduced security deposits, and reduced pet fees just by asking during the tour. Don't wait until you're sitting in the office ready to sign the lease. Ask for these things when you're "just looking," and you'll be more likely to get them.

Bring a notebook and a camera.

If you're looking at several places, bring a notebook and a camera to help you keep things straight. Take notes about the price, amenities, pros and cons of each apartment, and snap a few pictures to help jog your memory when you're making the decision.

Don't be hasty.

Make sure you check out every apartment on your list before you make a decision. Leasing agents are salespeople, and they're good at convincing possible tenants to SIGN NOW. Don't make a decision until you've seen and compared all of your options.

Take time to decide.

Once you've seen all of your options, go somewhere quiet to compare and contrast. When we visited North Carolina, Tony and I narrowed our options down to a few favorites, then we sat down for lunch at a diner with all of our notes and thoughts. We talked about price, location, and other pros and cons before choosing the place that would best suit our needs. Looking over our notes after taking time to process all of our options made the decision a lot easier.

Be ready to seal the deal.

If you're traveling out of town, be sure you have enough money in the bank to pay for an application fee, security deposit, and first month's rent. Also make sure you have all the information you may need to apply, including references, pay stubs for income verification, and valid identification.

Include all special deals in the lease.

When you're ready to sign the lease, make sure the leasing agent includes special offers that were discussed during the negotiation process. If they promised you reduced first month's rent or a lower pet fee, make sure the lease says so. The same goes for promised renovations and other perks. If it's not in the lease, they're not legally obligated to provide it no matter what was said, so don't sign until it's all in writing.