

TRAVEL EXPLORE

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Follow the deep blue Hudson river north out of New York City, and within just a couple of hours you'll be driving through the natural beauty of the Catskill Mountains, upstate New York's popular long weekend getaway.

With bucolic vistas, rolling farmland, mountain peaks and a burgeoning farm-to-table food movement, the region offers a taste of pure Americana that has sparked a tourism revival, seeing hipsters become "hicksters" for a weekend. Until the 1970s the Catskills was nicknamed the 'Jewish Alps' or the 'Borscht Belt', a nod to the predominantly Jewish resorts which characterised the area — and the eastern European beetroot soup that appeared on their menus.

During its peak popularity, the region was populated with over 500 hotels and resorts playing host to an impressive roster of Jewish comedians who came to hone their skills on the summer crowds — Jerry Seinfeld, Woody Allen, Joan Rivers, Jerry Lewis and Billy Crystal, to name a few. The iconic teenage romance movie, *Dirty Dancing* reflected this bygone wholesome vacation.

The dawn of the jet age saw the Catskills all but abandoned, with towns and properties steadily falling into disrepair — that is, until recently.

With Manhattan prices sky high, and other New York retreats like the Hamptons equally expensive, distinguished hoteliers and chefs have spotted the Catskills' unlimited potential, beauty and

natural reserves and are running with it.

The year-round destination is well known as a summer retreat but has fantastic skiing in the winter and wild flowers in the spring. And at the height of autumn, you can view its world famous "fall foliage", becoming a "leaf peeper" for a week as the autumn colours blaze.

Stunning expanses of mountains and forests are a tapestry of oranges, yellows, reds and purples. Roadside stalls dotted through the trees serve up warm cider from the surrounding orchards while Greek Revival houses with porch swings are lined with pumpkins ahead of Halloween. The skies are clear blue, the air is crisp and the leaves crunch underfoot.

Rundown inns and resorts are quickly transforming into sophisticated boutique weekend getaways, such as Scribner's Lodge, my base for the week.

Formerly a motor lodge, this hipster-haunt-cum-ski-lodge was recently renovated by a trendy New York hospitality duo, adding 21st century necessities like a yoga and meditation studio, a fine dining restaurant celebrating

seasonal produce, and an ultra-minimalist aesthetic.

With its original outdoor swimming pool overlooking Hunter Mountain, and marshmallows provided by the front desk for toasting on the fire pit, there's still a nostalgic feel of simpler times.

Hunter offers a huge variety of outdoors activities like bouldering (climbing boulders) and tubing (floating along rivers in a rubber ring). If you fancy zooming across the mountain at 600 feet on North America's fastest and longest zip line, here is the place to do it.

For hikers, the beauty of the Catskills is legendary, its mountains and countryside criss-crossed with thousands of trails for all abilities. A trek up Mount Tremper to reach the lookout Fire Tower at its peak rewards with panoramic views, as does the trail from the Tibetan Buddhist Monastery to Overlook Mountain.

From Hunter, it's easy to explore the region's quaintly picture-postcard towns. The Catskills is best enjoyed on the open road; be sure to stop at Phoenicia, Andes and Delhi, which despite



PHOTOS: LAWRENCE BRAUN/NICO SCHINCO

The call of the Catskills

Holly Rubenstein swaps Big Apples for a taste of New York state's countryside

The Borscht Belt gets a facelift with new foodie temptations among the glorious Catskills scenery



Before you leave, stop off at some of the roadside farm stands to stock up on local maple syrup and candy treats for the journey home too. As the immortal lyrics of the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack told us, you'll have the time of your life!

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GETTING THERE

▶ **DRIVING** to the Catskills takes around two and a half to three hours from New York's airports.

Flights from London cost from around £300 return with airlines

including BA (ba.com), Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com) and Norwegian Air (norwegian.com). Flights from Manchester are a similar price, with

Virgin Atlantic and Thomas Cook airlines (thomascokairlines.com).

Rooms at Scribner's Lodge cost from around £130 per night. scribnerslodge.com





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their exotic names are quintessentially American, Main Streets lined with tiny boutiques, delightful farm shops, indulgent diners and cosy beer holes.

Mount Utsayantha's mile-long winding route is another must-see. From the top, views stretch for 50 miles — an ideal picnic spot to devour the local treats on offer. Another historic Catskills drive is the old Route 28 to 212 towards Woodstock (known for the historic music festival of 1969 which actually took place 50 miles down the road in Bethel).

This vibrant, arty town is packed with galleries, whole food cafes, and delightful individual shops. Stock up on treats and gifts at Shop Little House, after an al fresco vegan lunch at The Garden Café.

In fact, a culinary renaissance in the Catskills means food is, once again, making a name for the region, with chefs relocating from the city to shorten the distance from farm to table.

Chef Ryan Tate was the holder of a Michelin star before he made a decision to switch out the hectic pace of manning the burners in NYC for the tranquility

of a mountainside hunting lodge at the Deer Mountain Inn, just a short drive up the road from Scribner's Lodge.

With sweeping views of mountain peaks and roaring fireplaces, this is New York countryside at its finest. His seasonal menu aims to capture the history of the area, by "modernising the cooking that might have taken place here years ago".

You'll see this reflected in dishes such as marinated beets, served with a smoked Catskills trout, then milk sorbet with forest honey and honeycomb for dessert.

A similar philosophy is in play at Prospect restaurant, overlooking Hunter Mountain. The new arrival has been a hit with both blow-in foodies and locals. Chef Joseph Buenconsejo left the city in hopes of spending more time foraging and hiking and brings his love of nature to the menu.

"Everything is made in-house. We make our bread, we culture our own butter," he explains. "What's on the menu is what I find around the area, what's available at the nearby farms."





This Sukkot, Ramada Jerusalem is the place to be!

Enjoy our excellent English program, produced by Lenny Davidman of LD Events, featuring Rabbi Dr. Aaron Adler (Chol Hamoed) and Rabbi Shmuel Hersher (Chag Sukkot), plus thought-provoking lectures and fun activities for the whole family.



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