

COOL FOR CATSKILLS

When the heat rises in New York City, savvy weekenders swerve the snooty Hamptons for the boho vibe of the Catskill Mountains, finds **Laura Millar**

He was just wandering along the street at two in the afternoon, a lone, twenty-something, modern-day troubadour, strumming on his guitar, head bobbing to his own music, wearing a pair of sheepskin boots, beat-up shorts, and a plaid shirt. Within just five minutes of entering the tiny town of Woodstock, Ulster County, a two-hour drive north from Manhattan, I'd basically learned not to bat an eye at such sights. When every other café is vegan, most shops are either tattoo parlours or offer psychic readings, and there are signs posted in windows advertising hot yoga and Tibetan chanting classes, it's clear that the spirit of the sixties is still alive and well in this tiny corner of New York State. Grizzled-looking storekeepers sport Fleetwood Mac tour T-shirts, and you just know they've been to every gig.

Woodstock, a tiny hamlet with a population of just 6,000, may not have actually hosted the famous music festival which took place in August, 1969 – it took place 60 miles down the road, in the town of Bethel, thanks to protests by Woodstock residents – but it still appeals to musicians, artists and anyone who embraces a laid-back, alternative lifestyle. It couldn't be further from the upscale towns which line the southern coast of Long Island (the other place New Yorkers escape to in the hot, sticky summer months). And this natural, boho, neo-hippy vibe reverberates throughout the whole, vast Catskills region. My boyfriend and I have come here to explore what's drawing more and more city folk north, rather than east, for the summer. Plus, it's where *Dirty Dancing* was set, so there's that too...

Getting to Catskills from New York's JFK International Airport takes around two-and-a-half hours by car, and the latter portion of the drive is incredibly calm and scenic.

The **drive up** from JFK eases us in gently to what we'll experience over the next few days. Once off the snarl of the Interstate, quieter, two-lane roads slice through thick, lush forests, and we can see the hazy blue and green peaks of the mountain ranges in the distance. But as we approach our hotel near Mount Tremper, passing dozens of little mom 'n' pop stores selling groceries and newspapers, I almost swerve into a tree, distracted by a collection of strange, colourful robot-like structures on a patch of lawn by the roadside outside a workshop.

Obviously, we pull over immediately. Inside the shop, Heller's Fabulous ▲

Photograph by Lorraine Boogitch/Getty

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TOURISM TO THE CATSKILLS AS A WHOLE IS BOOMING, BUT SO IS RELOCATION

► Furniture, we encounter a sprightly, if somewhat eccentric, 71-year-old called Steve Heller, a local sculptor and furniture maker. Working with old machine parts, unwanted vehicles and general junk, he creates retro, atomic-age figures, customised hot-rods, and all manner of weird and wonderful gadgets which have graced celebrities' homes (Robert De Niro is a huge fan), galleries and museums around the country. I ask him where he gets his inspiration, but he just hands me a DVD he's made about himself and says, gruffly, "Watch this. I can't be bothered answering questions about my work any more." He reminds me gloriously of *Back to the Future's* mad inventor, Emmett Brown, and even has a loveable dog, called Rocket. I think I'm going to like it here.

River deep, mountain high

The Catskills are made up of five main counties, abutted by the Hudson river to the east: Ulster, Greene, Sullivan, Delaware and Schoharie, which encompass 700,000 acres of protected forest and parkland, and a range of mountains which are an extension of the Appalachians. Inhabited since the late 17th century, when the Dutch arrived, theories abound as to what inspired the region's name (catskill means 'cat's creek' in Dutch). These include the **mountain lions** which used to roam the area – though today they're extinct, thanks to extensive hunting by the settlers.

Ulster County sits in the Hudson River Valley, in the mountains' foothills. The area's long been popular in winter, thanks to its main ski resorts Belleayre, Hunter and Windham, and its summer pursuits, such as

fly-fishing, kayaking and tubing the rapids on nearby river tributary Esopus Creek. There's also hiking and biking, which are now keeping hotels open year 'round. Tourism to the Catskills as a whole is booming, but so is relocation. "A lot of people have migrated from the city to open businesses," explains local guide Fran DePetrillo. "There are techpreneurs, artists, creatives – the quality of life is better here, and it's cheaper.

The forests and parks of the Catskills region are home to some pretty cool wildlife, from black bears to bobcats, white-tailed deer to all manner of different birds.

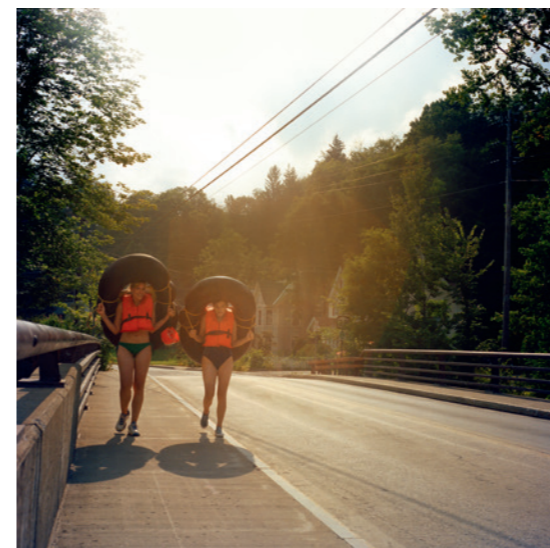
We've got great bars and restaurants, a developing craft beer and cider scene, and there's just so much open space, people feel like they can really breathe."

Hip replacement

We head to Phoenicia, the poster town, if ever there was one, for the Catskills' rebirth from home to the 1950s, largely Jewish vacation resorts which gave the area the nickname 'Borscht Belt' (including Kutcher's, the inspiration for *Dirty Dancing's* Kellerman's) to smart hipster haven. Now, the in-crowd kip at The Graham & Co, a stylish new boutique hotel decorated in faux log-cabin chic, sip locally brewed craft beer at self-styled 'farm-to-table gastropub' Tavern 214, and brunch on corned beef hash at the slick, airy Phoenicia Diner.

It's no coincidence that most of these places are owned or run by New Yorkers, many of whom are familiar with the area,

THE GREAT OUTDOORS: [clockwise from here] The Catskills; get the full experience in a log cabin; the area is also great for watersports



Photograph by (main) Michael Marquand/Getty; (cabin) Simsa Kukic/Getty; (road) Kevin Trageser/Getty

having holidayed here as kids. That includes former music photographer Laura Levine, who's shot everyone from Madonna to Lou Reed, and who now owns Mystery Spot Antiques in downtown Phoenicia. "I was born in Brooklyn, but my parents built a cabin up here," she tells me in her fabulously eclectic store, which features counters overflowing with vintage vinyl, unsettling-looking, limb-less plastic dolls, lurex shirts, and black and white prints of Levine's own work.

"In the 1980s, I stayed there with a group of friends for a long weekend and by the end of it, we had all decided that we wanted to buy proper houses here," she expands. "Gradually, I went from just coming up some weekends, to all summer, then I finally moved here full time last year. People fall under its spell; there's a real sense of community, and of course you're so much closer to nature. There's a lot of young people who are coming up here from the city to open their own independent businesses now, because they just can't afford to do that in New York city."

The sentiment is echoed by 26-year-old Simone Lecun, who serves me a delicious plate of wood-grilled octopus with homemade chorizo and chilli, at the quirky **Peekamoose restaurant** in nearby Pine Hill. "I see tattoos, piercings, skinny jeans and man buns everywhere now!" she laughs, having recently moved here herself from Brooklyn – the final straw, she explains, was her rent rising nearly a third over the past eight months. "Now my husband and I have a two-bedroom house with views over the valley, and go hiking every weekend."

Taking the long view

Ah yes, the great outdoors; it's the main reason people come here, and despite not being particularly outdoorsy ourselves, my boyfriend and I are determined to get into the Catskills spirit. We start small, first heading across the impressive, 212ft high Walkway Over the Hudson, a 19th century former rail bridge which connects Ulster County with Columbia County, and the town of Hyde Park, where Franklin D Roosevelt once lived. From the middle of the bridge, we look out over the wide, still, petrol-blue waters, the emerald, forested plains on either side of them stretching out for miles towards the peaks in the far distance.

Its views like this which inspired

Serving an inventive menu of local food from the farmers and artisans of the Catskills region, this restaurant has been a foodie mainstay for almost 15 years.

the 19th century romantic art movement known as the Hudson River School, largely spearheaded by Lancashire-born painter and architect Thomas Cole.

Driving over into Greene County, we visit his house and studio, now a museum, in the small town of Catskill. Set on two acres of land on a hillside, it offers breath-taking views across the Hudson River valley; no wonder he was so inspired to create the vast, sweeping canvases which portray local landmarks. There are several of Kaaterskill Falls, a gushing, tumbling two-level waterfall, which we later hike around. The lovely trail starts at the top, and as it's another hot day, we welcome the mild drenching we get at the bottom. Nearby is the imaginatively named North-South Lake, where you can camp, swim, hike and fish; a short walk up behind the water takes us to the edge of an escarpment where we can see right across five counties.

Despite being high summer, the area doesn't feel particularly crowded or touristy. Both Catskill, where we have lunch, and the tiny town of Tannersville, near where we stop overnight, are perfect examples of old-timey Americana mixed with modernity, their main streets lined with antique shops, independent boutiques, rustic cafés and recently opened wineries. There's still a decent amount of artsy quirkiness here; Tannersville is known as the 'painted village' due to the bright colours of its buildings, while Catskill has a yearly display of cat statues (catues?) decorated by different local artists which are then auctioned for charity. ▲





WATER FEATURE: One of the many waterfalls nestled in the Catskill Mountains. Hiking to the region's remote parts is a must for visitors

► The cabin in the woods

But all this still feels too urban. It's time to go full nature. It's time to go... camping. The next day, we set off for Roscoe, in Sullivan County, known, catchily, as Trout Town, thanks to its 2008 award for being the best place to catch the freshwater fish in the country. Here, there's also hunting and shooting a-plenty, although we don't plan to do much (ok, any) of this.

To get there, we cross into Delaware County, passing vast expanses of farmland, storybook red barns, silver 1950s-style diners, and driving alongside babbling creeks. It feels like we've headed back into the past. The roads are so empty that sometimes we're the only car for miles, slowing for the

Built in a former firehouse, Roscoe Brewery launched its flagship brew – Trout Town Amber Ale – in 2013, but now makes ten different beers, from punchy IPAs to malty barley wines.

occasional family of deer to cross. Mountains loom around us; it feels like the America of the movies. This was also big mill country – everything

from grain to lumber was processed here, until the arrival of the railroads in the 1860s. Today, most of these tracks are out of use, but 'rail trails' are popular, where you can walk along the old routes.

We arrive at the Roscoe Campsite in the mid-afternoon, the sun still high in the sky and dappling through the trees, and – as a concession to my tent-phobic boyfriend – we're staying in a little log cabin. It's delightfully cute, if bereft of a shower (yes, we still have to brave a communal shower block) but it really feels as if we've left civilisation largely behind. Thankfully, only a five-minute drive up the road, past several guns and ammo stores, is the **Roscoe Brewery**, staffed by grizzly men whose beards reach down to their chests – and this time, not in a hipster way.

After sampling some of its finest brews, it's back to the cabin for a slightly restless sleep (the countryside makes unsettling noises, it transpires), but we wake up to another scorching day. It feels like time to do some more communing with nature.

First, we head to the Lander River Rafting Centre. This stretch of the Delaware river includes Skinners Falls, a series of exciting-looking rapids which I immediately decide look quite dangerous. With this in mind, I downgrade our plans from doing some kayaking to watching other people doing it instead. Which is just as much fun, actually, if you do it with your feet in the river while sipping on a beer.

Later, we head to the Catskill State Park – those 700,000 protected acres of land – which is criss-crossed by picturesque trails. We're dive-bombed by butterflies, and spot the occasional kingfisher gliding gracefully over a pond, though I am finding it hard to completely relax and take it all in as apparently the park is also home to several hundred black bears. However, the hike passes uneventfully, and then it's time for one last stop-off.

We're ending our trip almost where we began, a few miles down the road from Woodstock, at the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts. This was built eight years ago on the actual site of the festival, and houses a museum with artefacts and footage from the time leading up to those three seminal days in 1969, as well as a concert hall.

We wander around gazing at vintage VW camper vans daubed with psychedelic graffiti, listen to electrifying performances by Jimi Hendrix, Santana and The Who, and watch documentary clips outlining the politics, fashion, and history of the era. Afterwards, I ask who has played here in recent years, and I'm told performers include Journey, the Doobie Brothers, Joan Jett – and, er, Pitbull. It aptly seems to encapsulate the way the Catskills mixes retro with modern – and after a week here, I just can't help but love its vibe. 

GETTING THERE

TAP Portugal flies from London to JFK via Lisbon from £411 return; book via flytap.com. Rooms at Emerson Resort and Spa, Mount Tremper: start from \$155/£126 per night, emersonresort.com. Rooms at Fairlawn Inn, Hunter, start from \$129/£104 per night, fairlawninn.com. For details on the Rosco Campsite, see roscoecampsite.com. For more information on visiting the Catskills, see visitthecatskills.com