



# A new generation of hoteliers revives Catskills tourism

*Once home to hundreds of swanky resorts, the Catskills is now seeing a boom in design-friendly, hip hotels*

By **lisaselindavis** | Jun 26, 2018, 9:57am EDT



Scribners Catskill Lodge | Nico Schinco

Part of

**The Curbed guide to the Hudson Valley and the Catskills**

In 2016, photographer Marisa Scheinfeld released *The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America's Jewish Vacationland*, a collection of ghostly photos of the western Catskills that seemed to capture the area's fate. Once-glorious resorts that populated the mountainous region north and west of New York City in the middle of the last century—the Catskills' golden age—were now decayed carcasses littering the landscape, with lonely lounge chairs abandoned next to parched Olympic-sized pools.

But a funny thing has happened on the way to the Catskills: Hoteliers started to take notice of the area again. Amid the Catskills' 35 high peaks and nearly 6,000 square miles—which include waterfalls, ice caves, rocky cliffs, and fly-fishing spots—several of those downtrodden resorts have been reborn or revamped, and shuttered or ailing smaller motels, hotels, guesthouses, and inns—not to mention a major casino complex—have recently opened, or are just about to.

“The Catskills are experiencing an incredible renaissance in the travel and tourism market,” says Roberta Byron-

Lockwood, president of the Sullivan Catskills Visitors Association. Each of the major Catskills counties—Ulster, Delaware, Sullivan, and Greene—has noted increases in tourism. Tourist spending rose to \$1.23 million in 2016 from \$1.12 million in 2014.

It could be a function of the improving economy, the increasing cost of air travel, or the pure hell of New York City airports. It could be the rise of telecommuting, allowing New Yorkers, who make up the bulk of tourists, to venture upstate midweek. Whatever the reasons, as Sims Foster, a native Catskills resident and co-owner of four (and soon to be more) small Catskills hotels, says: “There is promise and energy and momentum, and we feel really good about it.”

### **The golden and silver age of the Catskills**

In the 19th century, there were four major Catskills mountain houses, palatial getaways for wealthy New Yorkers escaping the city for health or for the views that inspired the Hudson River School of art. Only one of these, Winter Clove Inn in Greene County, remains: a 19th-century, 50-room inn with its dance hall and rickety bowling alley intact, filled with delightfully unfussy and un-updated decor (a certain reporter got

married there a decade ago, choosing it precisely for its unfussiness).



Crowded pool at Tony Leone's Resort in the Catskills. | Photo by Eric Bard/Corbis via Getty Images



Guests staying at the Jolly House Motel assemble in front of the entrance sign. | Photo by Eric Bard/Corbis via Getty Images



The others fell out of favor when the wealthy started venturing farther north, and by the mid-20th century, most had closed; the most famous one, the Catskill Mountain House, was bought by the state and burned in 1963. The remains of others are open to visitors.

As New York City expanded and changed demographically, the Catskills were largely divided up into ethnic white regions—the Irish Alps, the Italian Alps, and the Jewish Alps, aka the Borscht Belt, among them—and they became tremendously popular for the city’s expanding middle classes. By the 1950s, there were more than 500 hotels and 2,500 “bungalow colonies,” or small resorts that began when farmers rented rooms, then separate cottages, to summer boarders, starting in the early 20th century.

The resorts and the bungalow colonies offered similar things: pools, Saturday evening entertainment, sometimes meals. (They also offered those groups the opportunity to vacation with their peers without facing discrimination, a common problem for Jewish New Yorkers of the time, for example.) But bungalows were tiny and affordable to lower- and middle-class New Yorkers, and resorts offered more luxurious accommodations (though nowhere near as luxurious as

the mountain houses had—those were built for a different demographic altogether).

But as Jews and other ethnic whites assimilated, they didn't require getaways of their own; financial troubles plagued some of the resorts, and cheaper airfare allowed travelers to venture elsewhere. By the 1970s, many of these once-glittering Catskills resorts were no longer, as the area entered a long period of decline. (Poverty rates in Sullivan County, for instance, are still among the highest in the state.)

### **The new new Catskills**

But the hospitality business is on a certifiable upswing. The number of visitors to Greene County increased 4.2 percent in 2016. The number of hotel rooms in Sullivan County has increased 25 percent in the past few years, according to Byron-Lockwood, and tourism dollars in the county have gone up 20 percent since 2009, and 8 percent in 2016, the most recent data available. New attractions and hotels are expected to further contribute to the area's boom. "We anticipate that will continue to grow with new hotel inventory coming on board," she says.

The most original (and adorable) of that new inventory is **Think Big! A Tiny House Resort**, a collection of four (soon to be nine) modern tiny houses perched along Catskill Creek in South Cairo, New York, where rates range from \$175 to \$325 per night. The resort was created by Bob Malkin, who once owned Manhattan's Think Big! store (longtime New Yorkers will recall the enormous pencil that used to sit on West Broadway). Several of those relics, including an enormous armchair, a giant pickle, and a huge chicken, now reside at the 28-acre resort, which was funded in part by selling that Soho property in 2017. There is a dog wash, called the Laundermutt; a country store in a tiny house of its own; some pet ducks; a waterfall and fire pits and grills—and lots of **five-star reviews**. Malkin says visitors have referred to it as “a new type of bungalow colony.” That’s something he appreciates, considering he grew up going to a place called “Discount Bungalow Colony” himself, a refuge from his unhappy Brooklyn childhood, where he was teased mercilessly. “I think it saved my life,” he says. “I felt like crap about myself in Brooklyn, but in the bungalow colony I didn’t.”





A Tiny House Resort. | Courtesy of A Tiny House Resort

Indeed, many new hoteliers expressed similar desires to honor the area's history and bring it into the modern area. "There is a lot of nostalgia and rebranding to meet the needs of today's traveler," says Byron-Lockwood. "We're conscious of where our food is coming from and what the experiences are—not just, 'Am I going to get a nice hotel room?'"

Each of the owners, presiding over the smallest guesthouse to the grandest resort, seems to feel a sense of purpose, seeing their property as part of the Catskills' larger rebound. Such is the case for Sims Foster, co-

founder (along with his wife, Kirsten) of Foster Supply Hospitality, which renovated four properties in western Sullivan County. Foster, who was once the general manager of the now-defunct Meatpacking District nightclub Lotus, grew up in Sullivan County's Livingston Manor during what he called the region's "darker, desolate period," though he luxuriated in the beauty and the small-town friendliness. After the couple married, "We were drawn back because we really felt a commitment to the area and thought that we could play a part in helping to evolve it into the next chapter," he says.

That chapter includes **the Arnold House**, an 11- (soon to be 13-) room inn in Livingston Manor with a spa and barn, which opened in 2013; the **North Branch Inn**, a 14-room inn with bar and restaurant that opened in 2015 in North Branch; **Nine River Road**, an eight-room inn opened in 2016 along the Delaware River in Callicoon; and **the DeBruce**, where visitors can get a nine-course tasting menu, opened in Livingston Manor in 2017. Rooms range from \$129 to \$659, depending on the property.



Aerial view of the Red Rose Motel & Tavern. | Noah Kalina

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The dining room at the Red Rose Motel & Tavern. | Courtesy of Red Rose Motel & Tavern

Nearby, in the town of Roscoe, the **Red Rose Motel & Tavern**, a seven-room inn, is set to open this summer (the tavern, serving local beer, wine, and cider, is already open). Kris Kiger, an executive creative director of design for an interactive design company, and her husband, J.P. Frenza, director of strategic programs for a tech firm, were longtime weekenders in the area, but never went into the Red Rose because it was usually closed. “We kept driving by and saying, ‘We wish someone would buy it and restore it because it looks really interesting,’” Kiger says. “J.P. turned to me one day and said, ‘Why don’t *we* do it?’”

They had restored old houses in Brooklyn and had a clear sense of their three-part mission: “We wanted to do something good for the community that we loved,” says Kiger. “We wanted to work with likeminded people, and we wanted to have some fun. It was a pretty simple brief.”

In 2016, they purchased the property, drafted the couple behind the blog **Escape Brooklyn** to help them with marketing and social media, and recruited innkeeper Melissa Kaweck, who’d worked for years at the East Village’s Cafe Mogador. Kiger and Frenza have been working on it ever since. “We love that the place almost

has a soul to it,” Kiger says. Unlike the high-modern aesthetic common to many of these new establishments, the Red Rose has a look Kiger calls “not fancy but comfortable, eclectic, and layered. We have a paint-by-numbers wall in the front lobby and weather-worn leather chairs.” The rooms, when they’re done, will be in the \$200 range. When asked the cost of renovation, Kiger replied: “A lot more than we had hoped for.”

Marc Chodock, managing partner of **Scribner’s Catskill Lodge**, in Hunter, also extensively renovated an ailing 1960s lodge, which he purchased in 2015, hoping to attract what his website describes as a “new generation of urban explorers.”





The library at Scribner's Catskill Lodge. | Nicole Franzen

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A bungalow king room at Scribner's Catskill Lodge. | Emma Tuccillo

Chodock worked for six years for a private equity firm, and noticed both the return on investment in the hospitality field and how certain New Yorkers were bringing their branding and design skills north with them. “You could see what the reaction was and the rates you were able to achieve were fairly decent,” he says.

**The Graham & Co.**, a boutique hotel (or, really, a refurbished motel), which offers “togetherness” and free bikes among its amenities, was one such spot. It opened in 2013 with a rough-hewn urban look fairly common in these next-generation Catskills accommodations—white, reclaimed wood; polished concrete; bare Edison bulbs—and quickly scored plenty of press and a devoted following.

He mentioned Montauk as a point of reference: “These young professionals are spending crazy amounts of money on subpar destinations.” His goal was to create a different kind of scene—one with a warm, modern aesthetic; custom furniture; and local food (try the stinging-nettle bucatini or the fiddlehead ferns). Rooms range from \$145 midweek to \$295 on the weekends—less than the Hamptons, with less traffic and fewer celebrities to contend with.

Among those with higher rates, and in search of a different kind of traveler, is the \$165 million **Yo1 Wellness Center**, a 350,000-square-foot “luxury nature cure” retreat with 131 rooms on the site of the old Borscht Belt resort Kutsher’s, which closed in 2013. Nearby is **Resorts World Catskills**, a \$1.2 billion property made possible by the **New York Casino Gambling Amendment** in 2013. Gov. Andrew Cuomo says the project will “create over 1,500 jobs in New York’s Catskills Region” and “Will Attract 4 Million Visitors Per Year,” according to a **press release**. (Resorts World’s own **fact sheet** predicts an employment number more than 1,400.)

Resorts World totals 1.6 million square feet, with five gaming areas, 2,150 slot machines, 150 live table games, and private gaming salons; the resort also has a 24-hour diner and a “beach pool bar”; a family-friendly waterpark and lodge will open next year. In what its PR manager Talya Shlang calls “an ode to the old property,” Resorts World has kept the golf course, known as “The Monster,” but will give it a major facelift in 2019. “We want to look to our roots and still be new, relevant, and modern,” she says.

Despite reports that things are not going as well as planned (heck, it's only been open since May), Shlang is effusive (as it is her job to be). "Every day the crowds get larger," she says. "It's only going to get better."

## **Sustainable Catskills?**

All this good travel news doesn't mean that the Catskills' challenges have faded. The Tiny House Resort is surrounded by abandoned motels, and while there's no database of abandoned hospitality properties, there are plenty on the market in Ulster and Sullivan counties. One could look at that as a sign of how far the Catskills still have to go, or as untapped potential. Getting up there is still a challenge for carless and bus-averse New Yorkers, and Chodock says finding the talent to operate these properties is still a conundrum.

While the economic impact of small projects is harder to assess, the NYS gambling amendment mandated that state revenue from Resorts World, and other New York casinos, be returned to localities. Per the NYS Department of Labor, "Ten percent of the state's tax revenue from the casino will be split between the town of Thompson and Sullivan County for hosting the facility. Columbia, Delaware, Greene, Orange and Ulster counties will share 10 percent, and the remaining 80

percent of revenue will be distributed statewide to support public education and provide tax relief to New Yorkers.”

Many people point out that there is nothing new about what these hoteliers are doing. They may have a different aesthetic sense, but plenty of people before them have set their sights on the Catskills hotel business. **Kate's Lazy Meadow**, co-owned by Kate Pierson of the B-52s, has been offering hipster getaways since 2004, as has the lavishly designed **Roxbury Motel**. The **Spruceton Inn**, located in a rural area near Hunter Mountain, opened in 2014.

“What’s different now is momentum,” Byron-Lockwood says, and everyone I spoke with agreed. The new hotel owners note their connections to many other local businesses, from bus companies to distilleries to farms; they are weaving a web of sustainable support.

And even now, there are times when things are so bustling that hotel owners have to call up their competitors and ask them to handle the overflow. “There is still more demand than supply,” says Kiger. “There’s more than enough to go around.”



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