

A Stress-Free Summer Weekend in the Catskills

For a long country weekend packed with outdoor pursuits, great food and beer and no snootiness, follow our 3-day guide to New York's western Catskills.



James Gulliver Hancock
JAMES GULLIVER HANCOCK

By Elizabeth Dunn

IF YOU'VE HEARD of Sullivan County, it's probably for its "Borscht Belt" days: the post-World War II decades immortalized in the film "Dirty Dancing," when sprawling, country club-style resorts carpeted the lonely western foothills of New York's Catskill mountain range. In the 1960s, the region was said to have more hotel rooms than any other county in America, but by the time Baby and Johnny mamboed into theaters in 1987, the resorts had all gone—doomed, in large part, by air travel's growing viability as an affordable middle-class luxury. With them went the region's cachet as a vacation spot. Recently, however, after a long hibernation, the western Catskills has come alive again as a weekend retreat for New Yorkers with a yen for the great outdoors. While Sullivan County lacks the moneyed polish of other destinations within an easy drive of New York City—like Columbia County across the Hudson River, or Massachusetts's Berkshire Mountains—its new boutique hotels, shops and restaurants intriguingly share the landscape with ancient tackle shops, tractor-

repair businesses and abandoned farmhouses. To the creative types beginning to flock here, that unvarnished local character is part of the appeal. Another serious draw: the shallow, sandy-bottom streams that allowed the area to give birth to American dry fly fishing in the 19th century, and still produce world-class trout fishing today. Sullivan County, a roughly two-hour drive from New York City, encompasses almost 1,000 square miles, too much to cover in a single weekend (even a long one), so our itinerary focuses on the lush Delaware Valley, which forms the county's western edge, and the border of the protected land up north that comprises the Catskill Forest Preserve, where outdoor pursuits meet small-town charm.

Day One: Friday

5 p.m. Arrive by car in Livingston Manor (pop: 1,200), a straight shot from New York City up Route 17, the drab-but-efficient highway bisecting Sullivan County (from this point on, back roads only for you). Stylish accommodations are still sparse in these parts but exceptions include the four small inns opened since 2014 by fifth-generation Livingston Manorite Sims Foster and his wife, Kirsten. Their latest project is the DeBruce, a 19th-century boardinghouse recently refurbished into an elegant 14-room country inn. You might be tempted to collapse for the evening in front of one of the property's original fieldstone fireplaces. For now, though, drop your bags. It's time to get a beer. From \$469 per night on weekends, thedebruce.com

6 p.m. Head down DeBruce Road for about five minutes until it tees into Old Route 17. Hang a right, and soon a cherry-red barn with solar panels on the roof will appear on your right-hand side. Outside, there's a grain silo painted with an angry raccoon. This is Catskill Brewery, where you'll find locals meeting up for a post-work sharpener at a small bar nestled amid pipes and fermentation tanks on the brewery's production floor. If you're in an experimental mood, opt for a 5-beer tasting flight to try the likes of Freak Tractor (a wild ale) and Eye of Newt (a Flanders-style red ale). 672 Old Rte. 17, catskillbrewery.com

7 p.m. Two minutes by car from the brewery is the short strip of road that constitutes downtown Livingston Manor: "Small town, big backyard," as the sign at the foot of Main Street reads. Along the main drag, you'll find Upstream Wines & Spirits, specializing in biodynamic wines (34 Main St.), Will

drag, you'll find Upstream Wines & Spirits, specializing in biodynamic wines (34 Main St.), Will Hardware, one of New York state's oldest continuously operating hardware stores (61 Main St.) and nothing in the way of chain stores. Pop into Morgan Outdoors, a shop which stocks both hiking boots and local handmade pottery, and ask for owner Lisa Lyons to get the inside scoop on trail conditions. The shop also rents hiking equipment, from walking poles to child carriers, by the day. 46 Main St.

7:30 p.m. Across the street is the Kaatskeller. By this time on a Friday, it will look like half of Brooklyn emptied out into the picnic tables that fill the restaurant's front yard. An outdoor oven turns out wood-fired pizzas like the Wild One, topped with wild boar pepperoni and Harissa-spiked San Marzano tomatoes. After dinner, wander upstairs to the Kaatskeller's bar, which channels 1970s rec-room style with a vintage cocktail cabinet, orange Naugahyde bar stools and the sound of Bob Dylan warbling through the air. The Hemlock Negroni—who knew hemlock was potable?—makes for a good nightcap. 39 Main St., thekaatskeller.com

Day Two: Saturday

8:30 a.m. Head along Old Route 17, a scenic drive that runs parallel to the highway and rolls gently over the Catskill foothills, to the nearby town of Roscoe (pop: 540), self-styled as "Trout Town USA." On the sleepy main drag, Stewart Avenue, worn facades announce three fishing-supply shops, a gun store and a couple of restaurants that look like relics of the Johnson administration. A local roaster called Java Love opened a seasonal outpost here in a tiny log cabin that strongly recalls a child's Lincoln Logs creation. Grab a coffee and pastries from the shop's limited selection. 44 Stewart Ave., javaloveroasters.com

9 a.m. To try your hand at fly fishing (it's harder than it looks), book a local guide. Phil Eggleton, who runs Trout Town Adventures with his son Dave, has been fishing these waters since the 1970s, and arrives equipped with must-have gear like waders and rods, plus a lifetime's knowledge of the best local spots. If the rivers are too low for good fishing, as happens later in the summer, he can take you out for a paddle or a hike instead. trouttownadventuresandguideservice.com

12 p.m. Drive five minutes west along Old Route 17 for a lunch of steak and Guinness pie or ricotta toasts at the Red Rose Motel + Tavern, a defunct 1930s-era roadside lodging that has recently been refurbished by a professional antique picker. The tavern abounds with bric-a-brac, like vintage sporting magazines and an old-timey cash register. 21677 County Highway 17, theredrosemotel.com

2 p.m. Head 30 minutes out of town along roads that switch from pavement to red clay to reach Catskill Pheasantry & Clays, a no-frills bird hunting club. In the winter, during hunting season, it organizes pheasant and partridge hunts; in summer, you can shoot sporting clays at its large compound in the foothills (374 Neer Road, Long Eddy, catskillpheasantry.com). If you're traveling with kids, a family-friendly alternative is to visit Buck Brook Alpacas, a family-owned farm where a herd of long-lashed alpacas are bred for the show ring, as well as their silky fleece. 99 Bestenheider Rd., buckbrookalpacas.com

4 p.m. Back in Roscoe, pay a visit to Roscoe Beer Co., a five-year-old operation with award-winning beers (like its dark, strong Two Headed Stout) and an outdoor beer garden boasting a life-size version of Jenga. (145 Rockland Road, Roscoe, roscoebeercompany.com). Nearby, you'll also find Prohibition Distillery, located in Roscoe's former firehouse. Take a tour of the distilling process or just hit the tasting room; try their Bootlegger Bourbon, made from 100% local corn. 10 Union St., Roscoe, prohibitiondistillery.com

6 p.m. Head back to the DeBruce, where Saturday nights bring a hyperlocal nine-course tasting menu—it's included with the price of your room—served in a small dining room with mountain views. Chef Aksel Theilkuhl forages on the property for esoteric greens and wild berries to complement products from nearby farms. After dinner, nick the inn's Scrabble set and move downstairs to the tavern for a drink or two in front of the fire. Day Three: Sunday

10 a.m. Sleep in, then hit the road for the hourlong drive to the little town of Narrowsburg (pop: 430), on the Delaware River. You'll be stopping for brunch on the way, but if coffee can't wait, Brandenburg Bakery

offers a strong cup that's especially good with fresh-baked turnovers—a house specialty (66 Main St., Livingston Manor, brandenburgbakery.com). Halfway along the route you'll find Henning's Local; pay no attention to its odd location above a lonely Mobil station. Chef and owner Henning Nordanger once cooked as private chef for the King of Norway, and the restaurant serves excellent, Norwegian-inflected, farm-to-table brunch cuisine, like smoked trout with blinis. 6 Old County Road, Cohecton, henningslocal.com

1 p.m. Arrive at Skinners Falls, a set of gentle Delaware River rapids on the outskirts of Narrowsburg where you can swim and sun on the rocks. Landers River Trips, a family-owned outfitter since 1955, provides inner tubes on which to take unlimited spills down the falls (\$10). Arrive earlier (and call ahead) if you want to use one to float 5 miles downstream to Narrowsburg (\$26)—a journey that takes about 5 hours on the lazy river. landersrivertrips.com

4:30 p.m. Towel off and head 10 minutes south on Route 97 to Narrowsburg, a town lined with charming storefronts and restaurants—plus a post office that looks like a pristine 1970s set piece—all within a three-minute walk on Bridge Street. At One Grand Books the stock revolves around a curated selection of “desert island books” volunteered by celebs and thinkers ranging from Bill Gates to Tilda Swinton (60 Main St., Narrowsburg, onegrandbooks.com). Hit up Nest (15 Main St, nest-store.com) and MayerWasner (55 Main St, mayerwasner.com) for your stump coffee tables and gauzy caftans, respectively. Sunny's Pop (76 Main Street, sunnys-pop.com) is a seasonal pop-up from Sunrise Ruffalo—who lives nearby with her husband, the actor Mark Ruffalo—that features handpicked curiosities, such as free-form ceramic mushrooms and decorative animal skulls. 6 p.m. You have two first-rate options for an early dinner. For an ace charcuterie board and sourdough pies wood-fired in an authentic Neapolitan oven, head to the Laundrette, a cleverly repurposed laundromat down by the banks of the Delaware. The menu is chockablock with local products, from cheeses to meats to wine (20 Fifth St., thelaundrette.xyz). At the Heron, Sullivan County's most celebrated farm-to-table joint, everything is good, but the fried chicken is superb. 40 Main Street, theheronrestaurant.com

8:30 p.m. Head back toward Livingston Manor. Shortly

before reaching town, you'll pass the Arnold House, a sister property to the DeBruce. The tavern here has a pool table, a working jukebox and an ardent local following; Sullivan County shuts down early, especially on Sunday nights, but this is a solid option for one last drink. 839 Shandee Rd., Livingston Manor, thearnoldhouse.com

Day Four: Monday

8:30 a.m. You can't leave the Catskills without taking a hike. After an early breakfast at the DeBruce, ask for a late checkout, then pop down to Main Street Farm, a combination farm shop and gourmet store, for made-to-order sandwiches. Try the Beaverkill, which features house-smoked trout on soft ciabatta bread. 36 Main St., mainstreetfarm.com

10 a.m. Retrace your steps back up DeBruce Road and you have several hiking options. For sweeping views and a bit of a workout, head for Red Hill Fire Tower. It's a good 40-minute drive to the trail head, then about an hour's easy climb on foot to the summit. There, you can ascend a 60-foot observation tower for a bird's-eye view of the region. For less of a commitment, there are several shorter, flatter trails, such as the Frick Pond Loop, in the forest off Mongaup Road, about 6 miles along DeBruce Road from Livingston Manor. 3 p.m. On the way back toward New York City, stop at Bethel Woods Center for the Arts, on the site where Woodstock took place almost 50 years ago. Now, a permanent amphitheater draws acts like Lynyrd Skynyrd and Dierks Bentley in summer; a small museum is devoted to "telling the story of the Sixties," complete with artifacts from the period, like a psychedelic school bus and protest banners. Wander the rambling fields where the original concert was held, taking a few final moments to recharge in the peace and quiet of this untouched stretch of countryside. Flower power, indeed. 200 Hurd Rd., Bethel, bethelwoodscenter.org