

A photograph of a field of tall grasses, likely a meadow or prairie, during the golden hour. The grasses are a mix of green and brown, with some seed heads visible. In the center of the frame, a single white flower with many small blossoms is in focus. Overlaid on the image is the word "ESCA" in large, bold, yellow, sans-serif capital letters. The letters are semi-transparent, allowing the background to be seen through them. The overall mood is peaceful and natural.

ESCA

P



TO THE MOUNTAINS

Known for their sprawling resorts half a century ago, the Catskills in upstate New York are now attracting city slickers with refurbished boutique hotels and back-to-nature experiences

*Words by Amy Thomas Photography by Heidi's Bridge*



## N

ew York City. As much as people are drawn to it – residents and tourists alike – they also need an escape. The non-stop hustle and bustle can be overwhelming unless tempered by purer pleasures. Simple things like grassy fields, hiking trails and apples plucked from the tree.

Enter the Catskill Mountains. Some 220km northwest of the city, under three hours by car, Catskill Park, spread across four counties, is home to a 116,000ha parcel of state-protected Forest Preserve. You can trek through endless oak and fir woods to towering waterfalls, like the two-tiered, 79m Kaaterskill Falls near the town of Hunter; go fly fishing for rainbow trout and smallmouth bass in the Delaware River; and pick peaches and sip fresh cider at the surrounding bountiful farms and orchards. For much of the 20th century, the escape New Yorkers sought was found here.

In fact, one of the country's earliest resorts was Catskill Mountain House, which opened in 1824, and was visited by the city's elite as well as three United States presidents – Ulysses S Grant, Chester A Arthur and Teddy Roosevelt. Hundreds of sprawling resorts followed, each offering grand amenities from Olympic-sized pools and golf clubs to headlining comedians and big-band entertainment. The area's glory days arrived in the 1920s and lasted through the '60s, when much of New York City's Jewish community vacationed there, earning it nicknames like the Borscht Belt and the Jewish Alps.

But by the 1970s, the area had fallen out of favour, the

allure of vacationing further afield too strong to resist as air travel became cheaper and more prevalent. After all, why drive upstate when you could jet off to Europe or a tropical island?

Now, though, things are coming full circle. Both city folk and international travellers are rediscovering the Catskills' simple and accessible pleasures and beauty, and there's a new generation of resorts catering to the returning crowds. What's notable, however, about these fresh hotel arrivals is that they're quite different to their forebears, combining that rustic charm of old with a decidedly more urbane sensibility.

"I've been very surprised at how quickly it's caught on and how many people are coming to the Catskills for the first time," says Marc Chodock, co-founder and managing partner of Scribner's Catskill Lodge, which opened in one of the abandoned inns in Hunter, in the



**Clockwise from left** Scribner's Catskill Lodge sits on the site of a previously abandoned inn; the fireplace at North Branch Inn







**Clockwise from below** Arnold House, the sister property of North Branch Inn; one of the rooms at Arnold House; The DeBruce



northeast region, in late 2016. When he and his previous partner took over the defunct space, they remodelled it with a modern mountain aesthetic that balances sophistication and rusticity. Each of the 38 rooms features custom furniture and vintage rugs; some have potbelly stoves and sleeping lofts, and many have small decks where you can enjoy a seat in an Adirondack chair and take in the fresh air and view of Hunter Mountain, the most popular ski resort in the area, which lies just across the street.

Chodock himself, a management consultant and private equity investor before opening Scribner's, was charmed by the Catskills when he first started exploring it. "What I love about the Catskills is that [they are] a year-round destination. There's sunbathing in the summer, leaf peeping in the fall; it's great to go skiing or snowshoeing in the winter and biking in the spring."



"The main thing we wanted was a true connection to a place where we could be inspired daily by the beauty of our surroundings"





And yet for all that the area had to offer, he also noticed there weren't any particularly stylish places to stay. "You could see the demand far exceeded what was offered," says Chodock, who now splits his time between the city and Hunter, catering to a broad base of guests, from groups of friends to young families looking for a fun and relaxing getaway.

Sims Foster, who was born and raised in the Catskills and worked in hospitality out of Manhattan for 20 years, saw the same opportunity to connect with people who were curious to explore the area. Since 2014, he and his wife, Kirsten Harlow Foster, have opened not one, but four inns across the towns of Livingston Manor, North Branch and Callicoon in the southwestern pocket of the Catskills. "The visitors finding us, and the area, have a real sense of adventure," he says. "We rarely get the pragmatic 'I need a place to stay' kind of guest. They want an experience."

As such, each of their four properties leans into a different vibe to speak to different travelers. The four-year-old Arnold House attracts a younger, lively crowd with its pool table, jukebox and local bands playing in the barn on summer nights. Quiet and romantic, the North Branch Inn offers classic Americana, right down to the working two-lane bowling alley located in the open kitchen. Meanwhile, Nine River Road, which debuted in 2016, backs up to the Delaware River so kayaking, canoeing and simply watching the water is great for groups seeking fun and action. And at the polished new DeBruce, the focus is equally on the outdoors and an unforgettable culinary experience. It is located on 240 hectares with hiking trails, fly fishing and welcoming lounge chairs to sit in and read a book. You could stay and never leave the property, especially since days are capped off with a nine-course dinner created by executive chef Aksel Theilkuhl using ingredients primarily foraged on the grounds.

Clearly the resorts of today differ from those of yesteryear. Not only are they smaller and more intimate, but they channel the creativity of their owners and are in tune with visitors' desire to escape to the country without leaving behind little luxuries.

When Eliza Clark and Tim Trojian started looking to move to the Catskills from Toronto, they had very specific requirements. "The main thing we wanted was a true connection to a



**Clockwise from top left** Nine River Road; the two-lane bowling alley in North Branch Inn's open kitchen, Foxfire Mountain House



**Scribner's Catskill Lodge**  
13 Scribner Hollow Rd, Hunter, scribnerslodge.com

**The Arnold House**  
839 Shandalee Rd, Livingston Manor, thearnoldhouse.com

**The North Branch Inn**  
869 North Branch Rd, North Branch, northbranchinn.com

**Nine River Road**  
9 River Rd, Callicoon, nineriverroad.com

**The DeBruce**  
982 DeBruce Rd, Livingston Manor, thedebruce.com

**Foxfire Mountain House**  
72 Andrew Ln, Mt Tremper, foxfiremountainhouse.com

**Table on Ten**  
52030 NY-10, Bloomville, tableonten.com

**Rolling River**  
25 Cooley Rd, Parksville, rollingriver.net

**Resorts World Catskills**  
888 Resorts World Dr, Monticello, rwcatskills.com

**The Red Rose Motel & Tavern**  
21677 Old Route 17, Roscoe, theredrose.motel.com

place where we could be inspired daily by the beauty of our surroundings," Clark reflects. "We wanted to create a life where we could combine our skills and work together." So Foxfire Mountain House was born.

Located in Mount Tremper, in the shadows of Slide Mountain, the tallest peak in the Catskills, Foxfire brings a bohemian flair to its four hectares, as opposed to Scribner's smart design and the Foster properties' edgy rusticity. The couple spent two years renovating the hundred-year-old inn largely themselves, appointing the 11 guest rooms, three-bedroom cottage and all the common areas with worldly touches like Moroccan tiles and silk sari curtains from India, juxtaposing them with natural elements from the region – everything from butterfly collections to antlers and branches. Clark, a former television producer, focuses on design and Trojian, a chef, runs the kitchen and just-opened outdoor fire pit, where the couple envision guests enjoying fare like oysters and spicy sausages, while hanging out and listening to music on the grounds.

In other parts of the Catskills, the focus on foraging and farm-to-table dining means that some places are restaurants first and inns second. Inez Valk, a former model, moved from Brooklyn to Bloomville in the western Catskills after being drawn to the community she saw and met there on frequent visits. "I wanted to be closer to the independent farms; foraging, preparing and eating fresh, whole foods and working with my hands," she says. Six years ago, she and her then-husband went on to open Table on Ten, a 28-seat restaurant and three-room inn in a refurbished house from the 1880s. Table on Ten became almost a prototype for the kind of business that is currently rolling in the area. "The area has changed since we opened," she acknowledges. "There was almost

nowhere to go. You would have to know the farmer to get your jug of milk. Now more and more farm stands have opened up, and things are more available." Table on Ten is now also a celebrated staple, best known for its brick-oven sourdough pizzas topped with local ingredients such as onion, fennel and goat cheese.

Rolling River, another inn and restaurant further south in Parksville, also adheres to the farm-to-table movement, relying mostly on ingredients like trout from Beaverkill Trout Hatchery and veggies from Willow Wisp Organic Farm. You can eat your locally raised Angus beef burger alfresco near the soothing Little Beaver Kill river or inside a renovated carriage house, surrounded by a rotating exhibition of local art.

The region's idyllic lifestyle has inspired other creative entrepreneurial endeavours. Anna Bern, a former design director of *Vogue*,

**"There's sunbathing in the summer, leaf peeping in the fall; it's great to go skiing or snowshoeing in the winter and biking in the spring"**

opened Nest, a chic boutique of home goods and accessories in Narrowsburg and, more recently, Livingston Manor. The wife of Oscar nominee Mark Ruffalo, Sunrise Coigney, offers a hyper-curated selection of housewares and clothing in her shop, Sunny's Callicoon Pop, in Callicoon. In Roscoe, what was once a firehouse is now Prohibition Distillery, a vodka, gin and whiskey distillery and tasting room, and home





# North Branch Inn





of the award-winning Bootlegger 21 vodka. And a brewery, Upward Brewing Company, will soon open in Livingston Manor.

In short, the community is thriving. “This place was the same as it had been for the past 20 to 30 years,” says Tom Ward, a 43-year-old civil engineer who’s lived in the Catskills his whole life, referring to the businesses that are launching all around him. “[But] there’s been full-on growth for the past five years.”

Not all growth is seen as equal, though. Among the many inns, distilleries, boutiques and bars that are popping up are larger enterprises – like the glitzy new Resorts World Catskills, just off the well-travelled Route 17 in Monticello. An 18-storey hotel and entertainment complex, it has a 9,290m<sup>2</sup> casino surrounded by bars, pools and shops. Although its scale is akin to the resorts of yesteryear – 332 rooms, 20 suites and seven two-storey villas – it’s the antithesis of the more intimate resorts opening elsewhere.

Indeed, Chodock of Scribner’s views the casino as part of a bygone era. “I don’t see most people wanting to stay in a place that big,” he says. “They’re looking for a more boutique experience.”

The resort having just opened, it’s too early to tell if Chodock is right, or what sort of impact the casino will have on the region, but residents like Tom Ward are optimistic. “I think it’s been a positive experience for local people and generated lots of business.”

“We want everyone to succeed – it’s good for the whole

area,” emphasises Christine Monello, who moved up to the Catskills from the city to manage the DeBruce. She echoes Foster’s strategy of shining a positive light on the area and helping everyone thrive. “I never thought it would work long-term if other people weren’t opening up around us,” Foster says. “I fully believe a rising tide floats all boats.”

It seems to be true, as even more inns continue to open. The Red Rose Motel in Roscoe was built in 1938 and sat abandoned for years, but will reopen its seven rooms this spring after a gut renovation. The luxury Kartrite Hotel & Indoor Waterpark is slated to open near the casino in early 2019. And Foster and his team have started on their next project: a 17-room, 12-cabin property on Kenoza Lake, in the same southwestern vicinity as their other properties.

There may still be room to grow until the Catskills have fully returned to their glory days, but they’re well on their way.



**This page**  
North Branch Inn’s rooms are spread out across the property’s three buildings



Singapore Airlines flies to New York via Frankfurt daily. To book a flight, visit [singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com)

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

The Catskills are a great family destination. In addition to tubing down rivers, canoeing across lakes and visiting local farmers’ markets, there’s an array of destinations for some good fun



### Patel’s Kingston Lanes, Kingston

Put on a pair of bowling shoes and have some friendly family competition at these clean and modern lanes. There’s also laser tag and over 30 arcade games. [patelkingstonlanes.com](http://patelkingstonlanes.com)



### Apple Pond Farm, Callicoon

This horse-powered working farm is focused on organic and sustainable energy

initiatives – always the right message to learn. Tour the farm, milk a goat, collect eggs or pet a baby lamb. [applepondfarm.com](http://applepondfarm.com)



### Catskill Mountain Railroad, Kingston

Ride the Peace Train – inspired by Woodstock – or opt for something a little bit spookier, like the Rails of Terror. The thematic rides provide entertainment and great views. [catskillmountainrailroad.com](http://catskillmountainrailroad.com)



### Zoom Flume Water Park, East Durham

Waterslides, tube rides, a giant waterfall and more offer lots of all-ages adventure. [zoomflume.com](http://zoomflume.com)



### Multimedia Kaleidoscope, Mt Tremper

Step inside the world’s largest kaleidoscope – 17m high and 12m wide – and see the mesmerising moving images. Located at the Emerson Resort & Spa. [emersonresort.com](http://emersonresort.com)



### Buck Brook Alpacas, Roscoe

The cute quotient is high at this farm, where you can feed apples to the alpacas and learn about how their soft fleece is turned into fibre. [buckbrookalpacas.com](http://buckbrookalpacas.com)



### Windham Mountain, Windham

The fun at this ski resort doesn’t end with winter. Take a SkyRide to the summit for a picnic or bike ride. [windhammountain.com](http://windhammountain.com)