Catskills: Bringing the Back to Life

The Borscht Belt Gives Way to Yoga Retreats and Boutique Hotels

By Hilary Danailova
The Catskills-style, as manifested in an era of growing interest in small-town, rural communities and the popularity of getaways, is only the latest in a reincarnation of American leisure, Foster Supply Hospitality, see the region's storied heritage.

It was that simple rustic charm that attracted legendary Jewish clothing designer Ralph Lauren to shoot recent advertising campaigns at an 1873 Catskills barn restored by the Brooklyn-based real estate developers and his wife, Sims Foster, survey the Brooklynites sipping locally brewed pints at their Livingston Manor farm-to-table tavern, they see more than weekend patrons. The 40-something pair behind The Arnold Manor farm-to-table tavern, they brewed pints at their Livingston Manor, where the couple is now raising their two young children amid a culturally rich Jewish milieu. "I love the feel of the place—to have that kind of simplic-ity is what resonates the most," says Harlow Foster.

Across the entire Catskills region, the revival is the result of multi-ply market forces as well as the involvement of a new generation of Jews—from the unaffiliated to the ultra-Orthodox—who arrive in the area's first commercial lodging, which boasted American presidents among its guests. Starting around 1900, a steady trickle of Jews left sweltering urban tenements for crisp mountain air. The newcomers bought land, tried farming, discovered the soil wasn't suitable and rented out rooms to make ends meet. At the same time, second-genera-tion immigrant Jews were discovering a New World novelty: the country getaway, facilitated by the auto-mobile. Many could now afford to stay at hotels, but money wasn't the problem; anti-Semitism was.

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Halcyon Days
Who remembers Ping-Pong at Grossinger’s, followed by mah jongg played poolside and rounds of Simon Says?

snapped up cheap properties, giving their Jewish brethren hotels where they were finally welcome. The Catskills, after all, has always been a land of opportunity, not only for recreation but also for resources—locally mined bluestone-paved streets up and down the Eastern seaboard, for example—and even subterfuge. With thick forests, wide lakes and forbiddingly rocky terrain, “it was a perfect place for 1920s gangsters because you could hide there and you could get rid of bodies,” notes Silverman. Jewish gangster Dutch Schultz—né Flegenheimer—famously buried his ill-gotten gains in the frozen hills. “Every spring, people would go up looking for it,” says Silverman, but the loot was never found.

Shady goings-on notwithstanding, Jewish vacationers embraced the region. In 1914, Asher Selig Grossinger paid $450 for a chicken farm in Liberty. Drawing on their background as European innkeepers, the Grossingers purchased more land and soon set what would become the Grossingers purchased more land and were finally welcome. The Catskills, after all, has always been a land of opportunity, not only for recreation but also for resources—locally mined bluestone-paved streets up and down the Eastern seaboard, for example—and even subterfuge. With thick forests, wide lakes and forbiddingly rocky terrain, “it was a perfect place for 1920s gangsters because you could hide there and you could get rid of bodies,” notes Silverman. Jewish gangster Dutch Schultz—né Flegenheimer—famously buried his ill-gotten gains in the frozen hills. “Every spring, people would go up looking for it,” says Silverman, but the loot was never found.

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Once that world declined, many of the region’s hotels were razed; others were abandoned or reborn as glatt kosher resorts to cater to the Orthodox community, like the Raleigh Hotel in South Fallsburg. The former Kutsher’s site is now the $250 million Resorts World in Monticello.

In some ways, the Jewish Catskills has come full circle. Beginning in the 1970s, virgin land and aging bungalow colonies were once again selling cheap, inspiring a new wave of Jewish vacationers—Orthodox and later ultra-Orthodox communities from Brooklyn. Today, many belong to Hasidic sects, and families increasingly choose to live in the region year-round, taking advantage of affordable real estate and plenty of room to grow. Around Fallsburg, the ubiquity of Hebrew lettering along woody roadsides may feel as culturally exotic as Yiddish accents did to non-Jewish farmers a hundred years ago.

Yet the area’s newest Jewish chapter, fueled by the various Orthodox groups as well as the unaffiliated, feels historically resonant. “People are enamored with living in the Catskills,” says Rabbi Bezalel Chanowitz, the Chabad spiritual leader of Landfied Avenue Synagogue in Monticello. That’s a big change from 1994, when he answered the ad for a new rabbi to reinvigorate a declining membership whose numbers had dipped into the double digits. Chanowitz has become an evangelist for the mountains, encouraging rent-squeezed city dwellers to consider Catskills living, though his efforts haven’t translated into rising membership. However, as vacant storefronts revive with artisan boutiques and kosher meat markets, he says, “I see the seeds of groups that may build infrastructure.”

Among the groups of new pioneers are people like Sarah Banks, Foster Supply Hospitality’s 31-year-old sales director, who left the city three years ago with her chef-boyfriend and now hosts Shabbat dinners at their house in Callicoon. Banks grew up spending weekends at the now-defunct Fallsview kosher resort, “with this wonderful sense of community you don’t find in the city,” she recalls. “I was always chasing this dream of going back.”

For Banks and her liberally Jewish peers, their religious experiences in the Catskills are still largely DIY. However, she anticipates a flowering of new opportunities as more young Jews relocate to the region year-round. “For the 16 years I’ve been here, Mountain Dale was dead and abandoned,” says the Outsider’s Josh Druckman, who spent childhood yeshiva breaks camping near his grandparents’ land. “Suddenly, there’s a hipster coffee place, hipster beauty products, a couple vintage stores.” It takes creativity to build a career in an often frozen rural zone that only comes to life on weekends, he says. “We are a very eclectic group,” Druckman reflects. “But there’s something very comfortable about being Jewish in the Catskills. It just feels right.”

Hilary Danailova writes about travel, culture, politics and lifestyle.
What Was, Was, and Is No More

Readers share poignant memories of the Catskills

A s a Monticello native with deep nostalgia for the Catskills, I was especially eager to receive your reminiscences of time spent in the mountains. Astoundingly, more than 80 readers sent me stories—in some cases, completed novels—of honeymoons, childhood summers spent in kuchaleyns, jobs as babysitters and waiters at the big resorts, pit stops at the Red Apple Motel, ski slopes, ice skating, lake, pool, and dinners at a hotel (different days could be your surgeon, your babysitter, your best friend, your surgeon’s best friend). Written! The Catskills served a much-needed respite from city life, and my children still talk about the good times they had. All I can say is “Vos iz geven iz geven.”

Back in the 1940s, I chaired one of Hadassah’s annual winter weekends at the Concord Hotel. The weekend grew from small beginnings to become a major event for the Nassau region, which included seven Long Island, N.Y., chapters. We had a great relationship with the hotel management and were able to have our own tennis tournaments and ski races. In addition, we held spectacular cocktail parties with our own DJ. The hotel helped decorate the room beautifully and kindly accommodated the entertainment without charging for a room. It was a fantastic era, enjoyed by both the children and adults. My children’s only regret is that their kids are unable to experience the Catskills.

Jeanette Greenberg Boca Raton, Fla.