

FRUGAL TRAVELER | LOWER HUDSON VALLEY, NEW YORK

A Midwinter Playground on the Hudson



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Historic inns, family skiing and a renowned museum amid rolling hills can be had an hour from the city.

By REMY SCALZA

On a cold January night, all seven tables inside the Grange, a restaurant housed in a 1903 former post office in the Hudson Valley town of Warwick, were full. In dutiful farm-to-fork fashion, the evening's specials, written on a big chalkboard on one wall, were tagged with the names of local farms: Hudson Valley Cattle Company beef, Hillery Farms chicken, Meadowburn Cheddar. Exposed beams and brick and a waitress with thick black glasses and hair done up in a head scarf completed the scene — a tableau common in so many city restaurants, but somewhat less expected here, in what used to be my humble little hometown.

Warwick is barely an hour's drive from the George Washington Bridge, a primary gateway to Manhattan. Yet the town and surrounding communities in Orange County were for a long time off the radar of city dwellers. Rolling hills, centuries-old farms, untouched Appalachian forests — all of this we had in spades. But a place to get decent sushi or a hotel mindful of thread count were still largely rare and exotic commodities when I left home for college nearly 20 years ago.

Yet as I discovered on a recent trip back to my Hudson Valley roots, times have changed. What haven't, by and large, are the prices. Despite its proximity to New York, this historic swath of the lower Hudson Valley is still a bargain, especially in the winter low season. A local food movement, atmospheric inns dating back hundreds of years and a formidable expanse of state parks and ski mountains make for a frugal paradise within easy reach of one of the country's most expensive cities.

Dinner at the Grange (roasted cauliflower soup with house-made croutons; a flatiron steak from a ranch a few towns over) was excellent. But since the restaurant had yet to get a liquor license, after paying the check I was primed for a drink. Luckily, my hotel for the night, just a mile or so down the road, had both a bar and an extensive wine list.

Built in the 1800s as a private residence, Chateau Hathorn has a turret roof, a grand ballroom done up in mahogany and oak and a 12,000-bottle walk-in wine cellar. Restored in recent decades after an unfortunate stint as a dude ranch, it still needs a bit of work but otherwise oozes great spooky-mansion ambience. A room with its own fireplace cost me \$135, not exactly frugal but worth the splurge.

I dropped my bags upstairs before heading back down to the hotel restaurant for a nightcap. Up at the big hardwood bar, I ordered a nice Bordeaux and polished off a plate of old-fashioned oysters Rockefeller (\$14.50), before climbing the creaking stairs and making my way down a long, dark hallway to my room.

The next day I set out for Orange County's original shopping mecca, though by no means its best-known. That distinction belongs to Woodbury Common, the sprawling, high-end outlet mall that attracts 13 million visitors a year. Just a few miles up Route 17, however, is the antithesis of that anonymous outlet experience — the traditional crafts village of Sugar Loaf.

Along a single street lined with 18th-century houses, a dozen or so local artists — goldsmiths, soap makers, wood carvers, glassblowers, leather workers — make and sell wares out of their homes. I stopped into the Candle Shop, where one of the village's craft pioneers still lives and works.

"Forty-six years here — it's a lifetime, man," said Peter Lendved, who had a graying ponytail and spoke in long digressions about Sugar Loaf's past: Royalist refuge during the American Revolution, secret Underground Railroad stop, hippie hot spot during the '60s arts and crafts renaissance. As I was leaving, he discreetly wrapped one of his candles — which go for \$9 and come in just one, vanilla-based scent — in a piece of tissue paper and handed it to me as a gift, wishing me the best on my life's journey.

After stocking up on hand-cured soaps and loose-leaf teas, and making a quick pit stop in the nearby Warwick Valley Winery (great ciders, but skip the wine), I was ready to get outdoors. The low, rounded spine of the Appalachian Mountains cuts through Orange County, which makes for great hiking in summer and decent skiing in winter, at least when nature cooperates.

As I drove down a dirt road to Mount Peter, a family-run ski center in Warwick, the ground was ominously bare, but a haze of artificial snow hung over the mountain. Opened in 1936, partly to serve as a backdrop for Macy's to show off winter fashions, Mount Peter claims to be the oldest operat-

Remy Scalza is a writer and photographer in Vancouver, Canada. He is among the writers who will contribute to this column while Seth Kugel turns his attention to writing a book and working on a video series.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY REMY SCALZA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Clockwise from top: The Bear Mountain Bridge leads to Bear Mountain State Park, at left, on the west side of the Hudson River; the 1789 Baird gristmill in Warwick is a working farm; Dia:Beacon, opened in 2003 in a former Nabisco box factory, showcases contemporary art; folk musicians at the Warwick Valley Winery; and skiing at Mount Peter, operating as a ski center since 1936.

out into the crisp, dead-quiet country night, full moon overhead. My clothes would smell like campfire for days.

Not wanting to miss a view of the Hudson River itself, I got an early start the next morning for Bear Mountain State Park. Hundreds of miles of trails wind through thousands of acres of coastal forest, while a grand old 1915 inn and outdoor skating rink remain reliable draws. A section of the Appalachian Trail climbs steeply to the park's namesake peak. From the 1,305-foot summit (about an hour's hike up), I had a clear view of the Hudson River far below, curling its way south all the way to the distant Manhattan skyline.

But this part of the Hudson Valley has its sophisticated side, as well. From Bear Mountain, I headed just across county lines to Dia:Beacon (\$12 admission), a contemporary art gallery opened in 2003 in a rambling old Nabisco box factory down by the river, not far from a Metro-North commuter rail station.

Inside, the art is minimalist, challenging and, evidently, extremely popular. Throngs of patrons wandered amid heaps of scrap metal, canvases painted pure white and other masterpieces by avant-garde lions like Andy Warhol, Richard Serra and the German painter Blinky Palermo. For modern art greenhorns, however, the venue itself is likely to be the star attraction — an enormous industrial space flooded with soft natural light.

Historic Main Street in the town of Beacon offered less abstract charms. Rows of ornate, century-old brick buildings, packed with bookstores, cafes, an uncommon number of bakeries and restaurants, climb a hill above the Hudson. Once a factory town, Beacon seems to have weathered industrial decline and come out the other side with its soul intact — no small feat in this part of New York.

At the end of Main Street, the Fishkill Creek thunders down Beacon Falls on its way to join the Hudson. On a chilly night, a line had formed at the Hop, whose twin focus on craft beer and locally sourced cuisine draws big crowds. I squeezed into the last seat at the bar and ordered a flight of four local beers (\$8) and the best brussels sprouts — by a wide margin — I've ever had (sautéed in duck fat, drizzled with apple cider syrup, topped with a slab of maple bacon, \$14).

Mustachioed guys with growlers were elbowing in for refills. Stylish young couples with little children browsed the takeaway selection of Chimays. It was all starting to feel a bit too much like, yes, Brooklyn. But someone had put a sign above the bar: Hipsters Use Backdoor. And in the air was something a little too raw and gruff for Williamsburg. I knew I was home.



ing ski mountain in the state and — lucky for me — was an early adopter of snow-making technology.

Though ski pros are likely to be overwhelmed — maximum vertical drop on Peter's dozen or so runs is just a few hundred feet — for a beginner like me, the modest slopes were a perfect fit. And the price is right: Weekday lift tickets are \$25 and rentals are just \$30. I hopped on the Hailey's Comet chairlift and rode to the peak, watching below as little kids snowplowed their way straight down the mountain.

I spent the afternoon working on my turns while soaking up the small-mountain charm: no lift lines, friendly ski instructors who volunteered pointers, hamburgers in the lodge for the throwback price of \$4.95. At the end of the day, I watched the sun set over a rolling patchwork of farm fields and

hardwood forests, before shimmying down Dynamite — a black diamond, by local standards at least — on my last run.

The perfect après-ski spot is just down the mountain, in a home that served as a Revolutionary War-era iron furnace. The 1760 Iron Forge Inn is best known locally as a fine-dining spot, serving classic dishes like lamb loin and duck breast in its formal dining rooms. But the basement has been converted into a casual taproom with equally good but much cheaper bar food.

I ducked to avoid hitting the rough-hewn beams overhead and squeezed into a chair near the open fireplace. Between the fieldstone foundations and antique muskets on the walls, it wasn't hard to picture patriots quaffing a few pints here back in the day, after routing some Redcoats. A half rack of slow-roasted pork ribs (\$16) later, I stepped

IF YOU GO

Renting a car is advisable for exploring the area, though it is possible to take the Metro-North Hudson train line and a shuttle bus (Monday to Saturday) to Dia:Beacon and Main Street in Beacon.

The Grange, 1 Ryerson Road, Warwick; 845-986-1170; thegrangearwick.wordpress.com.

Chateau Hathorn, 33 Hathorn Road, Warwick; 845-986-6099; chateauhathorn.com.

The Candle Shop, 1378 Kings Highway, Sugar Loaf; 845-469-4927; sugarloafcandles.com.

Warwick Valley Winery and Distillery, 114 Little York Road, Warwick; 845-258-4858; wwinery.com.

Mount Peter Ski Area, 51 Old Mt. Peter Road, Warwick; 845-986-4940; mtpeter.com.

Iron Forge Inn, 38 Iron Forge Road, Warwick; 845-986-3411; ironforgeinn.com.

Dia:Beacon, 3 Beekman Street, Beacon; 845-440-0100; diaart.org.

The Hop, 554 Main Street, Beacon; 845-440-8678; thehopbeacon.com.