

I

WAS INTRODUCED TO northwest Connecticut by a friend whom I call the Minx because she is so deliciously naughty. Known for her elegance, wit, and charm, she is always impeccably dressed and groomed, a woman about whom one can say she smells good. Of her many extraordinary talents, perhaps her greatest gifts are the ability to have a good time and the ability to beguile others into giving her what she needs and wants. Things one wouldn't dream of doing for anybody else one finds oneself doing for her, because she makes them seem so appealing. One summer not long ago, the Minx said, "Come visit me in my tree house in Connecticut. It's on top of a mountain, and it is absolute heaven." In this case, what she really needed was a driver, and it seemed that I would do nicely. And so plans were made. She would get there first, with her son, by train and then taxi; I would drive up in a rented car to meet her, with my two boys.

We made our way up Route 7 to Salisbury, in the northernmost corner of the state, and found the road where we were to turn off. We drove up, and up. The road turned to dirt, and still we drove. We were driving up to heaven through deep forest. Finally the road emerged into the light, at a T-crossing that ran along the berm of a huge lake. A few more twists and turns and we found the house: a summer palace with no heat or electricity but a fireplace, oil-burning lamps, and flashlights; many, many books; no cell phone reception; lots of grass and

paths and woods; lots of bedding; a gas-powered fridge and stove—in fact, all the comforts one would really need.

For several days, we frolicked and rested. We ate, slept, read, and didn't bother much with washing. When the boys slept late, the mothers went down the mountain for cappuccino and the newspaper before picking up supplies from the market. After strenuous adventures jumping into the lake and lying in the sun, we'd set off at some point to explore the world—in search of perhaps some ice-cream cones or some just-picked ears of corn or cell phone tower range or a

civilized lunch of salmon burgers and mozzarella with farm tomatoes and basil at the West Street Grill in Litchfield. We built and stoked fires, and the boys played Spit. It didn't seem as though we did too much of anything, although I don't recall that we were ever bored. Indeed,

WHY NOW

March in north-west Connecticut can range from winter wonderland to brisk pre-spring. During the shoulder season, even the most luxe properties slash rates: **Winvian**, in Morris, offers guests who book two nights a free third night, plus spa gift certificates (860-567-9600; winvian.com; two nights, \$2,800 per person), and **Washington's Mayflower Inn & Spa** has a Detox Your Body package that includes healthy meals, spa therapies, and yoga classes at 30 percent off the usual cost (860-868-9466; mayflowerinn.com; two nights, \$1,450 per person).

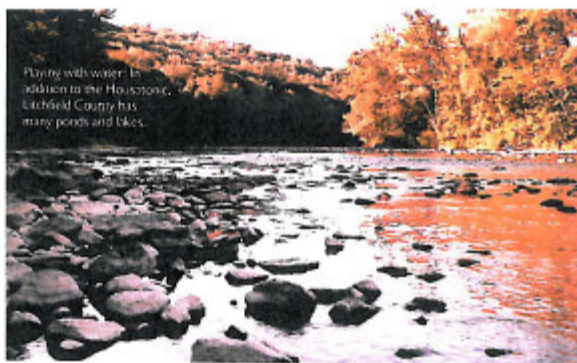


as always, as befits a woman of exquisite taste, the Minx was entirely right. Our stay atop the mountain really did seem like heaven.

THE NORTHWESTERN corner of Connecticut has, over recent years, developed country living into a high art. My visit chez Minx showed off the area's qualities at their best: simple beauty, sophisticated creature comforts, lack of pretension, fertile land. This is not to say that, should you be willing to let yourself go, you couldn't go broke exploring the possibilities for conspicuous indulgence, from ballooning to grass-fed beef. But the initial and ultimate seduction is in the landscape itself—views over the high hills into New York State, and across the gentle rolling green meadows dotted with sturdy black steer.

Litchfield County is both rural and bourgeois, and its attendant pleasures are a mix of high and low: Millionaires' Row just north of Sharon and manure on your boots; mosquitoes, poison ivy, and blackberries in the backyard as well as handmade Belgian chocolates; working-class Torrington and twee Litchfield; well-chosen antiques and the junk shops just outside town; over-the-top inns and everyday farms. By car, this corner of the world seems relatively compact; it takes no longer than a half hour to get from one town to the next and frequently less. The roads, even the main highways that make a triangle through the area—routes 7, 202, and 44—generally have only two lanes, and they follow the contours of the land rather than the convenience of commuters. Town clusters notwithstanding, the area affords lots of privacy and quiet moments. Over the course of a year, we went back several times. Not more than two hours from New York City, where we live, Litchfield County is an easy place to spend a weekend or a month at any time of year.

Driving up through Kent, on Route 7, I stop at the Belgique Patisserie & Chocolatier. Who would think that in a small town in the foothills of the Berkshires there would be a serious traditional pastry shop? Extravagant cakes, glistening fruit jellies, individual chocolates—a general drool-fest. A representation of Proust's madeleine practically falls in my lap. Honoring the master of memories here is irresistible. What is it that we're looking for as we travel? There is always something just a bit beyond our grasp, a memory on the tip of the tongue; travel has the ability to evoke the past and even less. Many of the lovely and cultivated

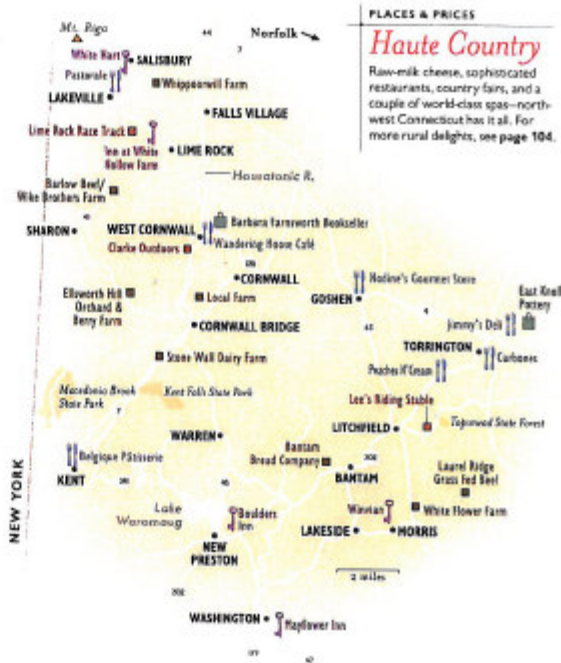


Playing with water. In addition to the Housatonic, Litchfield County has many ponds and lakes.

areas we visit are places where we can pleasurably seek these half-forgotten memories that create nostalgia.

And so northwest Connecticut, lavishly bucolic with hill and dale, farm and mansion, is like some fairy tale of European history, with squires and horses, fields of corn and perhaps wheat, cream and fresh eggs—a tactile connection to the land experienced by gentleman and farmer. It's a barely remembered world that suggests safety, peace, and quiet, a place and time of nursery rhymes

MASSACHUSETTS
CONNECTICUT



PLACES & PRICES


Haute Country

Raw-milk cheese, sophisticated restaurants, country fairs, and a couple of world-class spas—northwest Connecticut has it all. For more rural delight, see page 104.

Map by Janet Davidson

where you wouldn't be surprised to see kings picking cabbages and where drama is on the order of A. A. Milne's Alderney suggesting that His Majesty might like marmalade instead. Even if you've never been here, you can arrive and feel as though you've seen it all your life.

For instance, if you come into West Cornwall—not to be confused with Cornwall or Cornwall Bridge, all three of which are less than five miles apart—from the west, you must drive across the Housatonic River through a little red covered bridge. Although the vernacular may read *Shrek*, Disney has not been here: The bridge dates from 1864. What makes this country village, all weathered red and white, so perfect is that, in addition to its beauty, it has some of the trappings of big city life, only miniaturized. Old train tracks ran through the middle of town, and in the old railroad station is a thrift shop called the Little Benefit Shop. Just across the street is a tiny French restaurant so excellent, exclusive, and chic that it eschews even the slightest publicity (Sam Waterston, of all people, apparently occasionally supplies the beef—who even knew he was a farmer!). Add a post office, reproduction Shaker furniture for sale above the pottery shop, a gallery or two, other spots to eat, a farmers' market on Saturday mornings, and a bookshop. With a rose geranium growing just by the (Continued on page 123)

 See additional images online at atraveler.com/connecticut.



Connecticut

(Continued from page 8)

entance, Barbara Farmworth Bakoseller is full of roots and comfy corners, with bookshelves on every wall. We lingered there, doing nothing special, until our group started feeling peckish. The van had come out, so we munched a few steps down the road to sit outside at the Wandering Moose Cafe and eat waffles and watch the river and various people strolling by.

The Mix and I are not particularly athletic. Left to our own devices, we might wander back to the book store or the farmers' market. But our better halves on the trip were our adolescent sons, whose appetites needed more than waffles. In summer, the river accommodates canoeing, an activity that seemed both dignified and daring. The Mix, who likes nothing more than a party, suggested making a dip of it. "We'd invite another friend along and his teens, and we'd all go have a lovely lunch afterward. What could be better?"

The folks at nearby Clarke Outdoors were happy to set us up. We met there a couple of days later, early in the morning—a party of eight anchored by three teens. Not really knowing what to expect, we had all prepared for our own idea of what the day would bring. Some of the children were somewhat under-weathered, but the Mix kicked sporting gear into gear and flew.

The Clarke people called our group, plus three canoees, a far distance up the Housatonic and helped us slide in. The banks of the river were thick with bushes and trees and wildflowers, with the odd grassy lawn thrown in here and there. The water was placid, the children were all terrifically competent at paddling, and their behavior—except for a willingness to explore the techniques and strategy of water battle—was above reproach. The trip turned out to be bigger than we'd expected. After an hour and a half, we passed the landmark that signaled we had gone only a third of the way. We persevered, at times spreading out, with each family canoe making its own route, and at other moments paddling in unison, sometimes making brief attempts at racing. The pace was easy, our arms got tired, and just when the noise of hunger threatened to make everyone cranky, we came to the point where trees were strong across the water, indicating that it was time to pull over and pull our canoe up and out of the water.

DESPITE BEING THE VERY DEFINITION of an international destination, the Mix likes to eat to be at least a very early girl, perhaps owing to her swamp Yankee roots. The tree house is on Mount Ross, part of an old camp purchased by three families around the time of World War I. Before then, an 18th-century mansion was the location of "America's most important iron furnace," and its inhabitants were the Ruggles, poor immigrant families who worked as colliers

and forge hands. People had started producing iron in the South Taconic hills as early as the 1730s, and even before the famous Riga Furnace was built in 1806, this was an important means of forge, providing the assembly of the Revolution and the iron around the U.S.S. Constitution. Back then, the mountain was known as Bald Peak. At the Connecticut Museum of Mining and Mineral Science, in Kent, where the floor is made of bricks from around the country and the chimes have pulleys of cotton wool to represent the smoke from the furnace, a pretty silver-haired docent named Gail explained, "A hundred years ago, there were no trees here. Everything, everything was bare for miles—burned for charcoal for the mines." Once the wood was gone, the iron industry left too, moving to Pennsylvania, where coal was cheap and plentiful.

LITCHFIELD COUNTY'S BIGGEST city is Torrington, at its eastern edge. Incorporated in 1740, it grew into the area's industrial center with the largest collection of Art Deco buildings in the state. By the turn of the twentieth century, Torrington's brass mills and metal factories provided work for a surge of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, whose cultural influence can be traced in the sausages and gravies at Carbone's and in the pasta and meat dishes at Marro's or the Venetian. Still largely blue-collar, the city launched a thirty-million-dollar redevelopment in 2006 to revitalize the downtown, the successor of the 1931 Warehouse Theatre as a performing arts center was finished in 2002. The city's eastern outskirts have been sacrificed to commercial sprawl—a jumble of shopping centers, malls, houses, traffic lights, big-box stores, and construction.

There, just south of the Walmart, on a busy street of otherwise unremarkable houses, is the eighteenth-century brick home of painter Reggie DeLama. In the back of her garden is the meadow where she works and teaches, a little bare grass-patched with pottery, remnants of clay, rocks, and clay dust. An apricot tree and soft-spoken strawberry blond, Reggie is inspired by local history and skills. Myra Adams and I spent an afternoon with her learning how to make boxes out of slabs of clay. As we struggled to make a box that looked like something you would want to keep, Reggie worked, efficiently, at making them too, stopping occasionally to help straighten out one of our sagging slabs. She talked about the properties of different clays and the yellowware she specializes in, an traditional design and glaze, pottery history and local history combined. Commercial paint-to-pot studios, where you glaze some pre-fired ceramic object on a rainy day, have proliferated of late—but the boxes we made at Reggie's were of a different order. Most obvious, they testified to our lack of skill, but in their unevenness and floppiness, they showed us how far we would have to go to do this well. I bought myself one of Reggie's big yellow mixing bowls as a consolation

(in comparison with Torrington, Litchfield is lower, with a spacious grain, impressive white Colonial Revival houses, and some very nice antique shops. Torrington had the Naugatuck River, which allowed it to undertake industrial chores, but Litchfield, until 1921, was the social center of the area, the hub of trade and the seat of the merchant class. The town did very well, particularly in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. The country's first law school was born here, by Tapping Reeve, (re-dubbed more than fifteen hundred lawyers for our new nation), as was one of the first academically accredited law schools for women. Litchfield's location got it smack dab at the crossroads of the routes from Boston, Providence, and Hartford to New York and Philadelphia. The town lost its luster only after the railroad passed by.

HOWEVER LOVELY THE MOUNTAIN, it could be the winter, and the Mix and I are not as handy as the iron miners who used to live up there. Over a few fall and winter weekends, we explored the extravagant local food (and, yes, indeed, we took ourselves to the Mayflower Inn, a posh to upholstered luxury Connecticut style. Adriana Maschio, who rebuilt the hundred-year-old property fifteen years ago, has a nose for what rubs ladies like, today, the inn also has an excellent spa, where I was patted and washed and massaged into an over-heated swoon, only to be swaddled in instant-soft chemically blanketed on a white chaise longue to recuperate. Through an enormous picture window, I could see the lawn, dotted with ice crystals, sloping down to the pond. Everything was muted grays and browns—the water, the tracks, the frozen air below limbs of the trees—the view hypnotic. I could hear the loons hooting in the distance.

On another very cold weekend—the ground covered with a collector's dusting of snappy snow, the air sharp and brittle enough to sting, the atmosphere clear for miles, sunny and bright blue—we stayed at Wiseman, in Morris, a house of strange fantasy of playtime for grown-ups. Each cabin is an architectural folly on a Connecticut theme—from Skull and Bones to Camping to Tumblehouse. When we stepped into our cottage, a five-star version of a trapper's cabin called Beaver Lodge, the Mix shrieked, "A real log cabin!" and other such ones that showed her appreciation. As we indulged in the beermade ponds down by the pond, eating and sipping over the magnificent actual beaver's den embedded in the ceiling and the flat-screen TV (which at the peak of a battery rose up and down), and admired the fall on our feet of the heated floor of (re)visions in the bath, the image of eighteenth-century French aristocracy playing the virtues of the simple life fitted through my head. We were Marie Antoinette and Madame de Pompadour in our trapper's cabin de luxe. The Mix penciled her approval in the guest book: "Beaver heaven!"

We were hardly the first in the area to enjoy the pleasure of female company in company surroundings. Reggie the Painter had recommended Topswamp State Forest, five-hundred-plus acres just east of Litchfield, as a wonderful place for a walk. Formerly the summer estate of one Edith Chase, a brass industry heiress, the park surrounds the first Cotswolds Tudor cottage she built at great expense in 1925 and furnished with an exciting collection of antiques. Edith was married there with her friend Mary Barrall and Missy's sister, Lucy, for about fifty years. Sixteen years after the house was finished, she built a "dissected" off the garden, a two-story house—all the windows of which face away from the house itself—that contained a bedroom and bath for any male guest who might have the misfortune to arrive. In line with Miss Chase's prescribed "quiet visitation and passive recreation," we wandered the grounds and grounds, avoiding down to the pond, and walked we'd brought a picnic.

Happily, food is a big thing around here—indeed, this area helped nourish the young Michael Pollan, whose family still lives nearby. This rich work, the richest in New England, yields a cornucopia of such variety that one is reminded of the power of rivers and the integrity of humane farming. You want to eat the landscape—and so did Blackberryes growing wild behind a friend's small red house, peaches that Adam and I picked at Ellsworth Farm, corn and new baby potatoes I purchased from an unnamed farm where the transactions were as the house system and unimpeded.

At the farmers' market in West Cornwall, I met Debra Tyler, who epitomizes for me the local ability to knit past with future, pragmatism with ideal, and work with play. She was selling local cheeses and products at the farmers' market. I was in a bag behind Blair Brown, a woman I've never met but nonetheless recognized. Debra offered tastes of cheese and wistfully chatting. Beets helping to organize the farmers' market, she was dairy farmer, two milk jobs, and activist for having a family milk house, she also started and runs Motherhouse, which honors mothers and mothering and hosts numerous workshops in old life skills—keeping chickens, making sausage, baking bread, carding and spinning wool.

She invited me to a picnic that was taking place a few days later at Local Farm, on Popple Swamp Road, where she raises and milks her cows. That afternoon, on the lawn at Local Farm, someone had brought and set on one of the tables an enormous smug-looking loaf of whole wheat bread with the contours of an oval-shaped loaf. The table had red-and-white-checked tablecloth and

pieces of meat terrine. The occasion for the picnic was the extraordinarily delicious meal mounted over an outdoor fire by Wyatt Whitman (described as "Wyatt Whitman of Fairfield, a practitioner of historic foodways and food preservation techniques"). These were kids making ice cream, others playing with a couple of cotton cakes that, unlike any others I'd seen, were straight fearless. Had I drunk the Kool-Aid or been lonesome, as the case may be?

ON MY RETURN TO THE CITY after a number of visits I had to stay in touch with this fairy land—most hilariously, at least in retrospect, when I was impetuous to pass my living room with milk pails and accidentally re-created the scene with the dancing brooms in *The Snows of Ithaca*. So, memories surfaced, one with the fragment resonance of a malleable, an afternoon in nature with a brilliantly rippled terrazzo that still smelled unaccountably of its use and the field. It was the size of a grapefruit. Adam and I looked on it, with slabs of crusty bread, good butter, a little misprison, salt, pepper. Nothing more. □