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The Berkshires for skiing, socializing and culture

January 10, 2009 By ALISON GREGOR Special to Newsday

It seems counterintuitive: Go somewhere cold for vacation? But with air travel costs mounting while gasoline prices have plunged, it may be time to put that aging SUV to a use it was designed for and hit the road.

For Long Islanders, the destination could be the Berkshires in Massachusetts, where they'll find picturesque New England towns tucked among low, rolling mountains.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND

A short drive from New York City, the Berkshires are a mecca for nature- and culture-lovers in the warmer seasons, offering summer stock theater, classical concerts and Gilded Age mansions to tour. In the snowy winter months, the Berkshire region loses most of its tourists. Still, a surprising number of activities await travelers of all stripes.

THINGS TO DO

Sports lovers can partake of downhill skiing and snowboarding at four ski areas particularly well suited for neophytes. There are state parks and forest lands, along with numerous resorts offering trails for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Frozen beaver ponds and lakes call out to ice skaters, and snowmobiling is allowed in many Massachusetts state parks.

INDOOR PURSUITS

Those who shun the blustery outdoors in favor of a cheery tavern can mingle with locals on the Lenox inn tours and walks through the grand old homes of Stockbridge. The sprawling Red Lion Inn, with its antique furniture and china-filled public rooms, has a Colonial-style pub along with the Lion's Den tavern.

The Berkshires museums are open to visitors all winter long. In recent years, the Berkshires have become known as a region where travelers can retreat from the quotidian to focus on health and wellness. There are luxurious spas and the rather ascetic healing-arts experience at the 300-acre Kripalu Center.



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PLAN YOUR TRIP

With offerings this varied, the itinerary your winter Berkshires getaway takes is entirely up to you.

Here we offer three ways to tailor your trip - whether you crave outdoor adventures, arts and culture or merely an out-of-the-way place to curl up with a good book.

1 If you want sports and adventure, downhill skiing and snowboarding

Jiminy Peak Mountain Resort (37 Corey Rd., Hancock, 888-4-JIMINY,

jiminypeak.com) is the largest ski resort in the Berkshires. More skiing and snowboarding can be found at Catamount (Route 23 East, South Egremont, 413-528-1262,

catamountski.com), one of the oldest ski resorts in the Northeast. Ski Butternut (380 State Rd., Route 23, Great Barrington, 413-528-2000,

skibutternut.com), which has a tubing center, and Bousquet Ski Area (101 Dan Fox Dr., Pittsfield, 413-442-8316, bousquets.com) offer a family experience with affordable rates.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING AND SNOWSHOEING

The posh Cranwell Resort, Spa and Golf Club (55 Lee Rd., Route 20, Lenox, 413-637-1364, cranwell.com) allows nonguests to enjoy 6.2 miles of groomed ski trails (and a spa). If you want to combine skiing with some wine tasting, try Hilltop Orchards (508 Canaan Rd., Route 295, Richmond, 800-833-6274,

hilltoporchards.com), which has pristine backcountry trails and free tastings of Furnace Brook Winery's wines.

WHERE TO STAY

For skiers who forgo shoes, the ski-in, ski-out New England Country Inn in Hancock offers lift tickets with its large suites. The heated outdoor pool and hot tub warm up lodgers. Nearby are the convivial Christiansen's Tavern and John Harvard's Brew House, a restaurant and pub overlooking the ski mountain (From \$159, 800-882-8859, jiminy peak.com).

The homey rooms at family-owned Canterbury Farm in Becket overlook about 14 miles of groomed trails for moonlight (and sunlit) skiing, meandering through old-growth forests, past frozen lakes and ponds. Equipment for skiing, ice skating and show-shoeing is offered for rent (From \$125, 413-623-0100, canterbury-farms.com).

SHOPPING

The Arcadian Shop Outdoor Specialty Store

91 Pittsfield Rd., Lenox, 413-637-3010

arcadian.com

It's much more than a place to buy and rent outdoor gear, although it has an ample selection. Moonlight snowshoe tours and other excursions are organized here, and the Trailside Cafe and bookstore offer literature and lattes. 2 If you want to be sociable, nightlife

For a lively night out, try Rumpy's Tavern at the Village Inn in Lenox (16 Church St., 800-253-0917, villageinn-lenox.com), a subterranean watering hole

that hosts live music on weekends.

Club Helsinki at the Helsinki Café in Great Barrington (284 Main St., 413-528-3394, clubhelsinkiweb.com) serves up some of the best musical performances in the Berkshires year-round.

For invigorating live jazz and other music along with a fine dinner, check out the Castle Street Café (10 Castle St., Great Barrington, 413-528-5244, castlestreet

cafe.com).

INN TOURS

The bed-and-breakfast inns of Lenox offer a tour of a handful of inns on the first Saturday of the month, from November through May. Sample hors d'oeuvres, dinner and dessert at the inns and view the rooms. Information: Lenox Chamber of Commerce (413-637-3646, lenox.org).

THEATER

In Pittsfield, The Colonial

Theatre (111 South St., 413-997-4444,

thecolonialtheatre.org) offers concerts, dance and musicals year-round. The Barrington Stage Company's Second Stage is performing "Living With It," an autobiographical account of a teenager living with a parent with bipolar disorder, Feb. 6-8 (\$15, 36 Linden St., Pittsfield, 413-236-8888, barringtonstage co.org), while Shakespeare & Company's (70 Kemble St., Lenox, 413-637-3353,

shakespeare.org) new performance of Theresa Rebeck's "Bad Dates" runs through March 8.

WHERE TO STAY

The rambling Red Lion Inn dates from the late 1700s and has been immortalized in Norman Rockwell's painting of Stockbridge's Main Street (From \$89, 413-298-5545, redlioninn.com). It has 108 comfortable rooms, along with numerous parlors, both bustling and quiet.

Perched on a 22-acre hilltop estate, the Apple Tree Inn in Lenox is highly popular during the summer season, but it's also fun in winter. It has 13 rooms in an 1885 mansion with a large parlor, restaurant and tavern with dance floor. It also has 21 rooms in a lodge building next door (from \$60, 413-637-1477, appletree-inn.com).

DINING PICK

Viva

14 Glendale Rd., Glendale, 413-298-4433

Bullfighting posters line the walls, and locals fill the tables at this vibrant Spanish restaurant, where you can order a full dinner or select from tapas, including the sizzling chorizo in Rioja wine or the espinacas a la Catalana (spinach sauteed with chickpeas, pine nuts, raisins and apples). 3 For museums and contemplative travelers

Most museums in the Berkshires stay open through winter, including the Norman Rockwell Museum (\$15, Route 183, 413-298-4100, nrm.org), which has a large selection of his Saturday Evening Post covers and the world's largest collection of his original paintings.

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown (free admission through May 31, 225 South St., 413-458-2303, clarkart.edu) has an outstanding collection of European and American art, particularly strong in the area of French Impressionism.

The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams (\$15, 87 Marshall St., 413-662-2111, massmoca.org) hosts changing displays of contemporary art in a restored 19th century factory and offers a year-round schedule of the performing arts.

SPIRITUAL TOUR

In Pittsfield, Hancock Shaker Village (Routes 20 and 41, 413-443-0188, hancockshaker.village.org) offers tours of

20 historic buildings of the Shakers' City of Peace on weekends at noon and 2 p.m. and weekdays at 1 p.m. (\$12.50 adults, \$4 ages 13-17). Its shop sells the Shakers' well-crafted furniture and other odds and ends.

DINING PICK

The Old Inn on the Green

134 Hartsville-New Marlborough Rd., New Marlborough, 413-229-7924

oldinn.com

This restored 1760 stagecoach inn is off the beaten track, but the gourmet fare is worth the trek. Savor an appetizer of warm Hudson Valley roasted squab and an entree of roasted rack of Colorado lamb - or order the reasonably priced tasting menu (\$70, with midweek dinner specials around \$30) - served by candlelight in an enchanting setting that makes this a memorable dining experience.

WHERE TO STAY

The Victorian Rookwood Inn in Lenox is full of rooms in unexpected nooks, some with fireplaces, antique bathtubs and high - but firm - beds requiring footstools. Amazingly tranquil though nestled in the Lenox village center, the Rookwood offers a healthy breakfast and spa packages (from \$175, 800-223-9750, rookwoodinn.com).

Once a Jesuit seminary, the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge now offers simple but neat accommodations without the distractions of the modern world. Breakfast is silent (though rooms are available for conversation) and complimentary all-natural meals. Activities include Kripalu yoga classes, YogaDance and lectures about the healing arts. (From \$320 for two nights, 866-200-5203, kripalu.org). Day passes for non-guests are available.

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