

New Yorkers Flee To Hamptons, Catskills Amid Coronavirus Fears

Christina Poletto | March 25, 2020



Upper West Siders Leslie Hough and John Sudol rented a three-bedroom house in East Hampton for \$3,500/month. The post-production professional and acting coach are both working via video conference. Stephen Yang

It was just over a week ago that Julia Noran-Johnston and her family made the decision — on the heels of the announcement that schools were closed and ahead of recent dire pandemic predictions for the city — to pack their bags for the countryside.

Noran-Johnston, her husband and her two young children bid farewell to their Upper West Side apartment for destinations north — far north.

“We found a super old farmhouse in Vermont for \$3,000 for the month. We will likely stay beyond that,” says Noran-Johnston, founder and president of the Business of Home, a resource for interior design and home industry professionals.

Noran-Johnston, who chose Vermont because extended family is there, is far from alone in fleeing Manhattan during the city’s coronavirus lockdown. Some of her friends, she says, have rented vacation homes in the Poconos or the Berkshires.

Catskills houses for rent are in high demand for the same reason, brokers say, and many quarantined New Yorkers are making tracks to the Hamptons, boosting the short-term rental market there as well.

Leslie Hough, 55, who works in post-production and is currently on a project for Netflix, started her search weeks ago to find a work-from-home outpost away from the 1,000-square-foot Upper West Side apartment she shares with her partner, John Sudol, an acting coach.

The jump on looking paid off for Hough, who found a spacious three-bedroom in East Hampton close to the water for \$3,500 a month, where she plans to stay until mid-May. “We needed space and two rooms to be in and need to be able to spread out,” says Hough, who adds that video conferencing is a large component of both of their jobs.

Vanessa, 32, and Ray Vargas, 40, founders of Home Sweet Hudson, an Ulster County-based listing and management service for Airbnb properties owned by city dwellers, have seen a significant jump in inquiries for full-home rentals in the last few weeks.

The Vargas’ roster of rentals — more than 30 properties — are sought after by families “asking about internet service and Wi-Fi and trying to keep connected but get out of the New York City area,” says Vanessa.

“We’re seeing customers inquiring about staying for a month or two,” adds Vanessa. “If we can’t accommodate them at one property, we can relocate them to another one.” Currently, rentals through Home Sweet Hudson range from \$75 to more than \$200 per night depending on the size of the house and its amenities. “We’re doing our best to work with folks and find the right place for them based on their budget,” says Vanessa.

Murray Hill resident Kate McMahon, 50, an actor, packed up a car with her husband, two teenage sons and the family dog, and opted for a \$3,250-a-month creek-side three-bedroom home in Callicoon, New York. The cabin was secured through Red Cottage Inc., a rental service representing 58 cabins, farmhouses and woodland properties in the Catskills and Hudson Valley.

Red Cottage founder Jennifer Grimes, 53, reports working 70-hour weeks to help connect families — nearly all hailing from Manhattan — with rural dwellings amid coronavirus fears.

Though some properties initially reserved for spring and summer weddings have been canceled, Grimes says, they are just as quickly being scooped up by those seeking to shelter outside of the city for the next few months. “Someone just booked a huge house for two, maybe four people, until the Wednesday after Labor Day,” adds Grimes. Red Cottage’s rental properties skew high-end, often with amenities such as hot tubs and pools, with rates from \$250 to \$1,300 per night.

Owners of second homes upstate are also canceling renters’ reservations so they can also use the properties themselves. “We have had eight owners (out of 58) block their calendars for the foreseeable future,” Grimes says. “We have moved everyone to a different house, or have provided full refunds.”

To meet the unusually high demand, Grimes is even encouraging a handful of properties that typically close for the winter to reopen ASAP. Grimes says there are still places with availability starting in mid-April and new listings in the pipeline.

Patrick, 35, and Alana, 34, an engaged couple who declined to give their last names for privacy reasons, left their rental in Hell’s Kitchen for a woodsy three-bedroom rental in Stone Ridge, New York, where they have been working remotely since March 14. They are paying \$5,500 for a 35-night stay — and will likely extend the reservation.

For Patrick, who works in finance, and Alana, who is in advertising, the notion to relocate out of the city for the short term was a no-brainer. “It just wasn’t feasible for us to work remotely from a small apartment in Hell’s Kitchen,” says Patrick. The area around Stone Ridge was familiar to the couple, who have made prior visits to New Paltz and Phoenicia.

New York's more rural counties are taking notice of the influx, and pleading with city dwellers to reconsider relocating to their quiet towns during the public health crisis. Last Friday, Greene County, bordered on the south by Ulster County and to the east by Columbia County, issued a press release asking visitors and second homeowners to hold off on travel into the county and also to not expect the same resources. "Greene County is a large rural county with NO hospital!" the release said. "This limits our ability to serve a large number of people requiring higher levels of care for COVID-19 patients and other illnesses."

Greene County currently has four confirmed cases of the coronavirus. And on Tuesday, the head of the White House coronavirus task force, Dr. Deborah Birx, has asked anyone leaving the New York metro area to self-quarantine for 14 days in order to stop the spread.

"We've taken some steps, like requiring a 14-day minimum for new bookings, to be considerate of our friends and neighbors," Grimes says. "So it's a legitimate concern."

But given the orders to stay home except for essential outings — a lockdown-style policy also known as shelter in place — many NYC residents still prefer less-populated environments to wait out the pandemic.

"My phone is ringing off the hook with one- and two-month rentals," Steven Zellman, a real estate agent with Town & Country Real Estate in the Hamptons, tells The Post via email. "I have done 11 rentals in the last five days, and am working on four others as I write this."

Joseph Kazickas of Rosehip Partners Real Estate and HamptonsRentals.com reports a comparable flurry of activity. "There's definitely an uptick in inquiries in seasonal rentals, but also this urgency of customers who want to get into a home tomorrow for the next few months," says Kazickas, who primarily serves the area between Westhampton and Montauk.

For Hough, the temporary move out east is about finding solace and safety in turbulent times.

"I didn't want to be around and see New York City shut down," she says. "It would be too much to bear; to be met with closed stores, closed restaurants and not being able to go on the subway. I didn't want to watch it crumble, and wanted to be in denial out in the country. I wanted to be where the environment is beautiful, and where we might be able to find peace of mind through nature."