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As Coronavirus Hits, New Yorkers Wonder if They Should Leave

Rentals surge in summer destinations; East Hampton is as busy as July

Josh Barbanel | March 22, 2020

As coronavirus cases rise in New York, many residents can find themselves wondering: Should they leave to ride out the pandemic elsewhere?

Home rentals have surged in places New Yorkers typically turn to in the summer, from the Hamptons to Nantucket, Mass., as travel otherwise evaporated, according to AirDNA, a travel-booking analytics site.



Rental markets in areas outside other major, crowded cities as well from San Francisco to Chicago to Boston are seeing high demand.

Many families packed up and moved into summer homes that had been closed up for the winter in order to shelter in place. New Yorkers are ordered to stay home as much as possible and public schools are closed—raising the allure for families with small children and small apartments to find an escape, and a stroll on a beach.

The parking lot at Main Beach in East Hampton, N.Y., is as full as it is in July, said Glenn Vickers II, president of Discover the Hamptons, a not-for-profit that promotes tourism and economic development. People can be seen strolling along ocean beaches in hats and gloves, with children or pets in tow, maintaining a discrete distance between groups.

The new renters are choosing homes that have been thoroughly cleaned and still they arrive with buckets of cleaning supplies and gloves and masks and clean all over again, said Eddie Shapiro, president of NestSeekers International, a brokerage specializing in the Hamptons and other luxury markets.

This influx has in turn has triggered concerns that vacation getaways might not have enough resources to cope in the event that the number of people needing hospitalization soars in the weeks and months ahead.

“We are at summer population now,” said Judi Desiderio, chief executive of Town & Country Real Estate, a brokerage based on the east end of Long Island. She said her firm handled 250 rentals so far this month, triple that of a normal March, with most set to start immediately and rented sight unseen. One renter is paying \$250,000 in rent for April and May, normally a turgid period for rentals in the Hamptons.

Local medical services aren’t geared to meet the needs of the peak summer population in normal times, she said. The population at least triples in many places in the summer.

Stony Brook University Hospital, the nearest tertiary-care hospital, has said it is adding beds to cope with Covid-19 cases and it suspended elective surgery and procedures. In East Hampton, the town supervisor, Peter Van Scoyoc, said Friday that the town was working with state and county officials to identify “locations for satellite hospital services.”

The move to the country by more affluent city residents, echoes the response to past contagions, such as the great plague in London in 1665-1666 that saw most doctors, lawyers and merchants as well as the royal court flee, according to many accounts of the plague.

Some are ambivalent about the decision to leave the city.

Jill Laurie Goodman, a retired lawyer and a photography student; her husband, Melvin Jules Bukiet, a novelist, and their cat, Tio, fled their home on Manhattan’s Upper West Side last week for a weekend home they had been renovating in New Windsor, NY., next to a state park and hiking trail, just over an hour’s drive from the city.

They left after her daughter, Louisa, convinced her that at the age of 71, moving out of the city gave her the best chance of staying well, she said. “So I don’t get sick, with the implications of that for spreading the virus and its effect on the health-care system.”

“We are trying to do the best we can and make difficult decisions,” she said.

Bookings for March as of last Thursday were up more than 400% in the Hamptons, in Nantucket and in Chatham on Cape Cod, compared with the same period in 2019, according to the AirDNA analysis of Airbnb bookings.

Bolstered by people leaving Chicago and San Francisco, rentals more than doubled in Michigan City, Ind., near Chicago, and in Pebble Beach and Napa, Calif., and are up 41% in bookings near Lake Tahoe.

On the south shore of Lake Tahoe, tourism officials have urged visitors to stay away, warning that visitors could overwhelm existing resources and risk lives, due to the limited capacity of health facilities. “This is something I thought I’d never have to say throughout my tourism career, but please stay home at this time,” said Carol Chaplin, chief executive and president of the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority in a press release.

In the Hamptons, the surge built up a week ago, especially around March 15, when Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that New York City public schools would close, said Bryan Fedner, a co-founder of vacation-rental company StayMarquis, with listings on Long Island and the Hudson Valley, north of the city.

In the seven day period ended March 18, his agency booked 87 rentals for March check-ins, compared with six during the same period in 2019. This included two bookings for more than \$90,000 for a month,

Mr. Fedner's research also found that on a single day, March 15, visitors made a total of 201 bookings for occupancy in March on Airbnb and HomeAway, compared with an average of 31 such bookings in the rest of the month.

"People were booking sight unseen, with no negotiations, which was very unusual," he said.

With museums and cultural institutions closed, most stores shut, restaurants open only for delivery and drive-by pickups, there is little to do in the Hamptons beyond strolling and biking.

Lauren Spiegel, a Douglas Elliman broker, said that just being in the Hamptons was enough.

"If they are going to be shut down and locked down, at least they can be in the Hamptons," she said. "If they come out here, they can feel at peace even if the coronavirus is all around them."