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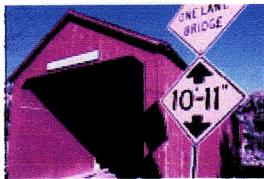
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Celebrities and History Lovers Mingle in Connecticut 's Litchfield Hills

Laura Weiss

In Pictures



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For celebrity watching, you could head to Hollywood . Or, try Connecticut .

Connecticut ?

In the northwest corner of the Nutmeg state, an area called the Litchfield Hills has become a favored retreat for TV and film stars. Mia Farrow, Merril Streep, Kevin Bacon, and Sam Waterston are among the celebrities who call the rolling countryside of this tucked-away corner of New England home.

What lures these stars, plus legions of weekenders?

"It's the rolling hills and beautiful colonial houses," says Linda Frank, who has lived in picturesque Washington , Connecticut since 1974, and who describes the area as "quintessential New England ."

Long known as a weekend escape for New Yorkers (its about a two hour trip from the city), the Litchfield Hills also abound with pleasurable activities for ordinary folk -- from antiquing to cross-country skiing. The area is dotted with charming bed and breakfasts and small villages with colonial-era houses and churches. The rippling Housatanic river cuts through the forested peaks and green valleys offering ample opportunity for canoeing, kayaking and other outdoor pursuits.

So on an impossibly warm late-January morning, my husband and I set out from New York to explore the region, which is bounded by the Berkshires Hills in Massachusetts to the north and the Hudson Valley in New York to the west. We wanted to test the allure of this somewhat removed corner of New England .

Routes 7, 44, and 202 are main byways, but wander down winding back roads, past hulking red wood barns, and up forested hills, to really savor the area's hidden charms.

Hartford and Wethersfield

While Connecticut 's state capitol, Hartford , is not considered part of the Litchfield Hills, it makes a great jumping off point. Situated in

downtown Hartford , (600 Main Street), The [Wadsworth Atheneum](#) , a Gothic-style pile, founded in 1842, is in an area of the city that today can seem a bit desolate, especially on weekends. But parking is ample on nearby streets, and once inside the museum, there are 50,000 works of art to explore. We bypassed the Atheneum's Renaissance, Baroque and other European exhibits to concentrate instead on its outstanding collections of American decorative arts. This is truly an antiques-lovers paradise. Room after room is bursting with rare 17 th century chests, highboys, chairs and other stunning examples of early American furniture, many of which were crafted by Connecticut cabinet makers.

Just south of Hartford , lies Wethersfield , a town so picture-perfect it would be easy to think you had stumbled into a colonial-era village replica. But though Wethersfield was first settled in 1634, it continues into the 21 st century as a real, living town.

Bisected by broad, tree-line Main Street and lined with stately 18 th and 19 th century houses (50 were built before the Revolutionary War), churches and shops, Wethersfield reeks American history. We saw where President Washington conducted Revolutionary War business at the Webb- Deane- Stevens Museum . But Wethersfield features more than Colonial-era sites. Mainly Tea at 221 Main Street serves lunch and high tea (there are 80 varieties) and local shops, like Heart of the Country, 263 Main Street, offer a selection of candles, bath products and women's clothing.

Norfolk

To start our tour of the Litchfield Hills in earnest, we headed north to Norfolk, a charming village near the Massachusetts border that contains within its borders hiking trails and ponds, as well as a renowned music festival.

Skip the crowds clogging the roads to Tangelwood and instead head for the Yale School of Music's annual summer music gathering, the [Norfolk Chamber Music Festival](#) , which this summer will feature classical music luminaries like the Tokyo String Quartet. The rambling [Manor House](#) , a bed and breakfast housed in a gabled, romantic 1898 home with guest rooms furnished with antiques and canopied beds, makes an ideal base.

In nice weather, the inn provides access to Toby Pond, which innkeeper Michael Dinsmore describes as "crystal clear, great for swimming or for putting in a kayak or canoe." Be sure to peek in the gorgeous, wood paneled Norfolk library before setting out to view Buttermilk or Campbell Falls from trails that start right in Norfolk. In winter, there's downhill skiing at nearby Haystack Mountain.

A Celebrity Siting

Wispy trails of smoked snaked from chimneys topping lone farmhouses as we made our way on Route 44 to Canaan, then south on Route 7 through [Housatanic Meadows State Park](#) , where there's fly fishing, canoeing , kayaking, and camping. Then it was on to the picture-book New England towns of Kent, West Cornwall, and Salisbury

In West Cornwall, where we stopped for lunch, we gazed at the historic red covered bridge, one of a handful remaining in Connecticut. At the [Cornwall Bridge Pottery Store](#) 415 Sharon Goshen Turnpike, we browsed through handmade bowls and mugs, furniture and lamps painted with Chinese motifs. Stopping for lunch at the [Wandering Moose Cafe](#) , 421 Sharon Goshen Turnpike, we had our first celebrity-spotting: Sam Waterston, star of TV's *Law and Order* , sat down at a table next to ours to order lunch.

Luxe Spa

Criss-crossing country roads, we made our way Washington to check out the [Mayflower Inn and Spa](#) , 118 Woodbury Road, Route 47 ; the 20,000 square foot retreat was added a year ago and features a full array of spa services, including facials, scrubs, and massages.

A haven of understated elegance, the inn is fronted with a wrap-around porch to laze around. Guest rooms feature fireplaces and luxurious touches like Frette linens and flat screen TVs. Nearby sits the town of Washington with white clapboard houses and a majestic, white steepled church grouped around a quintessential New England green.

Antique Capital of Connecticut

Known as the "Antiques Capital of Connecticut," Woodbury boasts antique dealers (more than 45) housed in historic homes on and around the town's Main Street. At Wayne Mattox Antiques we gazed longingly at a gorgeous early 19 th century mahogany table. Next door at Thomas Schwenke Antiques, original 18 th century furniture as well as reproductions of tables, chairs and chests are also available.

Hungry from a day of intense window shopping, we stopped off at the Split Rail, 230 Main St., for lunch. Everyone in the place was digging into hefty plates of corn beef and cabbage, the day's special, but we elected to order lighter fare from the friendly waitress -- turkey sandwiches -- before heading back to the city.