

Litchfield County, Easy on the Wallet

By [SETH KUGEL](#)



A J's Steak and Pizza might be intimidating, I was told — kind of a bikers' bar. But the burgers were cheap and good, the peanuts were free, the place was still open and it was right down the road from the room where I had just dropped my bags.

Something about the warning didn't quite compute: an intimidating biker joint down the road from the Mary Stuart House, my cozy little bed and breakfast on rural Route 4 in Litchfield County, Conn.? The same Litchfield County known as a weekend escape for New Yorkers prosperous enough to afford a second home but put off by Hamptons haughtiness?

I chuckled as I walked into the friendly basement bar. Sure, it was intimidating ... if you fear the sound of peanut shells crunching under your feet, the specter of CNN on a big screen, or the prospect of a bartender pushing the blue cheese and caramelized onions that would boost the price of your bison burger to \$9.25 from \$8. "You get the pungent with the sweet," she said, all foodie-like. I was hardly quaking in my boots.

To be honest, the real terror had come a week earlier, when I got my assignment: a frugal weekend in Litchfield County. Friends were skeptical; Twitter followers sent me the 140-character equivalent of raised eyebrows. "Good luck with that" was typical.

And like the warnings about A J's, my fears were way off base. I wasn't going to buy a country home. I was going to relax in a place where the main attraction is nature (which is pretty much free) in an area in which both old-school and newfangled diners, bakeries and burger joints are much cheaper than anything in New York City.

Even newcomers are quite reasonable, like the Arethusa Farm Dairy, an ice cream shop and creamery opened this summer by George Malkemus and Anthony Yurgaitis, the president and vice president of Manolo Blahnik. A waffle cone with one scoop of the luscious coffee ice cream made at their nearby [Arethusa Farm](#) costs \$3.50,

about one two-hundredth the price of a pair of their luscious scalloped suede Mary Jane pumps at Neiman Marcus.

Litchfield County is 945 square miles of farmland and hills and country towns in northwest Connecticut with a reasonable enough ratio of art galleries to fly-fishing shops to please old-timers and weekenders alike. General stores, town historical societies and volunteer fire departments are common. Farm stands offer vegetables and eggs on the honor system: pick what you want and leave your money in the box.

And [during peak leaf-peeping season](#), usually mid to late October, things are even better. The lush greens of late summer turn to deep reds, burning oranges and bright yellows in the hills that rise behind barns and cornfields and glacial lakes.

Lodging is probably the biggest obstacle to a budget weekend, but the region's official tourism Web site, litchfieldhills.com, provides [exhaustive options](#). Motels are the cheapest (aside from camping), but didn't seem in the spirit of things, so I was thrilled to find the Mary Stuart House in Goshen (860-491-2260).

Rooms in this 1798 house are listed at \$95, but Mary Orlando, the owner, offered me a \$10 discount over the phone — perhaps for coming alone, perhaps for coming on a weekday. (During leaf-peeping season especially, weekdays mean better prices throughout the county.) It's a homey environment: children, grandchildren and neighbors rolled through while I was there, and Ms. Orlando struck the right balance between helpful and obtrusive.

Goshen is also a good base from which to explore, in part because it is just down Route 63 from the town of Litchfield, which Ralph White, a native and author of the just-published "[Litchfield](#)," told me was the "gem" of the county — the rest is "the setting."

Though Mr. White is clearly biased, he has a point. Litchfield is relatively big: 8,500 people or so, with a charmingly historic downtown and plenty of good restaurants with a wide price range. I had two bargain meals there. The first, with Mr. White and two friends, was at [Da Capo](#). Our large double pepperoni pizza, mussels and calamari appetizers, salad and wine came to just over \$20 each, including tip.

That seemed cheap until I had breakfast at Patty's, which looks like a diner but could go toe to toe with many brunch spots in Manhattan in creativity and quality. The lemon coffee-cake French toast topped with fresh blueberries and raspberries was \$5.95, and no, Upper West Siders, that is not a typo.

But Litchfield County's attractions are mainly outdoors. Kent Falls State Park may be the most celebrated with its pretty waterfall, manicured grounds and easy hiking trails, but parking costs \$15 for nonresidents on weekends through October. Definitely not worth it.

Much better are the 4,000 wilderness acres managed and protected by the [White Memorial Foundation](#) in Litchfield. Hiking trails range from 0.2 miles to 6 miles, and a trail map costs \$3 at the Conservation Center. I chose the Little Pond route, 1.6 miles, mostly over a narrow wooden boardwalk that blends right into the setting as it snakes around the pond and through wetlands that in the summer were alive with butterflies and bees, swans and deer. In leaf-peeping season, I can only imagine.

There's also the West Cornwall covered bridge, built in the 19th century over the Housatonic River and resembling an elongated red barn. When I visited, two painters had their easels out trying to capture its magic, and a group of kayakers had paddled under it and must have thought that they had gone back in time. (For kayak trips starting at \$30, contact [Clarke Outdoors](#).)

And then there's a quirky attraction that I just stumbled upon: Sculpturedale, the sculpture garden at the corner of Route 7 and Carter Road in Kent, on the property of the sculptor [Denis Curtiss](#), a former art teacher at an

international school in Saudi Arabia who now lives and works in Kent, near the state park. The fanciful steel and bronze animals (and occasional humans), which run from \$300 to \$10,000, are not in my price range, but looking is free.

Litchfield County also has several vineyards that make up part of the 24-stop [Connecticut Wine Trail](#). I visited [Sunset Meadow Vineyards](#) on Route 63 in Goshen, right near my bed and breakfast, and paid \$6 for five tastes that turned out to be six, plus a free taste of the merlita (a merlot smoothie that goes for \$5 a glass). The vineyard had its way with me, though: I went home with two bottles of the Cayuga White (\$15.99 each), which got to me with its strong notes of grapefruit.

With apologies to Ralph White and his gem metaphor, I found two towns that I liked better: Kent and Bantam.

Kent won me over by adding an artistic flourish to the typical New England small town. The main street is actually called Main Street, and there several historic churches and old shops and all. But there are also animal sculptures scattered around the town center (is that a puma near the bookstore?) and lots of galleries and shops full of work by local and distant artists.

I was drawn to the Heron American Craft Gallery, which features fanciful works and quirky gifts, and the Foreign Cargo Gallery, with exotic items from all over.

The town's made-for-frugal-travelers diner, the [Villager Restaurant](#), is mostly about burgers and Reubens and monte cristos, but on Tuesday nights, its Mexican owner (and longtime Bantam resident) Tony Hernandez serves food from his native land. There are often Mexican lunch specials also; Mr. Hernandez cooked me up some carne enchilada tacos, four for \$7.95, served with a spicy, smoky red salsa and lime that easily matched the quality (and nearly the price) of the taco stands near my home in Jackson Heights, Queens.

Bantam is not quite as picturesque, but has a low-key charm notable in the rather unassuming names of its businesses, like Bantam Pizza, Bantam Market, Bantam Coffee Shop, Bantam Country Liquors and, most important, Bantam Bread Company (853 Bantam Road; 860-567-2737).

The bakery, a den of yeasty temptation that snuffs out any hope for low-carb dieting in the region, got me with its holiday fruit bread (\$5.75) studded with sour cherries, raisins and walnuts, and fruit crostatas (\$4.25), literally dripping with rhubarb and strawberry. Both were move-to-Bantam good.

Is anything wrong with Litchfield County? I suppose you could ding it for lack of night life, though that seems a bit like criticizing its lack of skyscrapers. There is the [Bantam Cinema](#), an art-house-in-a-barn that claims to be the oldest continuously operated movie theater in the state, dating to 1927. And for a nightcap, there's always A J's — that is, if you dare mix it up with peanut-eating, CNN-watching Connecticut bikers.