



Phoenicia, NY

To stand in the middle of Main Street in Phoenicia and gaze up at the towering mountains, which you can do on most weekdays without interrupting traffic, is to believe that whatever the maps say, city life is worlds away.

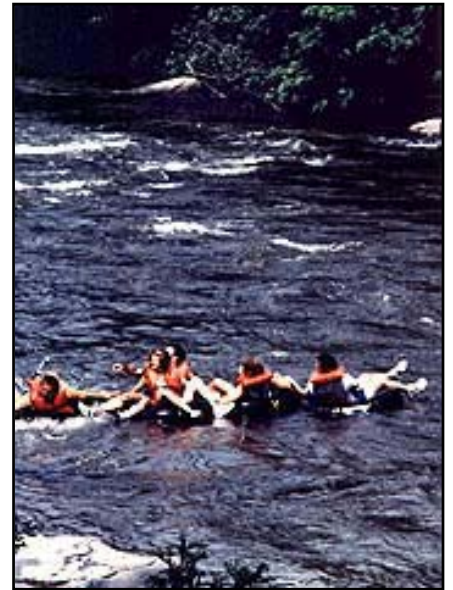
In fact, it is not. This hamlet, tucked into the Catskills, is only 120 miles northwest of Manhattan, and cognoscenti who value its rugged hiking trails and secret swimming holes have been making pilgrimages since the turn of the century. Babe Ruth came to Phoenicia regularly for the world-class trout fishing and the local watering holes, several of which proudly display his picture.

The banks of Ruth's favored fishing spot, the Esopus Creek, may also be the hiding spot for a secret fortune buried by the mobster Dutch Schultz in 1935, and treasure hunters with metal detectors still descend on Phoenicia to search for his loot.

The fortune hunters add such a quirky, quixotic flavor to the otherwise pristine surroundings that Laura Levine, a weekend resident and a former rock photographer, made a documentary about them, "Digging for Dutch," which is making the rounds at film festivals. Most visitors, however, come to the Esopus for summertime inner-tubing.

The lush terrain attracts nature lovers of all stripes -- anyone who values misty mountains, dense woods and a proximity to skiing at the Hunter and Belleayre resorts, both within a half-hour's drive.

In town, Sweet Sue's restaurant lists 22 kinds of pancakes, Gateway to Tibet sells hand-woven silks, the Tender Land gift shop offers Ethiopian processional crosses, and an assortment of vintage oddities spill from Ms. Levine's store, the Mystery Spot. On any given weekend, a bluegrass band might be playing on Main Street to celebrate the summer solstice or the library's book fair.



The linoleum-floored pharmacy a few doors down sells maps of Catskill streams and faded postcards that look like they come from the 1970's. "Well, they probably do," said the cashier with a smile.

Phoenicia is a quirky amalgam of dyed-in-the-wool lifers, artistic souls, leather-clad bikers and solitary curmudgeons who get along, perhaps, because they agree that it is worth forgoing amenities like Laundromats and malls for peace and quiet.

