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The Sunday Times

June 18, 2006

Go the Long way

It is famous for being an exclusive retreat for wealthy celebrities, but there is another side to Long Island that is worth leaving Manhattan for, writes Jason Allardyce

'Dahling!' Long Island's answer to Zsa Zsa Gabor has taken hold of my wrist and is staring sorrowfully into my eyes. It is clear she has bad news to break over a cup of Starbucks coffee.

The trouble, it emerges, is that Ingrid Lemme, from Gurney's Inn resort in Montauk, New York, has forgotten our booking. And with stars such as Alec Baldwin and Debra Winger expected to attend the launch party for the Hamptons International Film Festival that night, it looks as if we might be sleeping on the beach.

Fortunately, Ingrid is nothing if not tenacious and after a flurry of telephone calls she secures us a room and VIP guest passes to the film festival party to make amends for the mix-up.

At last we can settle in and enjoy the spectacular view of Atlantic rollers crashing on to the beach. Montauk, on the easternmost tip of Long Island, is only 110 miles from downtown Manhattan but it feels a million miles from the 24/7 cacophony of the city. This is where New Yorkers come to recharge their batteries, especially during the humid summer months.

Slightly more down at heel than the neighbouring Hamptons, the string of villages famous for summering celebrities, Montauk has a relaxing, laid-back feel. There are few designer shops or five-star restaurants but plenty of cosy diners and surf shacks.

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The beaches are wide and, even at the height of the season, comparatively empty. Fishing boats bob in the harbour and much of the land formerly inhabited by American Indian tribes is protected as a state park.

It's easy to see why stressed-out New Yorkers jam up the Long Island Expressway every Friday evening for a weekend of fresh air and beautiful scenery. There are roadside farm shops and pick-your-own pumpkin fields as well as vineyards on the north fork of the island.

Easthampton, Southampton and Bridgehampton on the south fork are Long Island's best known villages. They are universally upmarket, with branches of Tiffany's, Chanel and Dior dotted along the high streets and sprawling beach houses hidden from view by artfully grown, impossibly high hedges. Real estate in the Hamptons is among the most expensive in the US. If you have to ask the price of property here, you almost certainly can't afford it.

If the strain of being among so many beautiful people with limitless amounts of money gets too much there are plenty of other areas of Long Island to explore. For a retro flavour you could visit the sleepy village of Greenport, which seems happily stuck in a 1950s timewarp. In keeping with its backwards-looking vibe, there are several antique shops alongside traditional diners where waitresses in checked aprons will give you as many coffee refills as you can drink.

If you are combining a trip to Long Island with a visit to New York City, you could take the train to Port Jefferson, a pretty fishing village just 58 miles from midtown Manhattan. Once synonymous with whaling, then shipbuilding, it is now a popular vacation spot which buzzes with vibrancy in the summer months.

Like much of Long Island, the community, with its painted wooden houses and friendly welcome, has a New England feel about it — perhaps not surprising given that there is a ferry that ploughs across the Long Island Sound to Connecticut several times a day.

There are fantastic seafood eateries and a wholesome atmosphere — its spotless narrow streets are home to not one but two dedicated Christmas shops and a huge effort is made to dress every shop window during America's many festivals.

Back in Montauk it is time for a spot of indulgence in the spa at Gurney's. Having opted for the "argilite" treatment, I am being scrubbed all over with calcium and magnesium grains, blasted with multiple-head showers and smeared with hot, mineral-rich mud

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from France before I am mummified and zipped into something resembling a body bag. After a few anxious moments I am transported in my Cellophane cocoon to a happy place where troubles melt away.

Afterwards I lie back in a lounge chair by the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the ocean. If I could have summoned the energy, I could have taken a dip in the state's only seawater pool, with a water temperature of 84F.

Montauk's appeal goes back a long way. American Indians inhabited the region for thousands of years before European settlers arrived in the 1600s. Wyandanch, the Montakett leader, gave the English rights to pasture cattle in 1665. These days the region's spectacular cliffs and lush landscapes draw an eclectic mix of surfers, weather-beaten fishermen, writers and artists.

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The beginning of autumn is perhaps one of the best times to wander into this little piece of paradise. As the season winds down after Labor Day weekend (the first in September), the madding crowds disappear, along with the traffic. The water is still warm and there is plenty of sunshine and things to do.

You can take a whale-watching trip or a romantic moonlit stroll along pristine sands to New York's oldest lighthouse, where a 137-step climb is rewarded with grand views out to Connecticut and Rhode Island. There are hot-air balloon rides out over the island or horse riding along Indian trails.

We decide to have a go at gliding. It sounded like such a peaceful pastime, soaring gently over the \$20m mansions below, unless your "retired" pilot, like ours, has a passion for high-speed nose dives. It's well worth the rush so long as you haven't just had a typically enormous American breakfast.

On a clear day it's possible to see all the way to Manhattan's towering skyscrapers and gliding is well worth a try in a land synonymous with aviation. From the late 19th century daredevils began jumping off the North Shore cliffs in birdman-like gliders. During the golden days of flying there were around 70 airfields dotted on Long Island and countless records were set.

While the Wright brothers' pioneering flights took off from North Carolina, a vast number of flying firsts are associated with New York State, including Charles Lindbergh's 1927 non-stop transatlantic solo flight in the single-engine plane The Spirit of St Louis, which started from Roosevelt Airfield, Long Island, some time before it became a shopping mall.

Back on the ground it's well worth driving along the Long Island heritage trail, which recognises the horse-drawn journey made by George Washington in 1790 to thank his Long Island supporters for their help in winning the American Revolution against the British.

So, when Manhattan has worn out your shoes, Long Island is the perfect place to recover — and you never know who you might bump into.

Details: The Long Island Convention & Visitors

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Bureau (www.funonli.com) offers details of activities and special deals on Long Island. The Long Island Rail Road runs a regular service from Penn Station, NYC, to towns across Long Island.

Rooms at Danfords in Port Jefferson start from £57, www.danfords.com; from £57 at The Greenporter hotel, Greenport, www.thegreenporter.com; and from £114 at Gurney's, Montauk, www.gurneys-inn.com. All prices exclude local taxes.

New York City's tourist board (www.nycvisit.com) can be contacted on 020 7202 6368 Continental Airlines (www.continental.com) fly direct from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Newark. Prices start at £464.10 return.

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