

TRAVEL

In New York's Shawangunk Mountains, old haunts and old friends



By Robert O'Harrow Jr.

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The view from Sam's Point Preserve in New York's Shawangunk Mountains, known by locals as the Gunks. (iStock)

We followed our own shadows on the path beneath the cliffs, marveling at the drama around us. Fields of boulders appeared to be frozen mid-tumble. Trees grew from cracks in the rock. In the softening light, the way ahead seemed as timeless as a de Chirico painting.

Few places have felt as right to me over the years as the Shawangunk Mountains, a singular ridge in New York's Hudson Valley region.

I returned in late April to reconnect with an old pal and guide him to some of my favorite walks. It turns out I was as delighted as he was. A long absence, extended for two years by the pandemic, had clearly dulled my memories.

It's not the altitude that distinguishes the Shawangunks, known by locals as the Gunks. They peak at under 2,300 feet. What impresses is an improbable blend of escarpments, ravines, windblown crags and banks of talus, all on a plateau that rises abruptly from the surrounding countryside.

Key to the topography is the underlying rock, a durable aggregate called Shawangunk Conglomerate. Glaciers scoured away softer stone all around the Gunks. Left behind are cliffs up to 350 feet high, several crystal-clear lakes and a fantastically diverse ecosystem that supports dozens of rare plant species.

About 90 miles of old carriage roads, built to accommodate 19th-century tourists, stitch it all together. They are the most accommodating pathways I've ever walked.

Add in some of the best climbing routes on the East Coast, a welter of nearby pubs and a thriving arts community, and you have a magnet for people who love the outdoors.

My friend Craig and I had only two walking days on this foray, but we were in no hurry. We ambled along, catching up while keeping an eye on the satisfying complexity around us. The path was as smooth as I remembered. Perfectly suited to a daydreamer-cum-hiker like me who tends to lose track of his feet.

[Paddling through a painterly landscape in New York's Adirondack Park]

As I shuffled along, the Gunks seemed like a kind of time machine. I felt as though I was seeing the place, or at least the gist of the place, as it was long ago.



People go canoeing on Lake Mohonk. (iStock)

I gave private thanks to the conservationists and environmental advocates who have worked for decades to protect this place and the nearby lowlands. On this short trip, we would be walking only on the [Mohonk Preserve](#). Formed in 1963, it includes more than 8,000 acres, not including the famed [Mohonk Mountain House](#), a luxurious resort and National Historic Landmark that crowns the Gunks.

The preserve abuts the [Minnewaska State Park Preserve](#), an even larger gem that I plan to explore again next time. Conservationists and state environmental officials fought fierce legal and public relations battles over land use in the 1980s. They stymied proposals for condos, a conference center and a golf course that would have subverted the vibe of the ridge and one of its most scenic places, Lake Minnewaska.

Arnold Guyot, once a professor of geology and geography at Princeton University, surely would have applauded those efforts. In 1887, after his own visit here, he gushed: “Few spots on our continent unite so much beauty of scenery, both grand and lovely, within so small a compass, to be enjoyed with so much ease.”

We planned our rendezvous for late last year. Craig and I both like cold-weather walking. After being cooped up because of the pandemic, I pined to return to the Hudson Valley, where I lived in the 1980s. I wanted to see how easy and inexpensive I could make the trip, with an eye to visiting more often.

We booked rooms for late December, just in time for another surge of the [coronavirus](#). Although we bailed, we kept our eyes on public health data. We made another push when the numbers dropped to reasonable levels. I bought a round-trip bus ticket to Manhattan, a bargain at about \$100. I limited my stuff to a single shoulder pack.

In less than five hours after boarding the bus on a street corner in Arlington, Va., I stepped down at Madison Square Garden. I had just enough time to get a slice at a joint on Eighth Avenue before Craig retrieved me. We made our way over to the Hudson River, then up to New Paltz, about 90 hilly miles north.

Our first stop was a house we rented through Airbnb at offseason rates. It was perched on a small hill on New Paltz's Huguenot Street, perhaps the oldest continuously inhabited street in America. French immigrants, seeking religious freedom, established themselves there in the late 17th century. A big window offered a view of Sky Top Tower, an iconic stone structure above the cliffs to the west.



A gazebo sits atop a cliff overlooking a forest valley in the Mohonk nature preserve. (Shutterstock)

It was afternoon now, and we had to get moving. I pulled out my maps to select the right trailhead from the six that offer access to the Mohonk Preserve. I had to smile. They reminded me of the colorful place names and climbing routes that add poetic seasoning to the mountains: The Trapps. Lost City. Coxing Kill. Guyot Hill. Ice Caves. Boulder of the Gods. Land of the Giants.

Craig and I agreed on the West Trapps Trailhead, a popular spot in the heart of things. The preserve charges \$15 for a day pass to hike. No one was in the official booth when we arrived, so we decided to hoof it as scofflaws. As I looked around the parking lot, the time-machine effect took hold: climbers putting away packs loaded with carabiners, ropes and chalk bags; mountain bikers tucking away their rides; and walkers striding toward the trails.

It felt the same as ever.

We walked to a fork in the path, a crossroads overhung with massive slabs of rock that seemed poised to crush us. A howling wind, coming from the direction of the Overcliff route, persuaded us to go the other way. We took the Undercliff road instead.

The quiet crunch of the gray stone surface fueled my pleasure. So did the lofty eastern views of Hudson Valley farms and houses.

“Where’s the college?” Craig asked. I pointed out [SUNY New Paltz](#), an artsy school not far from our lodgings, that has helped the old village retain a hippie attitude.

To the left of the path, the cliff rose like a giant castle wall. Between us and the cliffs was a great jumble of boulders. Smaller stones had been fashioned into artful, almost camouflaged steps that provided access to climbing routes.

My eyes wandered up, and I watched as a climber, perhaps 50 feet above a partner managing the safety ropes, sought cracks and other irregularities he could use as finger- and toeholds to continue rising.

Coming toward us on the path were other climbers on another type of outing. They carried large, thick mats on their backs. “They’re bouldering,” I whispered to Craig. He nodded in a way that meant he had no idea what I was talking about.

“Bouldering” is the practice of climbing without ropes, on short but challenging routes usually a few feet off the ground, I explained. The climbers typically use mats instead of ropes as protection against falls. Before long, we arrived at one of the bouldering routes, off to the side of our path. It was on a mammoth brindled rock, stained with rust, black and orange. Cracks and other features were marked by clouds of white chalk where the climbers had grabbed hold.

The image struck me as similar to modern art — or perhaps postmodern petroglyphs.

Further on, a rope blocked one of the stairways up to the cliff. A sign announced why: It was the breeding season of peregrine falcons. A section of the cliffs was their temporary home. I could not see the birds, but I was thrilled by the idea of their presence.

The writer Robert Macfarlane once wrote that, for some people, “landscape was intricately involved with self-perception, and for whom certain places or weathers brought yields of grace.”

I was beginning to understand what he meant.



A trail near New Paltz, N.Y. (Robert O'Harrow Jr. for The Washington Post)



A fork in the road awaits some hikers. (Robert O'Harrow Jr. for The Washington Post)

I had another goal in mind.

My family has a Gunks tradition that I wanted to share with Craig. It involves a post-walk visit to the [Mountain Brauhaus](#), a restaurant and bar near the base of the mountains. Run by the same family since 1955, the Brauhaus serves German food in an old-school environment, where bartenders put ice in tall glasses to keep them chilled for the beer.

It was crowded when we arrived. One of the owners, Mark Ruoff, remembered me somehow. He gave us a table in the woody, old-fashioned bar, below old photos of celebrated local climbers. We drank Spaten and ate Reuben strudel, a concoction of corned beef, sauerkraut and Swiss and Gruyère cheeses, wrapped in flaky pastry.

We did not walk far that afternoon, maybe five miles. The light was waning. Besides,

It was superb — almost as good as the walk.

Tourists and walkers have been visiting the Gunks since the 19th century. Entrepreneurs built several Victorian hotels near lakes Mohonk and Minnewaska that catered to visitors.

Hoteliers of the day considered the landscape something that needed to be shaped, so they built pathways to romantic vistas and carriage roads for outings further afield, according to the 2015 book [“The Gunks \(Shawangunk Mountains\) Ridge and Valley Towns Through Time.”](#)

The Mohonk Preserve is now within easy driving distance for many people. It has more than 300,000 visitors annually. Because parking is limited to the trailheads, those who arrive late on a busy weekend will find themselves frustrated.

Ellen Sticker, chief of staff at the preserve, told me she and her colleagues have dueling missions: to protect the Gunks and to inspire people to enjoy their wonders. “It’s a balancing act all the time,” she said.

The next morning, after breakfast in the village, Craig and I decided to head to the Spring Farm Trailhead. It provides access to a different kind of walking than we had the day before: narrow, wooded trails and some carriage roads that start low and wend up the northern end of the preserve. Our destination was Bonticou Crag.

The first stage took us through a meadow that rose up the mountain to an edge of trees. I glanced behind me. The slate-blue Catskill Mountains made a silhouette against the sky. We entered a forest just coming into bud.

About one hour later, we faced a decision: Should we follow an imposing vertical shortcut, through a jumble of giant, angular boulders, known as the Bonticou rock scramble, or should we take the long way around?

We took the long way. Apart from being less strenuous, it had the virtue of winding through rare stands of pitch and dwarf pines. Such trees, gnarly and stout, can live for hundreds of years on the harsh, stony landscape of the higher elevations.



Blueberries at the Mohonk Preserve, where miles of carriage paths provide access to hiking, biking, climbing and horseback riding. (iStock)

Bonticou Crag proved as satisfying as ever. A wicked wind blasted over it, adding a sense of peril to beautiful views: the pines and the rock, the soft-blue sky, the rock scramble from above, the Hudson Valley on one side, the Catskill Mountains on the other.

We agreed that it was time for a halfway snack, retreated from the crag and settled in a clearing in the pines lower down.

I found a depression in the rock that was just long enough for me to lie on. It was filled with pine needles and loamy humus. For a short spell before the walk back, I lay in the sunlight, closed my eyes and drifted.

O'Harrow is a writer based in Arlington, Va. Find him on Twitter: [@robertoharrow](https://twitter.com/robertoharrow).

If You Go

Where to stay

Minnewaska Lodge

3116 U.S. 44, Gardiner, N.Y.

845-255-1110

minnewaskalodge.com

A comfortable property with 26 rooms, this lodge is tucked into the trees at the base of the Gunks. Some rooms include balconies and views of the cliffs. Midweek prices from about \$285 per night.

Where to eat

Mountain Brauhaus

3123 U.S. 44, Gardiner

845-255-9766

mountainbrauhaus.com

Opened in 1955, this family-owned restaurant serves cold beer and German food. Its menu relies on local vegetables and meats. The schnitzels with braised red cabbage are terrific, and you should try the Reuben strudel appetizer. Open Wednesday and Thursday, 1 p.m. to 8 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, noon to 8 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 7:30 p.m. Closed Monday and Tuesday. Schnitzels from \$20.

Main Street Bistro

59 Main St., New Paltz

845-255-7766

mainstreetbistro.com

This bistro offers a wonderful introduction to New Paltz's culture — and a magnificent breakfast before heading out to the mountains. Enjoy two eggs, home fries and toast for a few dollars. Open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Saturday 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday until 3 p.m. Breakfast entrees from about \$9.

What to do

Mohonk Preserve

3197 Route 44/55, Gardiner

mohonkpreserve.org

Mohonk Preserve has miles of carriage paths that provide access to hiking, biking, climbing and horseback riding. It has six main trailheads with parking. Visitor center open daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Trailheads open from 9 a.m. to sunset for day-use visitors. Visitor center and immediate area free; day-use fee \$15 for hikers and \$20 for bikers, climbers and horseback riders.

Nyquist-Harcourt Wildlife Sanctuary

133 Huguenot St., New Paltz

bit.ly/nyquist-harcourt

Near a street with houses dating to 1705, this sanctuary encompasses about 56 acres that are perfect for birdwatching and viewing wildflowers. Open daily, dawn to dusk. Free.

Information

iloveny.com

PLEASE NOTE

Potential travelers should take local and national public health directives regarding the pandemic into consideration before planning any trips. Travel health notice information can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's interactive map showing travel recommendations by [destination](#) and the CDC's [travel health notice webpage](#).