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City Life Stressing You Out? Flee to These Tiny Homes in the Woods

A startup is betting that young city-dwellers need to unwind in the least urban place imaginable.



Roderick Aichinger/Getaway

By Rodrigo Duran

January 5, 2018 at 9:55 AM EST

In a secluded area of New York's Catskills Mountains, there's a small campsite that promises a full escape. The woods seem to continue forever in all directions, and aside from the occasional hiker, there's no one to be seen. For the visitors who are here, a few tiny-home cabins offer just the bare necessities.

It's an attractive spot for nature lovers, and perhaps even more so for visitors from New York City, with their reputation for fast-paced, overstressed lifestyles. That's exactly what Getaway, the startup behind this campsite, wants to help them with.

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The chance for a short retreat to nature is what attracted Yumi Matsuo, a photographer who wanted to flee the city for a weekend. She discovered the campsite after the company liked her photos on Instagram. When she arrived, she found that most people she met on the campsite actually lived within a 30-mile radius of her Brooklyn apartment. “Every single person who was there was a New Yorker,” Matsuo says.

Similar scenes have popped up in forest areas outside Boston and Washington, D.C. Getaway, which started in Massachusetts, occupies 80 acres of the forests with boxy, wood paneled cabins within a couple-hours’ drive from each city. It’s betting that young city-dwellers want to unwind in the least urban place imaginable.

“We see ourselves enabling city living.”

“When you’re there, you can’t necessarily see the next cabin over,” Matsuo says. “When you’re inside of the cabins, it really feels remote.”

Getaway takes the tiny-house trend and pares it down even further, fitting just the essentials into 150 square feet: shower, kitchen, bed, and plenty of windows to see the forest. The houses aren’t far apart, but each gets one acre to itself, plus its own private view of the forest. The lodging itself is the destination. “We ended up with a perfect piece of hardware on which to escape to nature,” Getaway co-founder Jon Staff says.

The barebones layout means visitors don’t have to spend time settling in. In a typical unit for two, the first thing you’d notice is a wall-sized window right above the bed. The bed itself takes up about a third of the room. Next to that is the bathroom; the shower is elevated so it doesn’t drain out into the kitchen a few steps away.



Roderick Aichinger/Getaway

A reservation comes with a guide for low-tech activities meant to optimize relaxation, as well as a box to lock up your cellphone during the visit. The chance to disconnect is what got the attention of Tracy Ann Koch, a then Massachusetts-based social media manager who went to Getaway's New Hampshire location in August 2016 to "turn off from social media." In the time since, she's become an advocate for the experience. "I've referred about a half-dozen old co-workers, once as a wedding gift for the newlywed couple last year," she says.

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Getaway certainly didn't invent the idea to create tiny-home escapes in the woods. But what sets it apart is the near-obsessive execution of relaxation, says Dan Stokols, a research professor of psychology and urban planning at University of California, Irvine, and author of "Social Ecology in the Digital Age." By managing so many outside factors, Stokols says, visitors get something essential to de-stressing: the perception that they're totally in control of everything around them.

"Going out to nature can be a very rewarding experience, but not in overwhelming natural areas," he says. Stokols recommends a vacation that offers a new environment punctuated with spectacular or unusual moments, "like if you were walking through the woods and saw a flight of geese."

The health benefits of trees on urban life are well documented. Whether its a national park or a small plot in a city, greenery provides "a place where people can restore their batteries," Stokols says. "Just living on the side of an apartment building that faces a public park can improve someone's quality of life."

He says stress comes from the feeling of always being online. For some people this leads to emotional atrophy—a condition that hinders people's ability to read nonverbal cues and negotiate conflict. "When you're working and get interrupted 14 to 15 times a day by notifications and emails, it switches your focus and fragmentation of attention," Stokols says.

That helps explain why cities have been a good foil for Getaway—and Staff acknowledges that.


"We see ourselves enabling city living," he says. "We want to make sure people can spend time in both places."

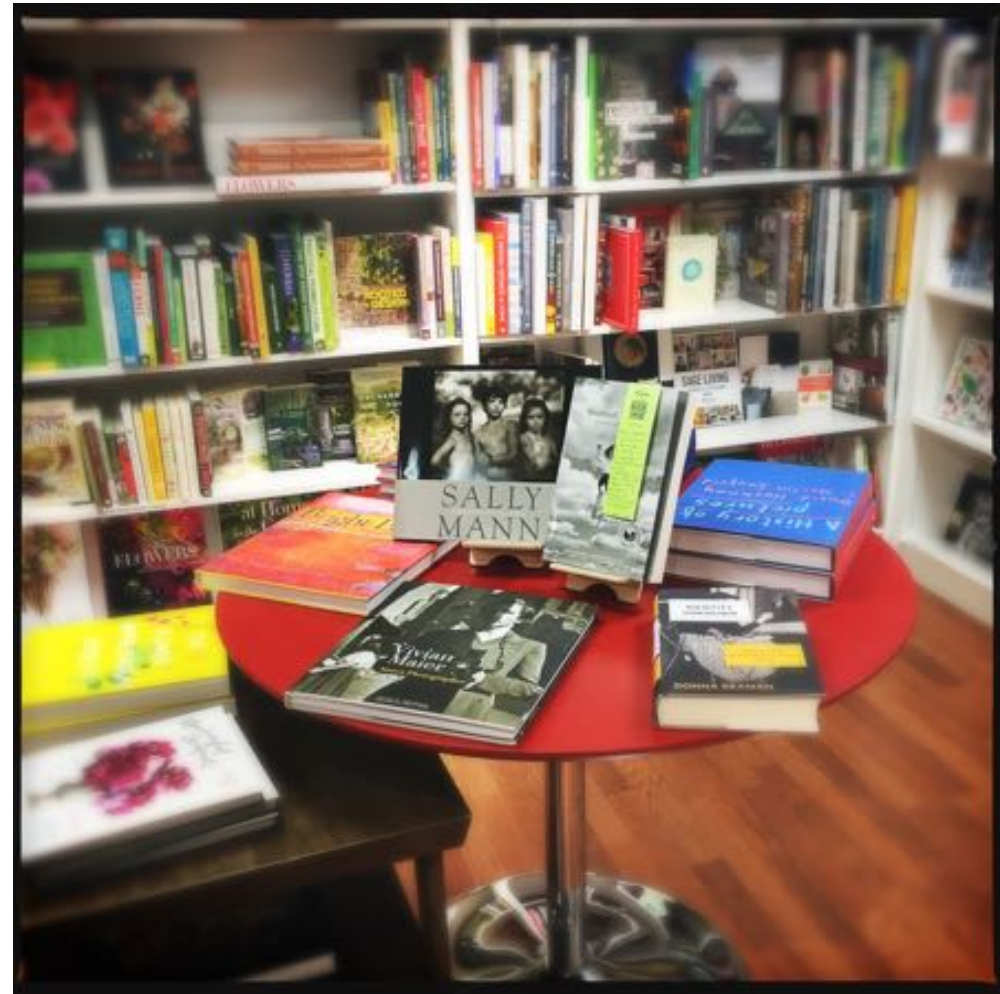
With a warm reception so far, and with how little time it takes to build a Getaway, it's possible to imagine them appearing in forests of more major cities to come. There's one thing Staff doesn't expect to see on the campsites: corporate retreats. When companies reach out to Getaway, "we tell them, 'Why don't you send your three hardest working [employees] instead?'"

CITY DESK

D.C. Is Having an Independent Bookstore Renaissance

Take a walk through Bookstore City and find new shops in several neighborhoods across the District.

 by **RODRIGO DURAN**
MAY 9TH, 2018



East City Bookshop Credit: Darrow Montgomery / File

Laurie Gillman's neighborhood bookstore closed in 2009. She'd lived on Capitol Hill for 25 years, and she could tell her community was not taking the news well. "After a year of saying, 'Why doesn't anyone open a bookstore?' I realized no one was going to do it," says Gillman.

She decided to open her own, and now East City Bookshop is coming up on its two-year anniversary. "Without a bookstore, how can you say you're a really good neighborhood?" she asks.

So many local bookstores are cropping up across D.C. that you can go from Anacostia to H Street NE, only visiting new bookstores, and hit most large neighborhoods. Include legacy stores like Politics and Prose and you can nearly map the whole city, jumping from bookstore to bookstore, browsing a variety of specially-curated selections of books. Recently-opened book stores in the District have focused on being hyper-local, carrying works that specifically reflect their communities.

For D.C.'s independent bookstores, part of being hyper-local means carrying titles by the city's authors. And in an effort to cultivate a community of writers, this new generation of independent stores is developing methods for connecting readers to the authors and poets of the District.

Acclaimed young adult author **Jason Reynolds** is a patron of East City Bookshop, partially because he lives close by. According to Gillman, just having the author spend time in the store, where his own books are on the shelves, shapes the way that people think about East City Bookshop. "It's more and more about being hyper-local and making people feel at home," she says.

Across the river in Anacostia, MahoganyBooks asked Reynolds to speak at their grand opening. Mahogany is the first bookstore to be opened in Anacostia in 20 years. Along with the promise of books on the African diaspora—books that spoke to an audience they had cultivated over 10 years as an online bookseller—owners **Derrick** and **Ramunda Young** also invited local authors to speak.

"We wanted to figure out how we could bring out local writers and local editors and have them be in the space together," says Ramunda Young. "Everyone is looking for an area where they can find support."



MahoganyBooks Credit: Darrow Montgomery / File

Focusing on their direct impact to the community, the Youngs have started calling themselves social-preneurs, bringing back a familial attitude that used to be supplied by D.C.'s tradition of independently owned bookstores. "I remember Caravan, Crown bookstores; I worked at Karibu," says Derrick Young. "I had access to these small community bookstores that helped to define these neighborhoods." To that end, from the start MahoganyBooks partnered with Duende District, a pop-up bookstore that specializes in books written by people of color.

Angela Maria Spring invented Duende District. She created a bookstore that could operate without having a brick and mortar location, and currently splits her week between the upper floor of BloomBars in Columbia Heights and MahoganyBooks, where she curates and runs a portion of the store. She recently opened a new location open now through early July at the Torpedo Factory Art Center in Alexandria. "I'm able to go anywhere," she says.

A year ago Spring left her job at Politics and Prose with hopes of increasing representation for writers of color in the city. Now her store is becoming a major player in D.C.'s independent

bookstore scene. She frequently hosts local poets and writers as well as author-led writing workshops in English and in Spanish. Recently, through a collaboration with nonprofit literary organization Pen Faulkner, Duende District hosted Howard University Professor and writer **Natalie Hopkinson** to talk about her book, *A Mouth is Always Muzzled: Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance*.

For Spring, the goal is to be able to influence which books publishing houses produce. “I’d love to carry your books; are they written by people of color?” Spring tells publishers who call the store. “That’s when you see how they have been thinking about [race] and you start a conversation.”

In Petworth, Upshur Street Books hosts a summer long program in partnership with the **Slipform Poetry Workshop**, a program through the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Younger writers work to produce a chapbook—a small, usually handmade book of poetry or fiction—and release them at an event at the store. Upshur Street Books is treating this release with the same respect as any other book release event.

“It’s important for writers, particularly young and new writers, to think that bookstores are porous,” says **Katie Presley**, the buyer at Upshur Street Books. “We don’t want someone to think, ‘My book will only be in a bookstore when I’ve made it.’”

Carrying handmade books and zines along with traditionally-published books by D.C. writers allows Upshur books to expand the expectation of what you can pick up at a bookstore, and gives shoppers a better look at what the Petworth community is producing.

On H Street, the coming-soon signs for a new bookstore hung for almost a year as the owners crafted their plan of action, and following a successful Christmas pop-up, **Jake Cumsky-Whitlock** and his business partner **Scott Abel** opened their doors to Solid State Books. After departing from Kramerbooks, a Dupont Circle mainstay, the two planned to take advantage of an evolving H Street.

“We want to make it so parents can come in with their kids and let them loose there while they browse,” says Cumsky-Whitlock. His son goes to school nearby, and he imagines the kids who get their start reading and enjoying books early will grow up to be the local writers of the city.

“D.C. is a great town to be a young writer in,” says Cumsky-Whitlock. “In a town with less of an independent bookstore presence or book event presence, it would be much more difficult ... It behooves ourselves to try and promote other bookstores. It reflects well on the city as a whole.”

Now with over thirty years in the district, Politics and Prose seems like the gold standard for what a D.C. independent bookstore can become. When the late **Carla Cohen** lost her job working for President **Jimmy Carter**, she founded Politics and Prose, which would go on to be the go-to spot for a Washington insider’s tell-all memoir release party and for every traveling fiction author to speak. Now Politics and Prose has expanded to a new location at The Wharf, and plans to open a third at Union Market later this year.



Politics and Prose Credit: Darrow Montgomery / File

“We were considering quite a few locations, identifying areas of D.C. that were underserved,” says **Jon Purves**, former director of marketing and publicity. “There was an existing community in Southwest that didn’t really have access to a bookstore. There was all the land that was being redeveloped.”

Politics and Prose runs a quarterly literary journal, *District Lines*, along with a vanity publishing service. Purves sees a future for bookstores that carry more work by self-published authors. Being able to give a slight push to a book without involving big publishers has helped put local stories on

the shelves at Politics and Prose. Purves mentions the book *Slugg*, a self-published account of writer **Tony Lewis Jr.**'s life as the son of a D.C. kingpin, which has become one of the store's highest-selling books. Purves says self-published books find their way to Politics and Prose specifically because readers want them there.

"We were creating a bookstore that reflected the community, so we listened to what the local residents wanted to see from us," he says.

This story has been updated to reflect the location of the Torpedo Factory Art Center.

WASHINGTON DC

BROOKLAND

Inside St. Anselm's Abbey, Brookland's Philip Johnson- designed monastery

This once "overflowing," now dwindling monastery aspires to become a D.C. destination

By **Rodrigo Duran** Dec 22, 2017, 1:43pm EST

All photography by Alyssa Kopervos

All photos by Alyssa Kopervos

At St. Anselm's Abbey, just north of Brookland, a small collection of Tudor-style buildings encircle a white boxy cement monastery, which in 1960 became the first completed development in D.C. for architect Philip Johnson.

Three years before he would bring his distinct cement style to the Kreeger Gallery, an art space down the street from Georgetown University, Philip Johnson experimented with design in various religious projects around the country, including the [Roofless Church](#), an innovative open air place of worship that covers a city block, and the St. Anselm's Abbey Monastery where he would completely revamp the look of a traditional monastery.

To match the surrounding buildings, the monastery is brick at its base. On top sits a giant cement slab, which is supported by cement columns that get increasingly narrow at their base, a nod to cutting edge architectural trends of the time.

"If it were on a college campus, you wouldn't notice it, but as a monastery it looks like something out of *Star Trek*," says Hilary Lewis, curator of the Glass House, a 1949-built development that has since become a Philip Johnson museum. She worked closely with the architect before his death and has written two books on Johnson.





Cement fascinated young artists in the early 1960s, she explains, who focused on pushing its “plastic qualities”—its potential to be manipulated into any shape—and Johnson, who had previously been a home builder, was eager to employ these new techniques without being bound to the expectations of tenants.

Lewis explains, “A religious building is one of the preferred projects you could get. It’s less about real estate and more about artistic expression.”

For the monks, the development would serve as a place to manage their ballooning numbers. As Johnson’s monastery was being built, 34 monks filled the main church, a long and traditionally designed building with a pointed wooden roof and a small chapel inside, that was completed in the 1930s.

“We were overflowing,” says James Wiseman, the Abbot at St. Anselm’s. He joined the Abbey while Johnson’s monastery was being completed and remembers that many of the monks chose not to move to the new monastery until certain alterations had been added to make the building more suitable.

Getting into the monastery requires walking up a set of steep cement stairs which, at the insistence of older monks, now has a guard railing. The dark metal bars, over the years, have leaked rust onto the cement. Doors to bedrooms and offices line the hallway, which leads around a courtyard. Wiseman describes a swirling vortex of snow that formed in the courtyard one winter. Without the glass panels which surround the courtyard, the snow would have been at his front door. For Wiseman, Philip Johnson had “imagined a courtyard from the Mediterranean, but that doesn’t work in this climate.”



As more monks moved to Johnson's monastery, the main church's bedrooms took on other uses, especially now since only 13 monks live full-time at St. Anselm's Abbey. The first floor's rooms are reserved for retired monks who share an on-staff caretaker and are often visited by family. The remaining rooms are for monastery guests. The [Washington Post](#) called the over 200 weary guests that St. Anselm's receives yearly as "hypertensive stockbrokers, burned-out journalists, depressed lawyers—men who called, wanting to check in for a few days of serious contemplation."

Incidentally, what has brought people to St. Anselm's is not Philip Johnson's architectural reputation, but rather it is the small dormitories with twin-sized beds in this older building, which look like something out of a picture book and have become an excursion for the few outsiders in the District who know about them.

With all of a monk's salary going to the Abbey, they keep the lights on and employ a small team: rotating receptionists, a caretaker for retired monks, a cook, and a layman beekeeper who tends to the beehives of Brother Maurus Wolf who has passed on.

In a wide dining room with wooden tables, monks in black gowns file in from the chapel. They point out where to get ice from the kitchen and talk about how their small garden will not survive the chill tomorrow morning. Where the chicken wire drapes too low sometimes deers jump over and eat tomatoes from Father Christopher Wyvill's personal farm. On a central table, tuna salad sandwiches and clam chowder are served buffet style for everyone to share.

Within the next 10 years, the monks aspire to turn the guest rooms into a destination for members of Congress.

"We are losing good Congressmen to the stress of D.C.," says Wiseman. He takes inspiration from Ohio Congressman Tim Ryan's [campaign to bring meditation to Capitol Hill](#). A more immediate goal is larger rooms with queen-sized beds to accommodate married couples.

The St. Anselm's Abbey's founding church, Fort Augustus in Scotland, which is honored with a large mural in the basement of the monastery, was converted into condominiums that overlook Lake Loch Ness with the original stone facade preserved. To the monks, Fort Augustus represents a heritage that goes beyond Washington, D.C. With an almost 100-year history in the District, these men in traditional black robes teach at Catholic University of America and the St. Anselm's High School. Making adjustments to bring in more visitors is part of the mission for a dwindling number of monks striving to continue their impact. ■

