

## Taking the A Train to Summer

WHEN the sun glares down on the city, New Yorkers of means flee for the beach. Matt Kaye, a bar manager and D.J. who lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was such a refugee.



Summertime Idyll in the Rockaways

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Outside Rippers, a popular hangout on the boardwalk near 86th Street, Rockaway Beach's surfing area.

He sat outside Rippers, a new grass-fed-burger shack that opened over the Memorial Day weekend, sipping an iced coffee. In the distance, a pod of [surfers](#) bobbed in the water, waiting for waves. An inked-up pal from Brooklyn, carrying a beach umbrella, wandered by to chat about swimming conditions. “The water’s too cold,” said Mr. Kaye, who wore a faded Spuds MacKenzie T-shirt and 10-day stubble. “But you know I had to get in for a minute.”

It was a vision of summertime idyll that plays out every weekend in the beach towns around New York. But this was not the Hamptons, Fire Island or even Jones Beach. It was the Rockaways in Queens — the sliver of dilapidated bungalows, drug-riddled public housing and W.P.A.-era boardwalk at the end point of the A train.

Over the last few summers, this sandy and pockmarked peninsula has become an unlikely hangout for young, artsy types who make their home in Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan. Arriving by single-gear bicycle, Zipcar and the occasional skateboard, they’ve turned the once-neglected beach community into an anti-Hamptons, where polo games and Champagne galas have been replaced by bungalow barbecues and piña colodas at old Irish pubs. “The boardwalk is the new Bedford Avenue,” said Mr. Kaye, 34, referring to the cafe-clogged commercial spine of Williamsburg.

The Rockaways’ rising popularity among the younger creative set has been profound. Not long ago, the remote beach at Fort Tilden, a former military base along the peninsula’s western side, hosted scattered picnickers, gay nudists and Russian fishermen reeling in spiny sea robins. Nowadays, the beachgoers are more likely to sport tattoo sleeves, Wayfarer sunglasses and Brooklyn ZIP codes, and fall between their mid-20s and mid-30s.

And this summer, its newfound cachet as a weekend getaway has been elevated. Concession stands that sell quinoa black-bean burgers and rice-milk smoothies have popped up along the boardwalk. Outdoor concerts that evoke the original McCarren Park Pool parties in Williamsburg are being staged. And real estate agents are eagerly marketing condos as summer vacation homes for young professionals.

“It’s got a little bit of everything,” said Chris Parachini, an owner of Roberta’s, the unofficial canteen of bohemian Bushwick. Mr. Parachini, who has been coming to the Rockaways for 10 years, is a partner in Rippers. “It vaguely reminds me of Venice in Los Angeles 25 years ago.”

THE ROCKAWAY PENINSULA, nicknamed Rocapulco, or simply the Rock, is an 11-mile ribbon of land that juts out from the southern tip of Queens. Its coastline is girdled with prime beachfront, including a pristine section that is part of the Gateway National Recreation Area, home to a maritime forest, marshy dunes and nesting grounds for migrating [birds](#).

## Fashion & Style

Despite such natural beauty, the Rockaways' eastern side became a symbol of urban neglect and governmental shoulder-shrugging. Once an elegant resort lined with Victorian mansions, it waned in popularity after World War II, and neighborhoods were razed to make way for public housing projects. "You ceased to have a summer rental population," said Lawrence Kaplan, co-author of "Between Ocean and City: The Transformation of Rockaway, New York."

Things started turning about a decade ago, and one of the first crews to plant their weekend flags on the grittier Rockaway Beach were hard-core surfers. (Breezy Point, a quiet beach community on the western tip long ago nicknamed the Irish Riviera, remains a popular summer getaway for older New York families.) Surfers would lug their boards on the subway and paddle out to Rockaway Beach. There was also an outlaw mentality: surfing was illegal, and wave riders would sometimes be ticketed. Their numbers have grown since 2005, when the city designated a two-jetty stretch near 90th Street New York's first surfable beach. (A second, smaller break near 67th Street was designated in 2007.) Dave Youn, 34, a computer programmer from Greenpoint, and 13 other surfers rent a yellow two-story bungalow on 91st Street for \$1,100 a month, mostly to store their boards.

Word of the cheap rents, easy commute and underpopulated [beaches](#) spread quickly, especially among beach-starved New Yorkers who find places like the Hamptons either too expensive or too bourgeois for their tastes. The Rockaway's grittiness and lack of family-friendly amenities were not deal-breakers but part of the appeal. "I didn't see one kid," said Chris Martin, 27, a skateboarder and photographer from Williamsburg, who car-pooled to Fort Tilden on Memorial Day. "It was awesome."

The rise of the Rockaways has also coincided with the swell of surf culture. Urban wave-rider boutiques like Surf NYC in SoHo have opened. Art shows devoted to surf culture have swept Chelsea galleries. And bands like Best Coast, Surfer Blood and Wavves are on this summer's playlists. "City beach culture is a special thing and a way of surviving," said Mary Meyer, a Brooklyn T-shirt designer who sells handmade Rockaway Beach tank tops online.

Rockaway Taco, which opened in 2008 on 95th Street, acted as the conduit between the surfers and the Williamsburg swarm. Food blogs like Grub Street hailed this tiny Mexican diner as a gastronomic second coming, comparing its chef, Andrew Field, to "a local Rick Bayless of sorts."

"We really had no culinary ambition except making the best fish taco for our friends and ourselves," said David Selig, who owns Rockaway Taco, along with Ñ, a tapas bar on Crosby Street, and Rice, an Asian fusion restaurant in NoLiTa and Dumbo. "We had no idea it would spawn what it did."

His beachfront empire has grown. Last November, Rockaway Taco won a bid from the city's Department of Parks and Recreation to overhaul three concessions stands at 86th, 96th and 106th Streets on the Rockaway Beach boardwalk.

Instead of freezer-burned hot dogs, Mr. Selig has created a kind of Brooklyn Flea by the sea, recruiting artisanal-minded vendors that send chowhound devotees into a lather. The lineup includes Babycakes, a [vegan](#) bakery on the Lower East Side; La Newyorkina, which makes ice pops in exotic flavors like hibiscus and horchata; and Vinegar Hill House, a rustic restaurant near the Brooklyn Navy Yard with a wood-burning oven.

A unique scene has also emerged at Rippers, the boardwalk burger place near 86th Street that is a joint venture between Roberta's and the Meat Hook, a butcher shop in Williamsburg born out of the nose-to-tail movement.

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The menu includes cheeseburgers made from upstate cows and a juice concoction of kale, green apple and ginger. On a recent Sunday, its picnic tables were filled with families, skaters, guys in cut-off denim shorts and Vans, and their girlfriends in racerback tops. Behind the counter, Michelle Cortez, a former cook at Savoy, ladled out cups of spicy limeade.

[Pop-ups](#) have also appeared. Veggie Island, an organic farmstand that opened next to the taco shack last year, has returned this summer as a beachside bodega at 96th Street, selling [vegetarian](#) sandwiches and dairy-free fruit shakes.

But this summer's biggest pop-up may be Rock Beach, a series of outdoor concerts at Floyd Bennett Field, the former airport on Jamaica Bay. They are being produced by Jelly NYC, the folks behind the defunct McCarren Park Pool parties.

"It's not really this secret anymore that it's cool out there" said Chris Goldstein, office manager at Jelly NYC. "Williamsburg has gotten so Chuck E. Cheesed out. People are looking for more of an adventure." THAT adventure includes real estate. While impoverished locals call some of the crumbling Far Rockaway bungalows home, urban professionals are turning others into retreats complete with antiques, espresso makers and patio furniture. A few well-preserved corridors seem trapped in the amber of the 1930s.

Besides the boxy bungalows (often nonwinterized wooden structures without kitchens or showers), larger cottages and glassy condos near the beach are now being marketed as summer homes, at a fraction of the cost in the Hamptons.

Among the new summer arrivals is Michael Piccininno, 34, a bartender who lives in the Financial District. Instead of going to Hampton Bays, he and his girlfriend, Jessica Uzzan, rented an apartment this summer at Arverne by the Sea, a new urbanist development with crisp clapboard, picket fences and the feel of a Phoenix ex-urb.

The one- and two-family units are priced between \$559,000 and \$899,000, and one 3,400-square-foot model includes a rental unit that can be furnished with granite countertops and stainless steel appliances. On a blistering Tuesday, Mr. Piccininno cooled off in a friend's nearby ocean-view rental. He cracked open a Budweiser and ticked off the benefits of the Rockaways. "You use your [MetroCard](#)," said Mr. Piccininno, who found his studio apartment on Craigslist and pays \$4,000 for a six-month season. "I didn't do Montauk or Hamptons because it's so much harder to get there."

He has company. Folks from the worlds of art, design, fashion and food are also starting to summer here. "I wanted to be able to have a retreat in the spur of the moment," said Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, an interior designer from Chelsea who has worked for celebrities and high-end hotels. Last November, he and his partner, Steve [Wine](#), a lighting designer, bought a two-bedroom apartment at the Seavon, a development on the Ocean Promenade Walkway.

Their sunny condo has a portrait of Marie Antoinette, custom furniture and a bedroom awash in pink. It also includes a sleek balcony with unobstructed ocean views, which they regard as an escape from the frenzy and pretense of Chelsea.

"My favorite thing is to contemplate the ocean from the comfort of our terrace," Mr. Noriega-Ortiz said. "Sometimes you want a rest from chic-ness."