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Travel > United States

Beyond the big city

There's more to east coast America than New York. Joshua Stein discovers Maine's beaches, and could New Jersey be getting hip?

The Soprano state wises up

We New Yorkers can be guilty of stereotyped views of New Jersey (which viewers of shows such as *The Sopranos* may recognise). A night out on the Jersey Shore has, traditionally, been as appealing as a flock of spiky-haired dudes, doused in cologne and shouting about their "sick" cars and wrestling meets. This is obviously a snobbish perception, but ask any New Yorker about the "bridge and tunnel" set (so called due to their entry routes to the city) and you'll likely get a similar description.



Suburban chic ... Bungalow Hotel is a match for Manhattan. Photograph: Matthew Williams

So, I was somewhat surprised to learn that New Jersey was getting a new boutique hotel, designed by Robert and Cortney Novogratz of Sixx Design, no less. The Novogratzs are authors of a popular design book and the subjects of an upcoming reality TV series. They've made a name for themselves transforming wrecks and empty lots into chic livable

spaces. So I suppose it's only fitting that they were chosen to polish the diamond in the rough that is the Jersey Shore.

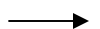
Could the Bungalow Hotel in Long Branch successfully convince nightlife snobs that there is fun to be had in our neighbouring state?



Photograph: Matthew Williams

Long Branch is a beach town about 55 miles south of New York city, or around an hour's train journey, so it is a completely viable beach add on for Manhattan city breaks. The hotel is situated at the front of Long Branch's Pier Village, a community of new condominiums about the size of Trafalgar Square.

It resembles a dream holiday home, with 24 rooms decorated like a design freak's pad, with quirky touches such as electric fireplaces, zebra skin carpeting and Phillippe Starck furniture. The lobby bar boasts vintage foosball and pool tables, feathered chandeliers and original artwork. You're unlikely to find anything more stylish in New Jersey.



Pier Village is easy to navigate on foot, with restaurants and shops all a stone's throw away from the water. The small coastal neighbourhood feels very Martha's Vineyard. The beach, like a family friendly version of South Beach in Miami: a similar sea of vibrant umbrellas and swimsuits, but here you're more likely to see amateur surfers and children building sandcastles than models posing.

Service at Bungalow and throughout the Pier Village was fantastic. The hotel has a deal with a nearby Gold's Gym and Le Club beach club (the latter of which includes a private rooftop pool and cocktail service). When my friend and I realised we had forgotten toothbrushes and toothpaste, a hotel manager was at our door within minutes with free supplies. At the Italian restaurant, when we were unsure which sangria to order with dinner, the waitress brought samples of both.

We were only an hour out of Manhattan, yet we may as well have been in California. Having arrived on a rainy Friday night with only the Saturday to spend exploring, we managed to cram in fireside cocktails, hours in the sun, a dip in the ocean, a lunch of fresh oysters and a spin through a chocolate shop. I can't say we uncovered any hipster enclaves (let's just say the Friday night lobby bar was more Twilight than Vampire Weekend), but it was a welcome and satisfying way to spend time outside the city, and perhaps the first indication that New Jersey is not so deserving of those Manhattan sneers as it once was.

Karen Ruttner

• Bungalow Hotel, Long Branch, (+1 732 229 3700, bungalowhotel.net). Rooms from \$270 per night.