

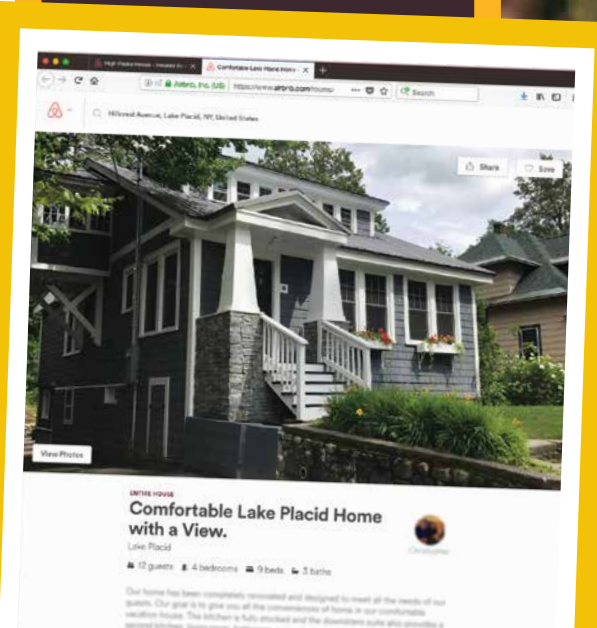
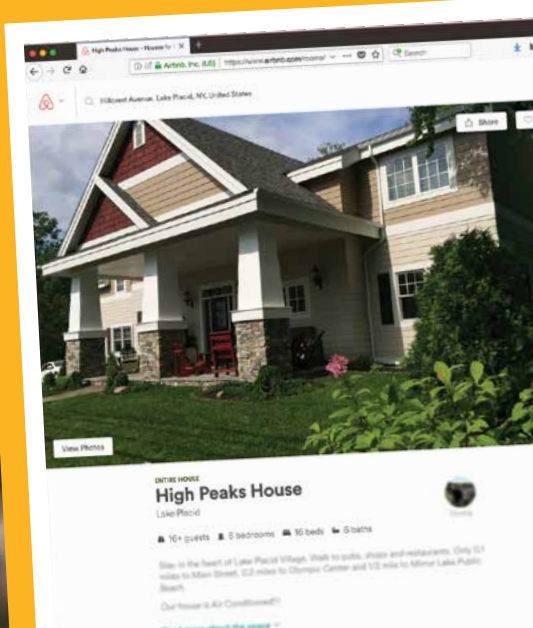


SPECIAL REPORT

# THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Airbnb has been blamed for the death of resort towns out West. In Lake Placid it's already altered the social landscape of some tight-knit residential communities, but it can also be a vital source of income in a place where it's hard to make a living. **IS THERE A SOLUTION?**

BY LUKE CYPHERS  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA





# SHEILA TAVARES

drives slowly through the streets of her Lake Placid neighborhood, giving what for her is a grim survey. “This house on the left is the one that sleeps 24,” she says, pointing to a massive, well-appointed McMansion. “And that gray one here is a vacation rental,” she says, her ice-blue eyes peering over her car’s dashboard and through her wire-framed glasses at Hillcrest Avenue. “This one’s a vacation rental, and the house in the back is a vacation rental. Everything on the left-hand side is a short-term rental.”

On and on it goes, block by block, house to house, with Tavares pointing to each rental address as if it were a losing battlefield in a war. In the eyes of Tavares and many others in Lake Placid, that’s exactly what it is—a class war in which family homes give way to short-term rentals; middle-class homeowners succumb to rich absentee landlords; and weekend party people displace long-term, working-class renters. It’s an invasion, led by a legion of doom called Airbnb.

Since 2008, Airbnb has grown from a startup app to a company valued at \$31 billion, hooking up homeowners’ spare rooms and vacated condos

with often younger, cost-conscious travelers who eschew traditional hotels. But while Airbnb has rejuvenated some struggling areas of the Adirondack Park, allowing hikers and others access to lodging off beaten paths, in traditional vacation spots such as Lake Placid, it’s become too much of a good thing.

Tavares has lived in the Hillcrest neighborhood for all but three years since 1978, when her father, a Methodist minister, was transferred from New Jersey to Placid. She remembers an almost exclusively owner-occupied neighborhood, where free-range kids had the run of the place on foot and on their bikes, and everybody knew everyone else.

Now? Her home on Maple Street, just off Hillcrest, sits next to a house rented to a new set of strangers every weekend via Airbnb. A house that advertises its ability to sleep 14 people and has a hot tub on the porch. A house that’s had at

**Lake Placid draws crowds for its Olympic fame, stunning landscape and as backdrop for events such as Ironman, the horse shows and Can-Am hockey. Facing page: On Hillcrest Avenue, Keela and Jim Rogers and Sheila Tavares remember a neighborhood where free-range kids had the run of the place, and everybody knew everybody else.**

least a dozen noise complaints to village of Lake Placid police since 2014. There may be more, says Chief William Moore, because the electronic filing system sometimes records the address of the complainant rather than the source of the complaint. Tavares, who works as a secretary at a local school, has made several of those calls, some of them well after three a.m.

She’s seen—and heard—women yelling after they dropped their cell phones in the tub, men yelling over the hum of the hot-tub motor as they line up beer cans on the porch railing, and one guy mooning his buddies and then yelling about it. One day, following a night during which she complained to police, Tavares and her 11-year-old son endured an expletive-filled screaming fit from an unhappy female guest. Tavares says she’s stopped herself from calling cops on numerous other occasions. “The police should not be responsible for Airbnb issues,” she says.

But she has no other recourse, and as a working person trying to raise two children, she feels increasingly isolated. “You can’t diminish the value of the people who live here,” she says. “We are the backbone of this village and town, and we’re just being stomped on. We keep the town’s heart beating. Every time a house is sold for an Airbnb, a little piece of that heart just”—she pauses as her voice catches—“dies.”



**ON AND ON IT GOES, BLOCK BY BLOCK, HOUSE TO HOUSE, WITH TAVARES POINTING TO EACH RENTAL ADDRESS AS IF IT WERE A LOSING BATTLEFIELD IN A WAR.**

**FROM LAKE PLACID TO SAN DIEGO,** and everywhere in between, Airbnb has transformed resort economies—opening up whole new swaths of real estate to short-term rentals. At first, these spare rooms and second-home rentals were an inexpensive alternative to high-end hotels charging hundreds of dollars a night and lower-priced motels that had seen better days. With Airbnb, a whole family, sports team or small tour group could suddenly rent a home and eat in for







The income from Shannon and Tyler Eaton’s Airbnb rental—their home on their sheep farm in Jay—covers their property taxes, and then some. Shannon says it allows her to work the farm rather than a full-time job elsewhere, which would also require the additional cost of childcare. Facing page: Short-term rentals for large groups offer a more affordable vacation experience that mimics aspects of the lifestyle of second-home owners.

a few days or a week or two, and experience life more like a local. Aided by the ease of handy apps at the dawn of the smartphone era, the market exploded, not only for Airbnb but for rivals such as Expedia’s HomeAway and VRBO.

“It’s everywhere,” says Roby Politi, a Realtor and supervisor of the town of North Elba, which encompasses the village of Lake Placid. “It’s what people want now—more extended-stay types of accommodations.”

The trend has contributed to a boom in vacation stays throughout Essex County, says James McKenna, head of the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism (ROOST). In 2017, Essex had more than 600 active rental units just for Airbnb, 358 of them in Lake Placid alone. These units have been a huge boost for ROOST. After much complaining

by local hoteliers, Airbnb agreed to include the county’s three-percent occupancy tax into its rental rates. In the first 16 months of collections, which began in September of 2016, the county took in some \$200,000 in occupancy tax from Airbnb’s nearly \$6.7 million in local rental revenue. (By law, 95 percent of that money goes to ROOST to promote regional tourism.)

Those numbers are cold comfort to full-time residents such as Tavares. “I’m not seeing any of it,” she says. Airbnb went to the Adirondacks, and all Tavares got was a bunch of loudmouths in a hot tub.

**FOR SOME OTHER ADIRONDACK RESIDENTS,** though, Airbnb is a living. Or at least a vital part of making ends meet. Shannon Eaton and her husband, Tyler, began renting out their home on Airbnb in 2012 on their small sheep farm in Jay, Blue Pepper Farm. The demand was instant, and soon they were turning away people who wanted to experience farm-to-table agriculture with their mucky boots on the ground. So the Eatons moved a yurt to the farm, which Shannon, Tyler and their two small children inhabit during the summer, allowing renters from as far away as Australia to enjoy the farmhouse and get a taste of the lifestyle.

The income covers the property taxes, and then some. The setup has worked so well they’ve started renting out the yurt during the winter to skiers, snowshoers and ice climbers. “It enables me to be here on the farm rather than be trying to work full time someplace else, and then paying for childcare, and trying to start a farm,” Eaton says. “It makes all of that possible.”

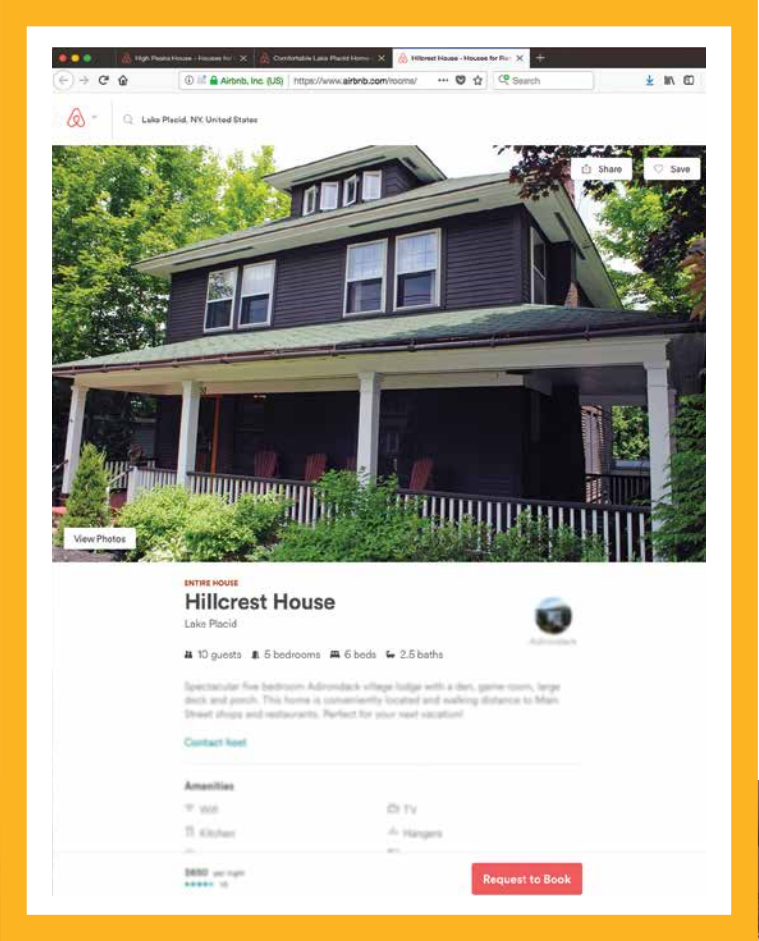
The Eatons are not alone. Several Adirondack farms, among them Asgaard Farm, in Au Sable Forks, and Sugar House Creamery, in Upper Jay, use Airbnb to provide an agritourism experience you won’t find at a Holiday Inn. Mean-

while, traditional second-homeowners have replaced dead weeks with rental income, while full-time owners use the service to cash in on garage apartments or spare bedrooms—just the way the Airbnb commercials portray the service.

But like Facebook, Uber and other tech-based service companies, Airbnb and other short-term rental services have disrupted existing markets in unforeseen ways—particularly in already hot vacation spots. “This is a nationwide problem,” says Politi, whose town has appointed a committee to study a permit system for short-term rentals. “Every resort community, and even in urban communities—San Diego and Denver and New York City.”

Tavares is far from alone in dealing with qual-

**THEY CALLED THE POLICE. WHEN OFFICERS AWAKENED THE MAN ON THE COUCH, HE WAS SHOCKED TO LEARN THE ROGERS’S HOUSE WAS NOT HIS SHORT-TERM RENTAL.**





ity-of-life issues. Jim and Keela Rogers have lived on Hillcrest Avenue since 1961. “It used to be a great neighborhood to raise kids,” Keela says. But it’s changed with the rentals, particularly in the past five years. They frequently have renters from the Airbnb next door park in their driveway, and occasionally have had to call the cops about various nuisances.

The most memorable event was a morning a few years ago. Jim came down the stairs to find Keela in the kitchen preparing breakfast. “Who’s on the couch?” he asked.

Keela replied that it was their nephew, Rob, whom they were expecting. “That’s not Rob,” Jim said.

**WITHOUT LONG-TERM RENTALS, MEMBERS OF THE PUB’S STAFF HAVE SPENT THE LAST YEAR COMMUTING AN HOUR AND 20 MINUTES EACH WAY, EVERY DAY, VIA PUBLIC BUS FROM MALONE.**

Keela theorized he was someone her granddaughter, who was staying with them at the time, had brought home. When her granddaughter entered the kitchen, Keela said, “Who’s the dude on the couch?”

“I don’t know,” her granddaughter replied.

“Don’t you lie to me,” Keela said.

“Grammy, I do not know who that person is.”

They called the police. When officers awakened the man on the couch, he was shocked to learn the Rogers’s house was not his short-term rental.

“He was a rugby player who had lost his way,” Keela said.

The Rogers’s biggest worry about the Airbnb invasion is not the occasional parking, noise or trespassers, but what’s lost when full-time residents disappear. Keela volunteered to organize ski-jumping competitions at Mount Van Hoevenberg for years, part of an army of community-minded citizens who staffed events and organizations. She wonders who will take up the slack as the community changes. And Jim wonders what happens to their property-tax assessments as neighboring home prices soar past the half-million-dollar mark.

“We made a mistake” not regulating these rentals earlier, Jim says. “The community didn’t have the foresight. You know, life in the rearview mirror is always quite clear.”

Chris Ericson, who along with his wife, Catherine, owns three restaurants in Lake Placid, says it’s hard to measure how much this new way of travel has hurt the local restaurant business. He’s certain a number of people who choose to stay in homes with kitchens cook meals for themselves rather than go out to eat. But that’s not the biggest impact on his businesses. “The most tangible way it’s affecting us is with our staff,” Ericson says.

Affordable housing has always been a problem in the village, but Airbnb

has exacerbated it. Out-of-town speculators have been buying homes in Lake Placid neighborhoods as short-term rental investments in the past five years or so, bringing in \$300, \$500 or \$1,000 a night during events such as the Ironman triathlon or the horse shows. That’s had a ripple effect, driving up rents in Saranac Lake and Wilmington.

“A lot of apartments and empty properties that potentially were being rented to more long-term tenants, including a lot of our staff members, and staff members at a lot of hotels, now are off of the market,” Ericson says.

Some members of Ericson’s Lake Placid Pub kitchen staff have spent the last year commuting an hour and 20 minutes each way, every day, via public bus from Malone—57 miles away from the tony vacation spot.

Husband and wife Misty and David Cayea love working in Lake Placid generally, and at the pub in particular. The fast pace of the work, the camaraderie with the crew, and the chance for advancement all make the pub a great employer, they say. There are few decent jobs in Malone—it’s the prisons, Walmart or fast food, basically—and Lake Placid’s vibe broadens their horizons.

David and Misty worked at hotels in the village before moving over to the pub, and David talks with pride about working with immigrant and student workers from overseas. “People from Serbia, Lebanon, places you wouldn’t think are that friendly, because that’s not really what we’re taught,” he says. “But they’re great people, and they’re coming from a different side of the world just so they can make a little extra money to help their families. It gives you a lot of hope for the world, and gives you the inspiration to commute back and forth to work.”

Robert Mulverhill, another regular rider on the 2:05 bus from Malone, enjoys the diversity, too. He works at the Golden Arrow hotel on Main Street, and mingles with guests from everywhere. “I like the clothes, the style, the food—everything,” he says. “It reminds me of a little section of New York City.”

Misty, who’s worked in the village for four years, brags about sighting Bruce Willis and 1980 Olympic hockey hero Jim Craig. She thinks she saw Springsteen once, and definitely saw Elvis—Stojko, that is, the Olympic figure skater. “When celebrities are in Lake Placid, it’s very low key,” Misty says. “You never see any paparazzi or TMZ. A lot of people don’t even know they’re passing someone famous walking down the street.”

But that three-hour round-trip commute ...

The Cayeas work the dinner shift, and are often able to clock out around 10 p.m. But their bus doesn’t leave until 11:30, and in the winter, there’s no public indoor space to kill the time. Making matters worse, the village closes Main Street’s public bathrooms at nine. Every work night, they arrive in Malone around one a.m. That’s if the snows cooperate.

They wish they could live closer to work. But a one-bedroom apartment in Saranac Lake costs \$1,200 a month, nearly double what David and Misty pay for a three-bedroom house in Malone, and requires a first and last month’s rent and a security deposit. “There’s just no way we can come up with that,” says Misty, who with David has been saving up for a car. “That’s New York City prices.”

So they and other regular riders make the best of the ride. They read. They sleep. They gossip. And they gawk. “You can’t beat the views,” Misty says. In addition to the foliage, mountains and lakes, they’ve seen moose along Route 30, and Misty recalls the majestic image of a bald eagle with a freshly caught fox in its talons, just off the road. They also appreciate the four-dollar one-way fare, the skill and attentiveness of the Franklin County transit drivers, and their fellow passengers. “It’s like a family,” Mulverhill says of the ridership.

Still, the distance creates headaches for everyone. “There are times we’ve gotten those calls saying, ‘Guys, something’s wrong with the bus; we’re



**Tony and Nancy Corwin, of bed-and-breakfast South Meadow Farm Lodge, say Airbnb has “totally evaporated” their guest bookings. Facing page: Misty and David Cayea commute three hours a day for their jobs at Lake Placid Pub & Brewery. A one-bedroom apartment closer to the pub costs double a month what the Cayeas pay for a three-bedroom house in Malone.**

not making it,” says Josh Spanburgh, a manager at the pub. When that happens, half his kitchen staff might be absent on a busy ski-season night. “You can’t avoid it,” Spanburgh says of the transportation issue. “It’s not their fault. They are dedicated. They don’t want to miss work.”

**EVERYONE IN LAKE PLACID AGREES** something must be done about Airbnb. But there’s little agreement on exactly what. Politi, the town supervisor, says New York State laws limit the capacity of localities to prevent homeowners from using their residences as a source of rental income. In addition, “It’s hard to regulate,” he says. “It would be very difficult for us to go and have to check out every single vacation rental in the Lake Placid area. There are just too many, just far too many.”

Ed Weibrecht, owner of the Mirror Lake Inn, says a homeowner’s freedoms end when the homes become primarily commercial enterprises. As a hotelier, he must follow strict health, safety and zoning codes. He brings up 93 Elm Street, which was purchased, torn down and rebuilt as an Airbnb rental that now sleeps 24 and rents for \$950 a night. “That’s like an eight-room motel,” Weibrecht says. “If I wanted to tear that





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## THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

house down, and build an eight-room motel, would they let me? No.”

Dick Cummings, a local pharmacist, is one of Tavares’s neighbors and lives across the street from 93 Elm Street. He called police twice last year to complain about noise, once when a women’s cycling club stayed there. He whips out a smartphone photo from a March weekend showing 17 cars parked around the home. “A hockey team,” he says. “The funny thing? The owner lives in Saratoga, and these were his buddies.” But Cummings is mostly OK with the house. That’s because whenever renters cause a problem, he can call Derek Doty, a friend of his who happens to be the paid caretaker of the property, and Doty will fix it. “I sent a picture to Derek, who sent it to the owners, and they were furious.” The cars were relocated.

Cummings believes a few simple regulations, such as requiring a 24-hour local contact person for any short-term rental, and doling out aggressive fines for existing parking and noise regulations, can solve most of the quality-of-life issues and pay for any added costs of enforcement. “People by nature screw up,” he says. “They’re going to violate the system. So when you do, you should pay for it.”

Other communities have been tightening regulations on short-term rentals, with apparent success. Lake Tahoe instituted massive fines, including an immediate \$1,000 fine on guests and landlords for things like illegally parked cars and violating a 10 p.m. hot-tub curfew. Closer to home, the village of Lake George banned rentals of less than six months in residential neighborhoods after Airbnb and VRBO rentals began creating noise, garbage and fire hazards. Public hearings were heated, but Mayor Robert Blais and the village board implemented the ban, which he estimates affected about 20 homes.

“You’re going to listen to the local residents and weigh that more than a property owner from out of town,” Blais says. “You want a community that’s vibrant. During Christmas, you want to see lights on in the houses. You want children in your schools. You



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want their parents volunteering in the fire department and the Rotary Club."

The ban preserves that, Blais says, and enforcement isn't difficult. "Neighbors are watching," he says, and report violations. "It's improved the whole quality of life."

As for Lake Placid, ROOST has funded a survey to figure out exact numbers and locations of short-term rentals in its five-county region, and Politi anticipates North Elba will pass and enforce new rules for Airbnb and its ilk this summer. "We've been working on it a long time," he says.

Too long for some. Tony Corwin owns an actual bed-and-breakfast, South Meadow Farm Lodge, and Airbnb has decimated his business. At an April hearing to discuss proposed new ordinances on "transient" rentals in North Elba, Corwin said that as recently as five years ago, he was turning away as many as 100 potential bookings during the Ironman week. For last year's race, he had only one four-night booking in his seven-room inn. "It's just totally evaporated," he says.

Unlike his new competition, Corwin must comply with Adirondack Park Agency, health department and state environmental regulations, as well as zoning laws for businesses. "It's an unfair playing field," he says. "How do you go up against something that's this big?"

Corwin was among more than 60 people at the hearing, many of them airing grievances about what the rentals have done to their community.

But the sharing economy is not going away. Lake Placid is too popular, Airbnb too convenient.

And Sheila Tavares's old neighborhood, the one with the kids on bikes who knew everybody's name, isn't coming back. "Young families can't afford to buy in Lake Placid any more," Cummings says. "That's gone." ▲

*Luke Cyphers wrote "Pickup Sticks," about High Peaks pond hockey, in the December 2017 issue of this magazine.*

*Lake Placid-based photographer Nancie Battaglia shot North Creek's Ski Bowl for the April 2018 issue.*



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