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House & Home

US property | The Berkshires area in Massachusetts is a fine autumnal sight, which makes it even more appealing to overseas buyers. By Troy McMullen

There's gold in them thar hills



Autumnal colours and rolling hills in the Berkshires, western Massachusetts — Denis P Tangney/Getty Images

Dotted with farms and unkempt woodland, the area known as the Berkshires in the mountains of western Massachusetts has long been a beloved slice of the American countryside.

Bordering New York state to the west, and Connecticut and Vermont to the south and north respectively, its rolling hills are home to picturesque villages and towns that exude New England charm. And as autumn gradually turns the dense woodland areas to gold, there are few landscapes in the US that are more appealing at this time of year.

The first settlements in the area were recorded in the mid-1600s, and within a century the Berkshires had developed into a foothold for progressive, culturally engaged artists, politicians and academics. By the late 19th century, wealthy US industrialists had descended on the area, colonising towns such as Lenox and Sturbridge as summer retreats.

Though still a popular second-home and weekend destination for the outdoor-minded from New York and the rest of New England, the area — which has a population of about 130,000 — is luring many from further afield. As well as Americans from the rest of the country, many foreign buyers are increasingly drawn to the region.

This influx has contributed to a sharp rise in sales in the past year, says Dan Alden, an estate agent with William Pitt Sotheby's International Realty.

"The Berkshires has never really been a secret to people who want the outdoors and a bit of nature," he says. "But its appeal was mostly regional. Now that's no longer the case."

The area's substantial art, music and theatre scene has helped to make the Berkshires a year-round destination. Annual cultural events include Tanglewood music festival, which is the summer home of Boston Symphony Orchestra; Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, in the town of Becket; and the Williamstown Theatre Festival.



Four-bedroom house on a 10-acre plot in Salisbury, \$2.45m

"Traditionally, vacation property owners would be here a few months out of the year, but that's changed considerably," says Randy Thunfors, broker and owner of Stone House Properties in West Stockbridge. "There are now major events spanning literature, music and the arts that draw people any time of the year."

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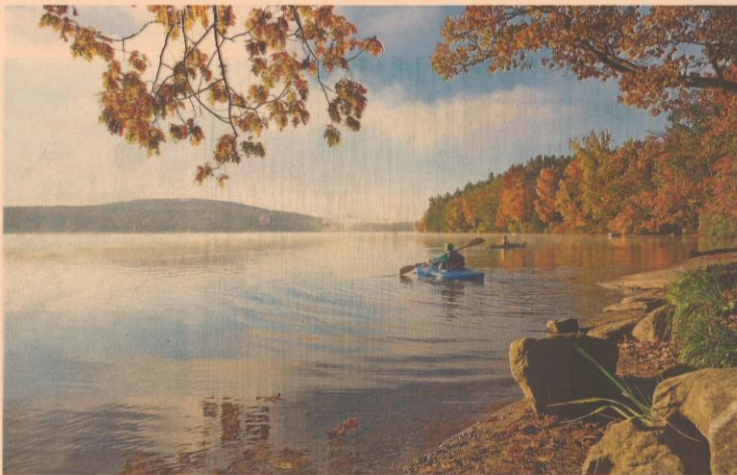
Strengthening economies in New York and Boston, each about three hours' drive away, and from where the bulk of high-end property buyers in the Berkshires originate, is also bolstering buyer confidence, adds Alden. "A stronger stock market, better corporate earnings and lower unemployment have been a boon to this market."

Property prices in the towns and villages that make up the area rose 17.2 per cent in the year to July 2015 compared with the same period the year before, according to the Massachusetts Association of Realtors (MAAR). The number of private sales in that period increased 28.9 per cent, the group says.

A lack of supply is also creating higher sales prices in the region. The number of homes available for sale fell 7.8



General store on Main Street in Stockbridge — Ian G. Deppa/Alamy



Canoeing on Stockbridge Bowl, a lake in the Berkshires — *Edrick/Corbis Images*

per cent in the year to this July, according to the MAR. "We don't get the kinds of property development that you might see in other vacation areas," says Keith Ross, a senior adviser for estate agency LandVest.

"That keeps the market for vacation homes in desirable areas very tight."

A total of 26 homes priced at \$800,000 and above sold in August 2014, which was up 8.3 per cent on the same period in 2013 and a 62 per

cent increase compared with 2012, according to Warren Group, a real estate information company.

Homes renovated with updated amenities in South County, which is an upmarket part of the region, can fetch between \$2m and \$7m.

A seven-bedroom home on 68 acres in West Stockbridge is on sale for \$6.99m through Stone House Properties.

The two-storey stucco and limestone main house measures 6,700 sq ft, and the property features a gym, massage room and outdoor pool.

Farther south, in Alford, near Great Barrington, a 55-acre property is being listed by estate agency LandVest for \$4.3m. The home was built in 2003 on a ridge near the centre of the town and includes three bedrooms and 11,800 sq ft of living space.

The Berkshires also includes a small sliver of Connecticut, mainly consisting of bucolic towns in the north-eastern part of the state surrounding Litchfield Hills.

"Areas like Salisbury and Lakeville in Connecticut are very appealing to second-home buyers, particularly from



New York and southern New England," says Alden.

Sotheby's is marketing a 10-acre property in Salisbury with views of Salmon Kill Valley, an area with protected farmland, for \$2.45m.

The four-bedroom main house also includes four bathrooms and measures 3,641 sq ft. The property includes a wet

bar, games room, infinity pool, out-buildings and a garage that can house up to nine cars.

Because of the Berkshires' year-round popularity, a large number of holiday-home owners rent out their properties, says Thunfors.

He estimates that larger properties in the popular mountainous areas near Great Barrington or the lakes in South County can fetch up to \$1,300 a month in the spring and summer months.

Homes in towns including Lenox and Pittsfield rent for about \$1,200 per month.

"The rental market here is very tight so high-end renovated properties rent immediately," says Thunfors, whose firm trades in home sales and rentals.

"That really reflects on the strengths of the broader market for real estate in the Berkshires and the sustained demand that we are seeing from buyers and renters."

BUYING GUIDE

Logan airport in Boston is the closest international airport, about 130 miles east of the Berkshires

The average winter temperature is -5C, it can range from 21C to 26C in the summer

Estate agents typically charge a commission of 6 per cent of the sale price

What you can buy for ...

\$7m A three-bedroom, 2,000 sq ft, cottage-style home in Stockbridge

\$3m A four-bedroom house set in about 20 acres in Great Barrington

\$5m A five-bedroom, 4,000 sq ft house with more than 40 acres near Lenox

For more properties, please visit ftpropertylistings.com

Foliage to fall for

Autumn draws thousands of tourists to the Berkshires each year to witness the changing of the leaves, writes Troy McMullen, and one of the best ways to see them is on organised "foliage drives".

"It's one of the most popular times of year in all of New England," says Lauri Klefios, president of the Berkshire Visitors Bureau, which maps out several driving tours through the region for holidaymakers wanting to get the best views.

The most popular driving routes are those around Pontoosuc Lake in Pittsfield and in the mountains and wooded terrain off Route 23 near Monterey.

It is the abundance of maple, oak and birch trees in New England that makes the area renowned for its autumn colouring, says Mark Breen, a meteorologist at the Fairbanks Museum in Vermont. "Leaves change colour when they're producing less chlorophyll [which is what gives them their green colour]," he says. "But in the north of the US, especially New England, these tree species undergo a more pronounced metamorphosis and reveal brighter, more vivid colours."

In the Berkshires, the autumn colour change usually peaks in the first few weeks of October but predicting when the leaves will be brightest is tricky — an unexpected cold snap can change things overnight.

Experts suggest using a mix of science and history: an early fall frost is thought to hasten the colour change, while warm, wet autumn weather will delay it.

Other than by car, autumn foliage can also be seen on hikes and via canoe. "A canoe trip through the forest is a peaceful way to enjoy the colours," says Keith Riley, a guide with Berkshire Hiking.

Operators offering canoe foliage trips include Berkshire Outfitters (berkshireroutfitters.com) and Zoar Outdoor (zoaroutdoor.com).



Seven-bedroom house with 68 acres in West Stockbridge, \$6.99m

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