

## Chill Out, You're in Montauk

By: Sophie Baker

With rich greenery, towering cliffsides, and glittering waters, I had never seen anything quite this place. It had all the same things my home state of South Carolina did — beaches, lakes, trees — but something about the love the locals had for this town made everything that much more vibrant.

After only a couple of hours of being there, I knew that Montauk, New York would be one of the most beautiful places I would ever see.

I got the opportunity to visit this secluded community through my college friend Emily, as she is lucky to call this place her hometown. She invited me and our friend Reina to come up for a couple days and see what the Montauk life is all about.

For our first day activity, we decided to spend the day on the lake. As we loaded onto the boat, Emily passed around a bottle of sunscreen. I ditched my sandals and bag in the small cabin and waited my turn. Unlike South Carolina summers, the temperature here rarely rises above 80 degrees, but I knew I would still burn easily.

With Emily's dad captaining the boat, we set out for the day, bouncing over the salty waters of Lake Montauk. Once we were a good distance out, we paused to toss out the tube. I was more than familiar with lake tubing, a common pastime back in South Carolina, so I was especially excited to try it in new waters. As Emily and her dad set up the tube, I looked at the water and noticed a significant presence of unusual creatures. I could count maybe 30-50 of these translucent blobs floating along beside our boat.

"Hey Emily, are those jellyfish?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, those are moon jellies," she explained. "There are a lot of them out today it looks like."

I was appalled at how calm she seemed to be about the horde of jellyfish surrounding our boat. From my limited jellyfish knowledge, it seemed if I jumped in right now, I would be covered in stings from head to toe.

"Do they uh, sting?" I asked nervously. I looked at Reina, she too looking a bit hesitant to swim in the water.

“Nah,” Emily’s dad piped in, “they don’t sting often. Their tentacles are short, and if they do it doesn’t hurt too bad.”

All right, great. So, I could get stung by a jellyfish, but it wouldn’t hurt *too* bad.

“AAHHH! Dad, stop!” Emily shrieked. A moon jelly bounced off her arm and plopped into the water. Her dad had just chucked one of the peculiar blobs at her. We laughed at Emily’s unfortunate marine attack, feeling a bit better about getting in after seeing that she made it through unharmed.

“Okay, the tube is ready,” Emily said. “Who wants to go first?”

Still feeling hesitant about entering the treacherous waters, I let Reina and Emily test it out for me. I watched them bounce along the water on the inflatable tube, with Emily’s dad attempting to throw them off balance in classic lake-dad fashion. Once they finally wiped out, it was my turn. But before I hopped on the raft, I realized neither Reina nor Emily had been wearing a life jacket.

“Hey, are there any life jackets?” I asked Emily.

“No, but you can swim right?” She replied.

“Oh yeah, I can. Just wondering.”

Of course I could swim, but I had never been tubing without a life jacket before. Back home they’re standard issue lake-wear. Nevertheless, I played it cool hopping onto the tube with Reina, secretly second-guessing my swimming abilities.

The boat started moving, the tether snapping into place over the rushing water. I gripped the handles tighter, naively thinking I could avoid swimming if I just don’t fall off. But it became clear after a few seconds of movement that this would not be the case.

Water sprayed into my eyes, limiting my vision. The tube bounced over the waves bumping me and Reina’s hips together, loosening my grip on the handles. Despite our imminent wipeout, Reina and I cackled as we flew across the turbulent water. A sharp turn to the left sent us careening over the right wave, the velocity of the turn tugging us towards the dark water.

Then we saw it. A foot-high wave crest rolled directly into our path, signaling our final obstacle. Our laughter ceased as we braced for impact. The tube flew. My fingers released their hold. I flipped over, feeling my back skate across the water, not yet sinking. I could see the sun, the water, then nothing but dark green as my head finally went under.

I bobbed up to the surface, gasping for breath. My legs and arms treaded the water steadily, proving that I did in fact still know how to swim. I waved at the boat in the distance, watching them turn to collect me. I exhaled, relieved that I had not drowned or been eaten jellyfish. Which reminded me... this lake was full of jellyfish.

I looked around me and saw them again, the moon jellies surrounding me. But this time I wasn't nervous. I moved my arm through the water, letting their squishy bodies bump up against me. I let out a relieved laugh, thinking about how scared I was of these harmless creatures just moments ago.

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Later that evening, we decided to have a midnight bonfire on the beach. I had never been to a beach bonfire before, but after a day of trying new things I figured, what's one more? We helped Emily drag wood and a firepit onto the empty beach. The full moon illuminated the water and sand, lighting our path to the perfect spot. We used old newspaper and notebook pages as kindling, eventually building ourselves a swaying fire.

Now, I am not someone who typically likes beaches. Or bonfires. The sand gets everywhere, sticking itself into every crevice and crease. As for bonfires, I hate the post-fire smoky hair smell that lingers even after you've shampooed twice.

But this beach bonfire was different.

I dug my feet into the sand, much thicker than the fine grains you would find in South Carolina. The wind couldn't pick up these heavy sand molecules and blow them into my mouth. Instead, the sand melded to my fingers when I wanted it to and fell right off my hand when I lifted it back up. The smoky fire smell dissolved in the beachy air, giving my hair an earthy smell that I didn't mind one bit.

We laid sprawled out on a blanket, laughing and listening to the waves crash on the beach. Three carefree friends on a stunning midnight beach, soaking up the moonlight and our love for one another.