

A Hidden Gem of Rhode Island

Caryn B. Davis

Watch Hill, founded on a peninsula bounded by Block Island Sound and the calmer waters of Watch Hill Cove, is the only village in the area with a dedicated town center. Bay Street is its main thoroughfare, with sweeping views of the harbor and an eclectic mix of boutiques, inns and restaurants housed in understated low-rise wooden buildings.

Although celebrities and the wealthy (Taylor Swift may be the most known) have flocked to Watch Hill in recent decades, it remains low-key. The well-manicured shingle-style cottages are sizable but not ostentatious.

“It’s an extraordinary town. Small, old fashioned. It reminds me of an earlier and simpler time,” said Deborah Goodrich Royce, co-owner of the [Ocean House](#), a local hotel, and author of “Finding Mrs. Ford,” a novel set in Watch Hill.

The [Watch Hill Lighthouse](#), constructed in 1807, is a short stroll from town at the end of a peninsula. It was a tourist attraction then, and these days the grounds are open to the public and it has a small museum.

The lighthouse’s first keeper, Jonathan Nash, also built the village’s first hotel, Watch Hill House, in 1833. Other hotels cropped up including the Watch Hill Inn (originally called the Narragansett House) and the Ocean House, which opened in 1868. After a complete reconstruction, the Ocean House reopened in 2010, and now serves guests as well as the community with family-friendly movie screenings on the beach, lobster boils on the lawn, and yacht and powerboat charters on the water. There are also several restaurants. Nothing is more relaxing than watching the sunset over the ocean while sipping champagne on the hotel veranda.

For beach seekers, there are two free options in town: [East Beach](#) and the [Napatree Point Conservation Area](#), a mile-and-a-half long barrier beach. It is great for bird watching and accessible only by foot, with a path crossing over the dunes that provides panoramic views of the cove and ocean. This beach gets waves large enough for body surfing, but not as large as those boogie-boarding waves found at East Beach. It’s also typically less crowded.

A third beach, [Watch Hill Merry-Go-Round & Beach](#) has daily rates for sun seekers: adults are \$9, teens are \$5 and youths are \$3. They rent bathhouses and also have a refurbished merry-go-round circa 1884. Left behind by a traveling carnival, it is reputed to be the oldest antique wooden carousel still in operation. One or two dollars — depending on the horse — will get you a ride.

The daily rates at the parking lots on Bay and Larkin Streets cost up to \$49 depending on the day, and these slots can fill up quickly. If that’s too pricey, two-hour street parking is free but arrive early. Neither beach has lifeguards or amenities, but there are public restrooms behind the merry-go-round.

A few miles east of Watch Hill is Misquamicut, which offers sandy beaches, outdoor

activities and entertainment on a narrow strip of land between Winnapaug Pond and the sea. This hamlet of the town of Westerly has attracted vacationers since the early 1900s, but after a series of destructive hurricanes in the middle of the 20th century, it was rebuilt and modernized with water slides, surf shops, and a carousel and arcade. Lodging options include cottage rentals and both roadside and seaside motels.

For food and drink, Misquamicut has beachfront restaurants, several venues for live music (including [Paddy's Beach Club](#), [Sandy's Lighthouse](#) and the [Windjammer Surf Bar](#)) and ramshackle clam bars that also serve [Del's Frozen Lemonade](#). The slushie-like drink, made with fresh lemon rind, is a Rhode Island institution.

“The first sign of summer is when you want a Del’s,” said Faye Pantazopoulos, the creative director at the South County Tourism Council.

[Misquamicut State Beach](#) is one of the largest of the area, and it can get busy, especially on weekends. Parking is \$12 on weekdays, \$14 on weekends with half price for seniors. [Wuskenau Town Beach](#) next to Misquamicut is a less crowded option and open to the public, though parking is more expensive (\$20 on weekdays and \$25 on weekends). At the far end of Atlantic Avenue is [Dunes Park Beach](#). Parking is \$25 on weekdays and \$30 on weekends.

Unlike Watch Hill, Misquamicut has plenty of paid parking at its beaches. Most state and town beaches have restrooms and some have concession stands.

Take Atlantic Avenue east to cross the Weekapaug Breachway and reach the affluent, residential community of Weekapaug, another hamlet of Westerly. There, the [Quonochontaug Barrier Beach](#) is the only beach with public access. The rest are for residents. It has no amenities and the 15 public parking spots on Spray Rock Road are on a first-come basis. Walk in via the Sand Trail and chances are you'll be the only human there. It's a conservation area, a nesting habitat for many migratory birds and a breeding ground for the endangered piping plovers.

The [Weekapaug Inn](#) hosts bird-watching trips for the public, on land and by boat, with a naturalist on staff, Mark Bullinger. He also conducts marine “safaris” for children through September.

“When it's warm enough to wade in the water, we go by boat to a sandbar and look for crabs, minnows and then poke around for sea urchins,” he said.

Adults are welcome to join, but can also book a sunset and wine cruise onboard the electric powered Quonnie Queen, a 24-foot Elco boat. The Weekapaug Inn is a sister property to the Ocean House so guests staying at either hotel can use the amenities at both. A complimentary shuttle transports guests between the two establishments.

To really get away from it all, head to the sleepy town of Charlestown, eight miles east of Weekapaug along the scenic Route 1A. Again there's no town center, but small eateries, markets, gas stations and many beach options — all that you need — dot the winding, tree-lined road.

At [Blue Shutters Town Beach](#), the sand is creamy, the beach expansive and the views unobstructed. Parking for non-residents costs between \$20 to \$30, depending on the day. There's no shops or restaurants but plenty of privacy.

Just up the sand road is another [East Beach](#), an undeveloped three-mile stretch with

20 campsites. There is a sand trail for walking this barrier beach, but driving is allowed with a permit. Parking fees are \$12 on weekdays, \$14 on weekends and half off for seniors.

“This is one of the most unspoiled beaches in Rhode Island,” said Katherine Bodell, a park ranger with the state’s department of environmental management.

Accommodations here are limited to rental cottages and campsites, more of which can be found at [Charlestown Breachway beach](#). These are reserved for self-contained R.V.s which sit looming behind the parking lot. This is a small beach with a jetty for salt-water fishing, among the best around. Parking rates are the same as East Beach.

Another option, [Charlestown Town Beach](#), is slightly more built up than Blue Shutters, with plenty of summer rentals within walking distance. Parking for non-residents costs between \$20 to \$30.

Charlestown also has [Ninigret Park](#), a 227-acre site with tennis and basketball courts, a swimming pond, biking and hiking trails, a playground, picnic areas and the [Frosty Drew Observatory & Sky Theatre](#). The Observatory organizes free stargazing, with telescopes and viewing stations, every Wednesday and Friday night through Labor Day.

“We are in an exceptionally dark location, free of light pollution. On nights with no clouds and no moon, thousands of stars are visible to the unaided eye, including the Milky Way Galaxy,” said Scott MacNeill, the observatory director. “This has earned us the reputation of having the darkest skies between New York and Boston.”

With three beaches, the village of Matunuck, six miles east of Charlestown, is known for its surfing, kiteboarding and windsurfing. The best waves are found at [Deep Hole](#) and there is neither a parking fee nor amenities. The surf at nearby [East Matunuck State Beach](#) has smaller, less forceful waves, and is a better option for families. It has lifeguards, changing rooms, bathrooms, showers and a snack shack. The parking fees are \$12 to \$14, depending on the day, and seniors pay half price. A third option just down the road from Deep Hole is [South Kingstown Town Beach](#). Parking is \$20 on weekdays and \$25 on weekends.

After a day in the water, stop for drinks, dinner or live music at [The Pub](#) or [Ocean Mist](#) restaurants. Both overlook the water; The Pub has a rooftop bar while the Ocean Mist has a wooden deck with waves rolling beneath it.

For finer dining, try the farm-to-table [Matunuck Oyster Bar](#). The owner Perry Raso, an oyster farmer with degrees in aquaculture and fisheries technology, started “digging wild shellfish with a bull rack at age 12.” He also created the [Matunuck Oyster Farm](#) that visitors can tour. It’s a quick jaunt on nearby Potter Pond via a pontoon boat.

“We do a brief introduction about aquaculture on a global and local scale and then ride out to the farm to see the oysters growing,” Mr. Raso said.

Mr. Raso serves vegetables at his restaurant grown on his certified organic farm. What food he doesn’t farm he procures locally, so guests can sample a variety of fresh seafood and shellfish.

Be sure to try the Rhode Island clam chowder, made with broth instead of cream

(New England) or tomatoes (Manhattan), and the calamari prepared Rhode Island-style with hot cherry peppers.

Caryn B. Davis is a photographer and journalist whose images and articles have appeared in more than 60 publications worldwide.

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