



New England Travel Journal

- HOME
- CONNECTICUT
- MAINE
- MASSACHUSETTS
- NEW HAMPSHIRE
- RHODE ISLAND
- VERMONT
- FAVORITE PLACES
- PLACES TO EAT
- SEAFOOD
- PLACES TO STAY
- RECIPES
- NETJ PODCAST
- HAVE NETJ VISIT YOU
- ABOUT US ▾



[New England](#) [Places to Stay](#) [Rhode Island](#)

The Return of Rhode Island Resorts

📅 May 5, 2020 👤 New England Travel Journal 💬 0 Comments 🪑 Chair 5

Bistro, Covid-19, Innas Hastings Park, Narragansett, New England Summer, Ocean House, Rhode Island, Shelter Harbor Inn, South Country Tourism, The Break Hotel, Watch Hill, Watch Hill Inn, Weekapaug Inn, Westerly

Article by Contributor Tricia Bielinski



Archives

- May 2020
- April 2020
- March 2020
- February 2020
- January 2020
- December 2019
- November 2019
- October 2019
- September 2019
- July 2019
- June 2019
- May 2019

With what seems like months spent in a quarantined state, everyone has been imagining what the post-COVID-19 life will look like, especially as we are on the verge of our beloved New England summer season. Will we be able to enjoy our favorite beaches, parks, and restaurants? What about that stay we had booked for a long weekend at one of our favorite hotels?

While nobody has a crystal ball and we are all at the mercy of our respective state mandates and policies, I spent some time talking with several Rhode Island hotels and resorts about their anticipated comeback, the impact the pandemic has had on their business and what our “new normal” expectations should be when visiting for a stay or dining.

The [Ocean House](#) located in Watch Hill is perhaps the grande dame of the state’s resorts and hotels, with regular appearances on top resort lists worldwide including recognition by Forbes and a AAA Five Diamond award winner. A Relais and Chateaux property, the Ocean House offers expansive views of the Atlantic Ocean enjoyed from multiple locations and a private 650 foot stretch of beach to enjoy.



Watch Hill

[April 2019](#)

[March 2019](#)

[February 2019](#)

[January 2019](#)

[December 2018](#)

[November 2018](#)

[September 2018](#)

[August 2018](#)

[July 2018](#)

[June 2018](#)



[VIDEO: Ripley Falls \(NH\)](#)

[The Return of Rhode Island Resorts](#)

[NETJ Podcast Ep.14 – Mic Michienzi on Rebuilding Buzzards Bay](#)

[King Arthur Flour, A Baker’s Paradise \(VT\)](#)

[The Treasure Hunt for New England Sea Glass](#)

(Photo submitted by Tricia Bielinski)

Laurie Hobbs is the Director of Public Relations and Marketing for the Ocean House along with sister properties [Weekapaug Inn](#) just down the road, [Watch Hill Inn](#), and the [Inn at Hastings Park](#) in Boston. She along with the rest of the team are anticipating a June 1 open date and in her words are “optimistic, yes realistic” about the upcoming season.

“Safety and well being for our guests and our associates is top priority, and we will base all of our actions on facts administered by the government,” responds Laurie when I inquire about how they anticipate the reopening to look like, as the property closed in March when the shelter in place was issued in Rhode Island.

Each of their hotel departments is developing protocols for safety and social distancing. The team is getting creative with ideas for variations on private dining to include exclusive dining in their cabanas. Reservations will be required so that they can properly prepare to keep tables six feet apart and avoid any lines or back up at the host stand.

During this time of quarantine, Laurie has made extra efforts to proactively engage and communicate with internal and external audiences. They have provided recipes and cocktail classes via their social media channels, and she credits the support she receives from partners such as the South County Tourism Council (also included in this article) for maintaining that communication during these extraordinary times.

She goes on to point out that New England is a “great drive market, and car travel will come back first,” so the anticipation of all that the summer brings is there. “People want to enjoy the outdoors, and the Ocean House provides that.” I can attest to that as a personal regular visitor to the property...go for the views, go for the ambiance, go to step inside a part of Rhode Island’s history. Just go.

Event bookings will look different this year, with most weddings having been canceled or delayed to next year, the focus is on small events such as family reunions, so folks can still enjoy a beautiful setting for their special moments, just on a smaller scale.

This is something that Dennis Flangan, owner of [Shelter Harbor Inn](#) located in Westerly can relate to. The Inn is another historic property, built-in 1800 and underwent a complete renovation just last year. While they are currently about 30% booked for the summer season in their 23 guest rooms, the postponement of weddings has impacted that. "The key for us is *when* to open up," says Dennis, who is targeting May 20th.

Highlighting the fact that Rhode Island is sandwiched between New York and Boston, he anticipates there could be a real surge once the curtain is lifted so to speak. Employee temperature checks and increased sanitary procedures are all a part of the new regime for the team, and they have planned for safely distanced inside tables with a curtain separator, creating almost a private dining feel for their guests while providing that extra security.



Newly renovated Shelter Harbor Inn
(Instagram Photo)

They will also rely on their expansive outside dining area, and Dennis is confident about the strong community of local families that frequent their establishment. I asked him what dishes people should make the trip for.

"People from the south rave about our shrimp and grits, and the

hazelnut chicken is an old favorite along with our clams and chorizo.” Their wine list continues to grow and they plan to continue to host their wine dinners on Tuesday nights this summer. I plan to be one of the first through the door (with the required reservation of course) for that one!

Over in Narragansett, Marc Grandmaison, General Manager of [The Break Hotel](#), a boutique property that includes the popular Chair 5 bistro, anticipates a slow ease back into business based on state regulations. Unlike many other hotels, The Break Hotel did not close during this shutdown, but of course, it’s been slow, to say the least. Offering curbside pickup from Chair 5 has helped but like so many restaurants are experiencing it is far from the same level of revenue coming in as when fully operational.

Marc is excited to welcome back his team, all of whom were furloughed when the shutdown hit. He is also putting in place increased safe distancing measures and sanitary procedures. The food is popular, as is the beautiful ocean view from the outdoor patio that Marc and team are reconfiguring to become a quaint outdoor space that guests will be able to enjoy safely.

These guests are important to Marc and his team, and he wants to personally thank them for returning and look forward to serving them some of their artisan cocktails, craft beers, and classic beach dishes. Also, be sure to check out their vegan menu!

Reservations will be key, as it seems like most or all will be requiring them to be able to properly plan for the safe and satisfying guest experience all are so anxious to provide again.

Lastly, what better source to tell us about the return of travel and tourism in the southern half of the Ocean State than the South County Tourism Council. They had the following to say:

“Our season normally peaks from July-October. Right now, it’s tricky to say how it will go, as a lot depends on when the Governor opens

up our economy again. We do know that our lodging forecast (we are funded via hotel tax, so that's what we track) shows a 55-65% decline for the year.

"Overall we know that once the economy opens back up, domestic travel is going to be big for summer. For us, that's good news as most of our visitors are our drive market. So our neighbors will be our strength this season though we know we'll be losing on events as so many have been canceled. History has shown this, too, after the economic downturn in 2008-2009, we saw an increase in our drive market.

"As a region, South County has a lot to offer travelers looking for a nearby, nature escape. With 100 miles of coastline, 20 public beaches, and miles of hiking and biking trails, it's easy to get away and practice social distancing while you enjoy nature. We are currently working with the Boston Globe on an article about scenic drives in South County, so we know our neighbors are planning summer travel. Right now our hotels are gearing up to welcome guests again with extensive safety and sanitation measures in place, same with our restaurants.

"We hope visitors find their way back to nature and to South County, Rhode Island this summer. Sunny days are ahead.

I want to thank each of these individuals for speaking with me and sharing a bit of their journey. The Rhode Island travel and dining scene is one that is very near and dear to me, as I am spoiled to be able to enjoy all that has to offer year-round. The impact that COVID-19 has had on these businesses and the people the world over is something tragic and tremendous that all have felt together and separately.

I like to think I put a piece of my heart in all of my writing, but this one brought my heart completely to its knees, as each business highlighted here was so intent on wanting to thank the community that has supported them over the years, and give them a safe place

to return to or to visit for the first time.

Sunny days are indeed ahead.

Featured Photo - Ocean House in Watch Hill

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