



# How a Staycation at This Freshly Renovated Rhode Island Resort Opened My Eyes to My Home State

EPIC STAYS

by ROBERT ISENBERG

JUN 5, 2024



I should really take a trip to Newport, I think to myself. That's such a fun town. Beautiful coastline. Yachts in the bay. Spectacular mansions. So much history, art, and gourmet dining. One of these days, I should just pack up the car and go.

Yet Newport isn't some faraway place for me. I live in Rhode Island, the smallest state in the country, and the harborside city lies only 45 minutes from my house. I could drive there on a whim on just about any weekend of the year. I could hop a bus or ride the ferry from Providence. Hell, I've ridden my bike there.

Rhodies are known for staying put. One of our most famous bumper stickers reads, "I never leave Rhode Island," and plenty of locals never cross town lines. The prevailing wisdom: If the journey takes more than 15 minutes by car, don't bother. And in the winter? Just don't leave the house.

The upshot to this provincial attitude is that Rhode Island feels much bigger than it is. After six years in the Ocean State, I'm still learning about nooks and crannies for the first time. So when I was invited to visit the [Newport Harbor Island Resort](#), you'd have thought I was headed to Fiji.

# An island off the coast of an island, and a resort unto itself



Newport is nestled into the western side of Aquidneck Island. I have to cross two substantial bridges to get there. An eclectic mix of docks, cape-style cottages, centuries-old intersections, and Gilded Age estates, the city has a glamorous reputation. The Kennedys summered here, but so do a good number of shaggy surfers. A few commercial trawlers still operate out of Long Wharf. Within view of the same pier, you'll see superyachts anchored in the harbor.



Then there's the Newport Harbor Island Resort, which occupies its own skinny land mass, Goat Island. It's not far from downtown; you can drive across the two-lane bridge in about one minute, but Goat Island feels separate and distinct. The resort has 257 rooms and 18 suites, nearly all of which overlook some kind of water. Outside, you'll find grassy grounds and Adirondack chairs lined up along the rocky shore. The resort even has its own marina, with moorings for 20 boats.

This is the New England coast at its showiest. And just when you think, "Sure, but where's the lighthouse?" There it is, a little whitewashed tower known as the Goat Island Lighthouse.

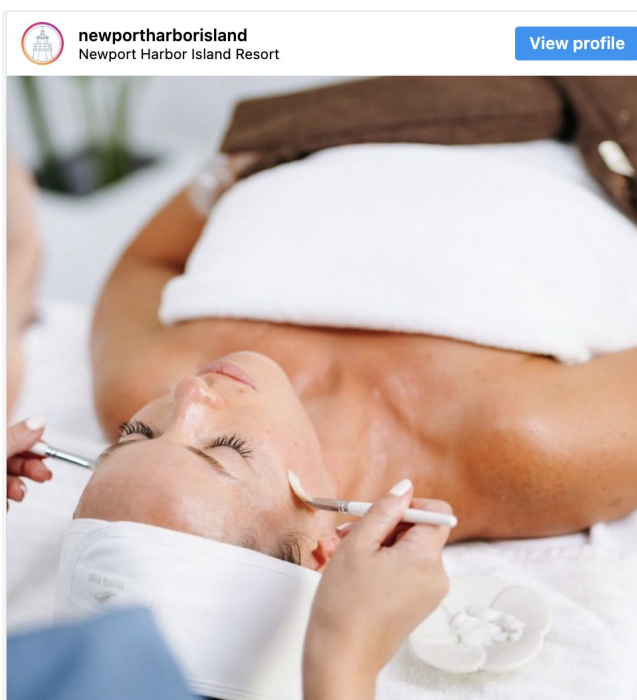
## **New renovations and a fresh coastal aesthetic**



I wish I could have seen the resort before its \$50 million renovation. By the time I arrived, the work was nearly finished. A few spots were still covered in plastic sheets, and decorations were still being arranged, but the resort had clearly undergone a metamorphosis. The lobby has been redesigned with earth-toned walls and rustic trim. Tasteful modernist furniture complements driftwood sculptures and vintage photographs. Above reception now hangs an abstract tapestry, which I instantly recognized as the work of local weaver Sarah Swift.

When I toured the resort, many corridors still smelled of fresh paint. The rooms, which start around \$320 per night, are understated, with white bedding and sandy hues. Most have large windows; the vistas have always been a major draw. My favorite accommodations were the two-floor suites, which behave like seaside bungalows that happen to be built into a high rise and are priced accordingly, starting around \$800 per night. These suites have a generous living room with sofa and easy chairs, plus a wall of glass that overlooks the bay. Climb a carpeted staircase, and there's an attic-like bedroom, with slanted ceilings and a view of the Newport Bridge. Whatever the season, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more romantic place to wake up.

## Finding calm in Rhode Island's wellness capital





After a slew of recent flights and train trips, every muscle in my body ached for a massage when I turned up at The Spa at Newport Harbor Island Resort. The moment I slipped into the changing room and stuffed my clothes into a locker, I sighed with relief. Within the hour, the knots in my shoulders would be unraveled by the capable hands of a New Harbor massage therapist. I wrapped myself in a plush bathrobe and ducked into the waiting room.

Once I'd rolled onto the mattress in my treatment room and pressed my face into the horseshoe-shaped pillow, my massage therapist and I traded pleasantries, then questions, then anecdotes about our lives. The therapist (I'll call her Tess) kneaded my shoulders and lumbar exactly as I needed. The room filled with oily fragrances, then stretches of silence. When the massage was finished, I practically levitated back to the changing room.

Unlike many new staff members, Tess has worked at the Newport Harbor Island Resort for years, and she knew how needed its recent makeover was. The spa is a major draw for visitors, offering shellac manicures to raindrop aromatherapy. Newport has become the wellness capital of Rhode Island, and while the town may not have a tradition of thermal springs or yoga academies, wellness centers have sprung up in recent years to keep up with the demand for holistic treatments.

One worth noting is Bodhi Spa, which specializes in hydrotherapy about a mile away from the resort. Its signature "Water Journey" is a restorative soak in mineral baths. Unlike my massage, these sessions take place in silence, doubling as a kind of meditation experience. Those interested in wellness will also appreciate Farmaesthetics, a sustainable skin-care company that started as a farmstand in rural Rhode Island in 1999 and now supplies top-of-the-line spas with all-natural products. Founder Brenda Brock grew up in Texas and moved to New England to develop her herbal remedies — and that's a great thing for visitors to Newport.



# A taste of Newport



When oenophilic friends come to town, I almost always pick up a bottle of Great White. This white wine is a blend of riesling, Cayuga, and Vidal Blanc, and it pairs with a range of dishes and desserts. I love to wax poetic about its producer, Newport Vineyards — how it's the largest winery in New England, how it was founded by a retired naval captain, how the vines have thrived for a quarter-century so far. I knew that Newport Vineyards had added a brewery called Taproot, as well, and started serving food. Yet despite my tendency to brag about this Rhode Island treasure, I'd never actually been there until my recent Newport trip.



Executive Chef Andy Teixeira gave me a personal tour of the grounds. This was in early spring, so the fields hadn't yet been sown. Still, on an island as small as Aquidneck, it's astonishing that a single vintner would possess 100 acres of fertile land. I rode in a golf cart between the vines, peeked inside the brand-new greenhouse, and enjoyed a banquet-style lunch in the Newport Vineyards dining room.

"All our ingredients are traditional from New England," said Teixeira, who comes from a long line of professional chefs. "We can't grow everything ourselves. But we want to grow as much of our own ingredients as we can, and we work a lot with local farmers."



Newport Vineyards' headquarters are based in a sizable building with a bar, restaurant, and gift shop. Patrons in fleece sweatshirts were scattered among the tables, and I could only imagine how packed this place became in midsummer. I wouldn't be surprised if many of the drinkers and diners came straight from the Newport Harbor Island Resort given its convenience. Even if I'd sampled every vintage in the cellar and gorged myself on paté and monkfish, a taxi could have easily taken me the five miles back to Goat Island.



Newport Vineyards was just one of the memorable culinary stops on my trip. I also visited The Power of Juice, an organic juice company that sells colorful, vitamin-packed concoctions in mason jars. I later enjoyed a decadent farm-to-table lunch at the Castle Hill Inn, a stately Queen Anne-style domicile set on 40 oceanfront acres. Castle Hill Inn has housed and entertained guests – including Thornton Wilder and Grace Kelly – since 1875.

## Saying goodbye to Newport — for now



My sojourn to Newport wound down, and I started to re-pack my car in the Newport Harbor Island Resort parking lot. I felt so many things at once: restored from my massage, cramped from a hike in the Norman Bird Sanctuary with local influencer Meredith Ewenson, stuffed from so many inventive meals, and moisturized from forehead to toe thanks to the bottles of Farmaesthetics.

I turned onto the Newport Bridge, a two-mile-long suspension bridge that spans the harbor. The water was speckled with sailboats. Land and sea warped below. And there, far to my left, was the tiny white cylinder of the Goat Island Lighthouse. It had always been there, ready to be noticed.