

COMPASS

The New York Times



Shoppers stroll through a high-end shopping area in Westport, a 20-square-mile town that sits midway along the Long Island Sound shore of Fairfield County.

Jane Beiles for The New York Times

LIVING IN

Westport, Conn.: A Historic Town With a Global Mind-Set

The suburban backdrop to TV shows like “Bewitched” and “American Housewife” offers residents a rich cultural life and high-end shopping and dining.

By Susan Hodara

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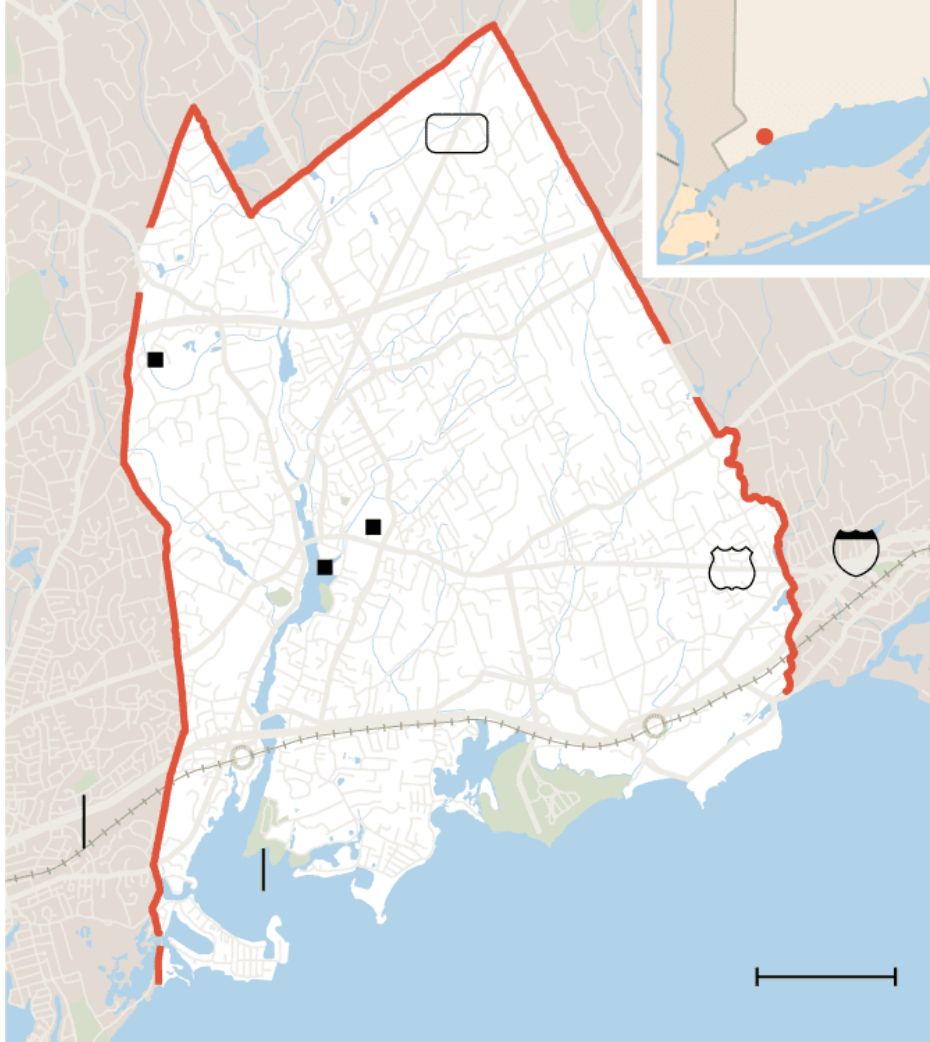
For Mike and Daniela Forde, building a home in Westport, Conn., was a major decision. It meant that, after four years of renting a house in nearby Old Greenwich, they would become property owners. It also meant remaining in the United States rather than returning to their native England.

Mr. Forde, 44, is a founder and the chief executive of Sportsology, a professional sports consulting company based in Manchester, England, and Manhattan. Ms. Forde, 40, is a stay-at-home mother to the couple's three young daughters. In Old Greenwich, they enjoyed being near the beach, but the area "felt very finance-driven," Mr. Forde said. If they were going to stay in the U.S., he said, "we wanted to be part of a real community."



The flag-lined Ruth Steinkraus Cohen Memorial Bridge crosses the Saugatuck River in downtown Westport.

Jane Beiles for The New York Times



Westport
CONNECTICUT
By The New York Times

They chose Westport for a number of reasons, including its scenic waterfront, proximity to New York City and variety of restaurants, as well as its international contingent and cosmopolitan atmosphere. “It has a nice balance of diversity, understated successful people and enough of a European vibe,” he said.

“We feel our kids are gaining the security of a small-town upbringing,” Mr. Forde said, “while being surrounded by people with a global-citizen mind-set.”

When James S. Marpe, Westport’s first selectman, describes this town of nearly 27,800 residents, that global mind-set is one of the things he brings up. He also touts Westport’s active engagement with the arts and education, along with its abundant recreational facilities and two downtowns.



The Saugatuck River flows north-south through Westport.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times

“The lifestyle here caters to a range of interests,” Mr. Marpe said. “And to high expectations.”

The 20-square-mile suburb is situated midway along the Long Island Sound in Fairfield County, bordered by Norwalk, Wilton, Weston, Fairfield and five miles of coastline — so sustainability is another priority.

Plastic bags have been banned since 2009, Mr. Marpe said, and next month an ordinance banning additional plastic and Styrofoam items in food-service businesses is slated to take effect. Since 2017, Westport’s Net Zero by 2050 initiative has been supporting efforts like these to minimize environmental damage.

“We live in a place that dates back to the very start of this country,” Mr. Marpe said. “There is a sense of history here, but we are firmly focused on the future.”

What You’ll Find

Intersected north-south by the Saugatuck River and east-west by Interstate 95, the Route 1 commercial corridor and the Merritt Parkway, Westport is divided into neighborhoods: In Greens Farms, the oldest section, you’ll find waterfront estates.

Compo abuts the Sound. The area known as In-Town is within walking distance of the main downtown, where there are national retailers and upscale boutiques. Saugatuck, a second downtown, has a cluster of restaurants and small businesses along the river. Staples High School is in the Long Lots neighborhood; Old Hill is west of the river; and Coleytown is farther out, to the north, with larger lots.

House hunters will find mostly single-family homes — 8,818 of them, said Paul Friia, Westport's assessor. The mix of housing includes many colonials and farmhouses dating to the 18th and 19th centuries, some of them restored and expanded, others razed and rebuilt.

There are 104 multifamily houses, 546 condominiums in 21 complexes and 292 rental apartments in residential and mixed-use buildings, Mr. Friia said, plus four affordable-housing complexes with 217 units and one building with 36 age-restricted cooperative apartments.

The Vibe

From “The Twilight Zone” and “Bewitched” to the current sitcom “American Housewife,” Westport has long been cast as an affluent suburban backdrop for television.

Stereotypes aside, the town blends a laid-back ambience with year-round cultural offerings, high-end shopping and dining, and a slew of outdoor activities.

With roots as an artists' colony, Westport remains a creative hub. Theatergoers can attend performances at the renowned Westport Country Playhouse, as well as the Westport Community Theatre. Music fans can choose from 50 free outdoor summer concerts at the revitalized Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts, and the literary set will find classes and readings at Westport Writers' Workshop. Following a \$21 million renovation, the Westport Library reopened in June with a recording studio, a maker space and meeting rooms. MoCA Westport, formerly Westport Arts Center, opens this month in a new space with two installations by Yayoi Kusama.



The Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts holds free outdoor concerts during the summer.

Jane Beiles for The New York Times

There are three town beaches (the largest, Compo, has a new handicapped-accessible boardwalk) and a state beach in the 235-acre Sherwood Island State Park. At the town-operated Longshore Club Park, covering 169 acres overlooking the Sound, residents can enjoy golf, tennis, paddle tennis and swimming in three pools. Boaters can dock at public and private marinas.

Westport residents gather for myriad events, among them Fourth of July fireworks at Compo Beach, a weekly farmers' market, the annual Maker Faire Westport, the Great Duck Race down the river, jUNe Day, which celebrates the United Nations, and a springtime dog festival.

The Schools

Westport's roughly 5,300 school-age children are served by the Westport Public Schools district. Those in kindergarten through fifth grade attend one of five neighborhood-based elementary schools, then move on to Bedford Middle School or Coleytown Middle School for grades six through eight. (Because of a \$32 million rehabilitation project at Coleytown, all middle schoolers will attend Bedford for the

2019-20 school year.) Students converge at Staples High School, which sits on a nine-acre campus. Staples was rated seventh in Connecticut in [U.S. News and World Report's 2019 high school rankings](#). In [Niche's 2020 rankings](#), the district was first in Connecticut and 28th in the country.



Staples High School students on the campus field.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times

On the 2017-18 [Smarter Balanced](#) assessments, 83.2 percent of Westport's fourth-graders met or exceeded English language-arts proficiency standards and 83.7 percent met or exceeded math proficiency standards, compared to 55.3 percent and 46.8 percent statewide. Mean SAT scores for the 2018 graduating class at Staples were 640 in evidence-based reading and writing, and 630 in math; statewide means were 535 and 519.

Westport is also home to two private schools, Greens Farms Academy and Pierrepont School.

The Commute

Approximately 55 miles northeast of Manhattan, Westport is a two-way commuter town. Mr. Marpe said that more people commute into Westport than out, some to jobs at the investment firm Bridgewater Associates, the town's largest employer.

Metro-North Railroad's New Haven Line stops at two stations in town: Westport and, a few miles east, Green's Farms. Peak trains to and from Grand Central Terminal take 64 to 90 minutes. Round-trip fares are \$27 off-peak, \$36 peak and \$391 monthly. There is a waiting list for permit parking, but both stations are served by shuttle buses running along seven routes.



A statue of a minuteman was erected in 1910 to commemorate the Revolutionary War Battle of Compo Hill, which pitted hundreds of British troops against a few dozen Continental soldiers.

Jane Beiles for The New York Times

The History

On April 25, 1777, in the heat of the Revolutionary War, 26 British ships dropped anchor by the mouth of the Saugatuck River and deposited 2,000 soldiers onto what is now Compo Beach. The troops marched north to Danbury, where they destroyed a munitions depot, and left a wake of destruction on their return to the shore. There, on April 28, they were ambushed by local minutemen. The skirmish, called the Battle of Compo Hill, pitted hundreds of British troops against a few dozen American soldiers, who suffered many casualties, said Ramin Ganeshram, the executive director of the Westport Historical Society. "It was basically a massacre," she said.

Today, at a traffic circle by the beach, a statue of a minuteman commemorates the militia's bravery. Erected in 1910, the life-size bronze soldier was made by H. Daniel Webster, who lived in Westport. In 1985, to honor the 150th anniversary of its incorporation, Westport adopted a flag depicting Webster's minuteman. Yet the statue's most widespread recognition likely came in 1957, when it was featured — and accidentally damaged — on an episode of "I Love Lucy."



The Saugatuck River flows north-south through Westport.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times



Some homeowners enjoy waterfront access to the Long Island Sound.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times



Many residents dock their boats at one of two town-owned marinas. This one is at the 169-acre Longshore Club Park.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times



An eight-person shell on the river by the Saugatuck Rowing and Fitness Club.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times



Staples High School students on the campus field.
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This month, MoCA Westport, formerly Westport Arts Center, opens in a new space at Martha Stewart's former headquarters; two installations by Yayoi Kusama will be on view.

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Following a \$21 million renovation, the Westport Library reopened in June with a large, open forum, a recording studio, a maker space and meeting rooms.
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Elvira Mae's is a popular sandwich and ice cream shop across from the beach.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times



The Remarkable Bookcycle, a free lending library, parks at Compo Beach.
Jane Beiles for The New York Times



Compo Beach is part of a 29-acre park with an accessible walkway, playground, sand volleyball courts, pickleball court, playing fields, basketball courts, a skatepark, a boathouse and a boat launch.

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