

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

34 Best Things to Do in Rhode Island – From Stunning Beaches to Historic Mansions

Keep busy in the country's smallest state with these fun things to do in Rhode Island.

By Stacey Leasca | Updated April 11, 2024



Rhode Island may be the smallest state in the nation, but it still offers something exciting to do at every turn. The Ocean State is packed with activities for the young, old, and young at heart, solo travelers and families, leisure seekers and adventure lovers, and everyone in between. Don't believe it? Here are 34 things to do in Rhode Island, from savoring the best lobster roll to attending local-favorite festivals.

Marvel at the Newport Mansions.



No trip to Rhode Island would be complete without crossing the Claiborne Pell Bridge to see the famed [Newport mansions](#). Built by some of the most renowned titans of industry (including the Vanderbilts and the Astors), these architectural gems have stood the test of time and remain in pristine condition for you to view, thanks to The Preservation Society.

Soak in the scenery along the Cliff Walk.



Before leaving Newport, take a stroll along the [Cliff Walk](#), a 3.5-mile trail that follows the ocean's edge from Bellevue Avenue to Memorial Boulevard. You'll see the mansions on one side and the Atlantic on the other as you explore this unmissable free attraction. The path can get challenging at times, but an easy, scenic chunk lies between Narragansett Avenue and Ruggles Avenue. This is where you'll see The Breakers, Ochre Court, and Salve Regina University.

Visit the Tennis Hall of Fame.

Newport's [International Tennis Hall of Fame](#) honors the greats from Maria Bueno to Roger Federer (the latter via hologram). The museum has inducted more than 260 players from 27 countries and celebrates the game with history exhibits, virtual reality experiences, and memorabilia. In addition to the displays inside, the hall of fame is in the Newport Casino, a stunning 19th-century building.

Paddle out at Narragansett Beach.



The Ocean State has no shortage of beaches to explore, but Narragansett is one that never disappoints. The stretch of shore has long been a favorite to tourists and locals alike, thanks to its soft sand and typically docile waves. Though every now and then, a good swell comes through and lures the surfer crowd in. Keen to try it? Get some instruction from the pros at [Warm Winds](#), who will happily show you the ropes.

Meet the residents of Roger Williams Park Zoo.

The [Roger Williams Park Zoo](#) is more than just a place to see animals (though it's great for that, too). The nonprofit zoo also provides environmental education to guests so they can walk away with both a new appreciation for the animal world and lessons on how to conserve it for future generations. Things to do here include zipping through the forest on an open-air cable car, going on an African safari, and watching bird demonstrations.

Watch the flames at WaterFire.



Make your way to Providence, the state's capital, for a spectacularly fiery scene. For more than two decades, the city has put on a pyrotechnic display — technically a "fire sculpture installation" — called [WaterFire](#). Every few weeks from May through November, the three rivers that flow through downtown Providence are illuminated with displays of fire on and off the water. The show is free, though donations are welcome, and sometimes accompanied by an art and food market. WaterFire is typically held on Friday and Saturday nights.

[How to Spend 3 Perfect Days in Providence, Rhode Island](#)

Check out the local talent at RISD Museum.

The Rhode Island School of Design in Providence is world renowned for its talented student body. At the [RISD Museum](#), you can see their works and then some. The museum, founded in 1877, is home to about 100,000 works of art across media from ancient times all the way to modern masterpieces. Featured are pieces by Picasso, Monet, and Andy Warhol.

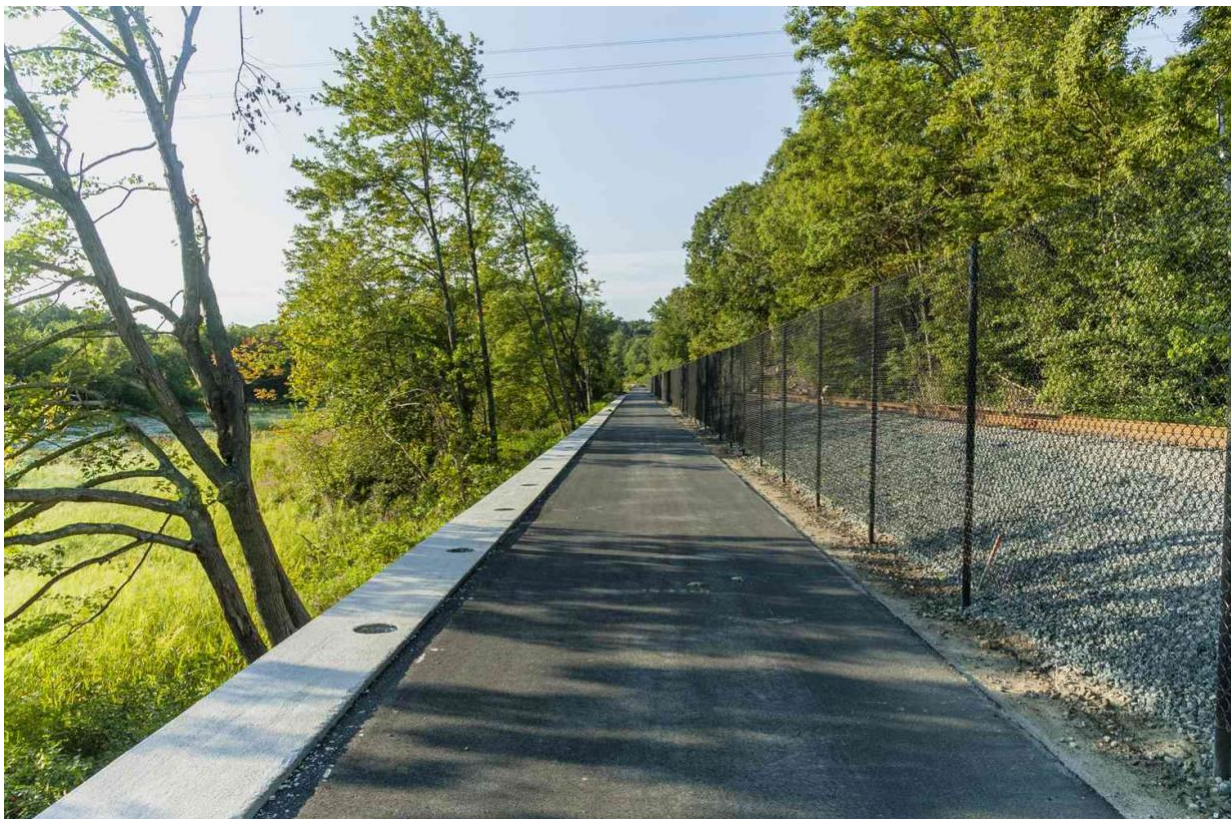
Attend a Trinity Repertory Company performance.

The [Trinity Repertory Company](#) is a nonprofit regional theater company that puts on intimate performances of classics like "Sweeney Todd" and, around the holidays, "A Christmas Carol." Performances take place in either a 500- or 250-seat theater in the Lederer Theater Center in Providence. Whichever theater you choose, you'll never be more than 12 rows from the stage.

Explore the boutiques and galleries at Bowen's Wharf.

Harkening back to pre-revolutionary Rhode Island, [Bowen's Wharf](#) on the Newport waterfront is a charming blast from the past now brimming with boutiques and restaurants. With its brick pedestrian walkways and colorful shopfronts, the seaside square is picturesque and always lively, also partly because tourists flock here to board cruises from Bowen's Wharf Marina.

Pedal the Blackstone River Bikeway.



The [Blackstone River Bikeway](#) stretches 18.2 miles between Cumberland and Providence, providing cyclists with soothing wilderness scenery in the Blackstone Valley on their journey. It's only the second-longest bike path in the state (behind the Washington Secondary Bike Path, some 19 miles long), but it's too beautiful to pass up. Pleasure pedalers, however, should consider sticking to the 11.6-mile off-road portion between Cumberland and Woonsocket.

Try the lobster roll at Monahan's.

Coming to Rhode Island and forgoing a seafood meal would be downright criminal. Stay on the right side of the law by paying a visit to [Monahan's](#) and ordering its famed lobster roll, which comes loaded with meaty chunks lightly sautéed in drawn butter and secret seasoning. The beloved institution provides beautiful waterfront views from Narragansett's State Pier No. 5, and it has a second location in Charlestown.

Tour the manicured masterpieces at Green Animals.



In Newport, you might be inspired to cut your shrubs into fun shapes after visiting the [Green Animals Topiary Garden](#). The green space overlooking Narragansett Bay boasts some 80 topiary masterpieces, all depicting different animals. Visitors are welcome to pack a picnic and eat beside their favorite creature. At certain times of year, the grounds explode with color thanks to the flower gardens.

See North America's largest collection of fresco paintings.

[St. Ann Arts and Cultural Center](#) in Woonsocket used to be a Catholic church but is no longer affiliated with any religion. Now, it's all about celebrating and preserving the Romanesque building's artistic, architectural, and historical splendor. The cultural center claims to contain the largest collection of fresco paintings in North America, all created by Guido Nincheri of Italy. It also has more than 40 stained-glass windows to admire.

Ride a Venetian gondola on the Providence River.

Never mind that it's a teeny bit touristy, cruising the Providence River in a Venetian gondola driven by a gondolier clad in classic stripes and a straw hat is an experience even the locals shouldn't skip. [La Gondola](#) tours run for about 40 minutes and allow you to bring your own snacks and wine aboard.

Spot sea critters on the Middletown coast.



Take a walk through [Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Middletown to see anything from harlequin ducks to salamanders to snapping turtles. Come walk its plentiful trails and see how many different species you can spot — maybe a saltmarsh sparrow or piping plover? The refuge's 242 wild acres are a common stopover for migrating birds.

Take a spin on the "flying horses" carousel.

Go for a ride on America's oldest continuously operated carousel in Watch Hill. The iconic "flying horses" have been a source of pure joy since the 1880s, and people of all ages still ride the nostalgic beachside attraction while trying their hand at the brass ring game. The [merry-go-round](#) runs seasonally and costs as little as \$1 a ride.

Go tide pooling at Beavertail State Park.



See more ocean creatures (of the small variety) by taking a walk along the tide pools at [Beavertail State Park](#). Go it alone or alongside a park naturalist, who will happily point out all the different species calling these little ocean puddles home, from starfish and sea urchins to crabs and tiny snails.

Taste Federal Hill's delicious Italian fare.

[Federal Hill](#) is the Little Italy of Providence. Home to a large and vibrant Italian and Italian-American population, this neighborhood has long been known as the spot for a great plate of pasta and a delicious slice of cheeseless pizza, the traditional Neapolitan way still honored by [Caserta](#). However, if you have room in your belly for only one plate of carbs, make it one at [Angelo's](#), family-owned and -operated for four generations.

Get a late-night dog at Olneyville New York System.

If you're craving something absolutely over the top to eat after a long night out in Providence or Cranston, a street cart-style hot dog from [Olneyville New York System](#) will not disappoint. The famed little diner is open until 2 a.m. and serves its "hot wieners" (their words, not ours) fully loaded with onions and the restaurant's proprietary wiener sauce. Order it with cheese fries on the side for a truly indulgent experience.

Shop for souvenirs at a whimsical and one-of-a-kind market.

Visitors can find tranquility, free-roaming emus, and a range of trinkets at the [Fantastic Umbrella Factory](#) tucked away in Charlestown. It's difficult to describe exactly what this tiny enclave is, but you'll find gardens, unusual gifts both locally made and sourced from around the world, a penny candy station, candle shop, and more. Everything is housed in a complex of charming buildings for a bazaar-like feel.

Take an oyster farm tour at the Matunuck Oyster Bar.

An absolute must-visit for oyster aficionados is the [Matunuck Oyster Bar](#) in Wakefield. The restaurant is rather popular, so be sure to make reservations well in advance to try the oysters, plus locally grown vegetables and regionally sourced fish. Those with an interest in aquaculture can even opt into an oyster farm tour, which teaches all about how the bivalves are cultivated for you to enjoy.

Delight your kids at the Providence Children's Museum.

Take your kids for a fun-filled day of learning at the [Providence Children's Museum](#), where children can get their hands on puzzles, science experiments, and art projects galore. Visitors learn through interactive displays and play areas, including exhibits like Water Ways, the Children's Garden, and Coming to Rhode Island, a "time-traveling adventure" that shines light on

the state's early immigrants. Little ones will be enchanted by the play area designed to look like a magical woodland.

Sip local varietals at Carolyn's Sakonnet Vineyard.

Sip and savor at [Carolyn's Sakonnet Vineyard](#), a Little Compton-based wine producer that makes award-winning vino from chardonnay to rosé to red blends. This place claims to be New England's oldest winery, around since 1975. Stop by to order a flight and some nibbles in the public tasting room and see the 150-acre estate that gives Rhode Island its delicious wine grapes.

Ferry over to Block Island.



As the ferry jingle goes, "Sail away on the Block Island Ferry, take a trip back to carefree times." Block Island, located 12 miles off the coast of Judith Point, is an easy-to-access paradise. It's just seven miles long and three miles wide, making it entirely possible to fully explore in a single day. Rent bikes and head to the Mohegan Bluffs to get the view of a lifetime, grab lunch at [Three](#)

[Sisters](#), and end your day with a boozy drink at [Ballard's](#). Extend the stay by booking a room at the [Block Island Beach House](#), rinse, and repeat.

Explore the Southeast Lighthouse.



While on Block Island, take a moment to visit the [Southeast Lighthouse](#), one of the brightest beacons on the East Coast. The lighthouse, built in 1875, sits atop Mohegan Bluffs and is open for both interior and exterior visits, though the museum inside is not open during winter. While you're there, check out the boulder marking its original location. It was moved in 1993 due to coastal erosion.

Taste Rhode Island's best clam dishes.

Clams are practically their own food group in Rhode Island, where "clear" clam chowder was born. Try the regional favorite at Matunuck Oyster Bar in Wakefield, then taste another Rhode Island staple, clams "casino," also on Matanuck's menu and widely devoured at [Flo's Clam Shack](#) in Middletown. For golden-

brown clam cakes fried to perfection, you'll want to visit the walk-up window of [Iggy's Doughboys and Chowder House](#) in Warwick (and order a round of its famous donut holes while you're at it).

See pufferfish, sharks, and more New England marine life up close.

The [Biomes Marine Biology Center](#) is a private education facility, but it's open daily for public walk-ins between 12 and 5 p.m. The center claims to have the "largest collection of New England marine life in the world," which includes pufferfish, horseshoe crabs, seahorses, sharks, octopi, and more. Feedings and demonstrations are held every half hour on weekends.

Find a Del's truck on a hot day.



[Del's Frozen Lemonade](#) may very well be the perfect treat on a summer day. The icy drink originally came from Franco DeLucia, who brought it to Rhode Island when he immigrated from Naples more than a century ago. It can be found in various Del's shops sprinkled around the state (Newport, Providence, Middletown,

etc.), though really, it's the most fun to try to spot one of its trucks or carts and grab it fresh. Pro tip: Never, ever drink it with a straw. Trust us.

See what life was like in 18th-century Rhode Island.

Get a glimpse into Rhode Island's past at the [John Brown House Museum](#) in Providence. The museum, named after the U.S. representative, walks guests through what life was like in 18th-century Rhode Island, including for marginalized communities. Refreshingly, the museum doesn't gloss over Rhode Island's participation in slavery and Brown's role in it. Visitors can also walk through the home that displays antique artworks, furnishings, and even a fully restored 18th-century carriage.

Enjoy diner fare from a food truck.

[Haven Brothers](#) takes the concept of a classic American diner and puts it on wheels. The stainless-steel facade has the same curb appeal as a fixed restaurant, but Haven Brothers is mobile. The Providence institution is said to be one of the country's original food trucks, serving up loaded hot dogs, indulgent burgers, onion rings, and more diner staples since 1888 (although the original menu might have looked quite different).

Explore the campus of an ivy league university.



Brown University brings liberal arts and science progressives from all over the country to Providence. See the campus where notable names like Emma Watson, John F. Kennedy, and Ted Turner once studied, taking in the beautiful architecture of the academic buildings and the constant buzz along the adjacent Thayer Street.

Experience a drive-in movie.

Watch the big screen from your car like they used to in the olden days at one of the few remaining drive-in theaters in America, the [Rustic Tri-View Drive-in](#). The theater, which opened in 1951, is still projecting major films weekly from April to September. The movies are always family-friendly — think "Guardians of the Galaxy" and "The Little Mermaid" — and showtimes are always listed on [Your Neighborhood Theatre](#).

Walk through history at Fort Adams State Park.



For the history buff, a visit to [Fort Adams State Park](#) in Newport is a must. The park is home to an 18th-century fort that was used during World War II. Today, people go to admire the well-preserved landmark — including its underground tunnels and original cannons — on a guided or self-guided tour of the grounds. The coastal surroundings also beckon a range of outdoor activities, such as fishing, boating, hiking, and picnicking.

Time your visit with a festival.

Rhode Island is home to several major festivals such as the [Rhode Island PrideFest](#), held in Providence every June, and the [Charlestown Seafood Festival](#) and [Newport Jazz Festival](#), both taking place in August. But the [Newport Folk Festival](#) is arguably Rhode Island's best-known event, featuring a world-class lineup that has in the past included Dolly Parton, Kacey Musgraves, Patti Smith, and James Taylor. Visit Rhode Island in July to catch some of the greatest musical acts alive strum out their hits.