

DISCOVERING THE QUIET CHARMS OF RHODE ISLAND

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With its soft sand and small waves, Block Island's Baby Beach is perfect for families with young children. PHOTO COURTESY VISIT RHODE ISLAND

As a born-and-raised Angeleno, the East Coast has always held a certain allure with its four distinct seasons, historic buildings on every corner, Ivy league universities, lobster rolls and peacoats.

Drawn to its beauty, peacefulness and fresh seafood, New England is where my mother chose to recalibrate after she and my dad divorced. During school breaks in L.A., my sister and I got to try out life along the Atlantic while visiting our mom in her home in Sandwich, Mass., the oldest town on Cape Cod. We'd have picnics by the lake, visit glass artist studios, tour college campuses, eat delicious seafood and take long walks along the beach.

Today, while I'm firmly rooted in Los Angeles and raising two girls of my own, I find myself longing to recreate those slow East Coast adventures that only a sweet New England town can offer, so I was thrilled to recently explore Rhode Island's South County, the southern half of the smallest U.S. state, which is nestled between Connecticut and Massachusetts.



Stunning views from the Southeast Lighthouse on Mohegan Bluff. PHOTO BY NINA HARADA

Block Island: a step back in time

Shortly after my arrival, I met some other journalists and writers at [George's of Galilee](#), where we had our first (of many I'd soon learn) plates of calamari and “stuffies,” a popular New England dish of stuffed clams. We hopped aboard the [one-hour ferry ride](#) from Point Judith, an easy 40-minute drive from the T.F. Green International Airport, and sailed into a thick blanket of fog that transported us back in time to Block Island.

Though the other writers traveled from nearby Long Island and New York, none of us had ever been — or even heard of — this small island, which sits only 12 miles off the southern coast of Rhode Island. Just under 10 square miles, Block Island is lesser known than its more famous neighbors Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard and Aquidneck Island, home to Newport and its famous mansions, but it's full of fun facts that add to its Old-World charm and mystique. It's the smallest town in the smallest state, the whole island enforces a 25-miles-per-hour speed limit, the fire and rescue teams are volunteer-run, instead of addresses, houses are identified by “fire numbers” and all mail is picked up at the town's post office.

Block Island is home to only 1,000 full-time residents. One of them is Jessica Willi, lifelong resident and executive director of Block Island Tourism Council. “There's not a lot of new things, but it's new to a lot of people,” she says.

It's precisely this absence of the constant whirl of city life that attracts new visitors. We checked into our rooms at the charming [Inn at Spring House](#), the latest addition to the family-operated Spring House Hotel reserved for guests 21 and over. From my balcony, I could see migratory birds taking a moment of respite on bare branches and the ocean just beyond the trees. Taking a note from the birds, I put up my feet and rested, too, a simple act we parents tend to forget.

We started day two at [Odd Fellows Café](#), where locals and folks who just got off the morning ferry ordered their coffees and breakfast sandwiches before a guided tour of the [Southeast Lighthouse](#). Year round, you can visit the grounds and see where the lighthouse once stood on the precipice of Mohegan Bluff before getting relocated 300 feet inland in 1993. Enjoy stunning ocean views

where there is “nothing between here and Portugal,” except for the country’s first commercial offshore wind farm. From May 24 through Oct. 12, visitors can venture inside the national historic landmark, originally built in 1875, which includes a museum featuring photos, old equipment and other artifacts from the lighthouse’s long history.



At Abrams Animal Farm and Aviary on Block Island, Lucky the camel happily accepted some kale. PHOTO COURTESY NINA HARADA

Though most businesses don’t open until around Easter or Memorial Day, when the island fills with families and visitors carrying on tradition, the beauty of Block Island is also in its quiet moments offseason, where you can bike

from [Baby Beach](#) for kid-friendly fun to [Cooneymus Cove](#) for sunset hikes, cozy up in a pub over stuffies and beer at [McAloon's](#), or reconnect with nature at [Abrams Animal Farm and Aviary](#).



Wickford Village shops and restaurants parallel Wickford Cove.

PHOTO COURTESY VISIT RHODE ISLAND

Apparently, this is what my soul needed. Owned and operated by the Abrams and Draper families, the farm is free and open to the public year round. The families' gift to the island was to “spark a little sense of curiosity and wonder,” says Logan Mott Chase, office manager of Block Island Resorts. “To inspire people to take better care of the environment and animals.”

It's no surprise that our group of writers, who spend so much of our time behind computer screens, lit up at the opportunity to feed curious lemurs, eager goats and Lucky, a sweet, giant Bactrian camel.

Wickford Village: the allure of small-town living

We bid farewell to Block Island to take the ferry back to Point Judith for breakfast at [T's Restaurant](#). The small local chain serves up breakfast classics

and local favorites such as coffee milk, Rhode Island's official state drink. Properly caffeinated, we explored the shops, galleries and restaurants of [Wickford Village](#), a charming town founded in 1709 in the city of North Kingston.

I was equally invigorated by the beautiful walk along Main Street, which parallels Wickford Cove, as I was by conversations I had with local artists and shop owners like Melissa Beckwith, whose dream came true when she opened up her artisan boutique [Serendipity](#) with her mom 10 years ago, and Guy Cassaday, a former toy designer for Hasbro-turned-painter and one of the 29 artists who operate the co-op gift shop [Harbor View Artisans](#).

A delicious lobster roll lunch at [Wickford on the Water](#) rounded out our neighborhood tour.



Lobster roll and oysters at South Coast House in Narragansett. Calamari and fresh baked bread at River Bar in Westerly. PHOTOS BY NINA HARADA

Art and history in Westerly and beyond

Hungry for more small town charm — and lobster rolls — our guides took us to Wakefield, Westerly and Ninigret Park, where I finally got the chance to meet one of Danish artist [Thomas Dambo's famous giant trolls](#). The park is also home to [Atlantis Rising](#), an international sand sculpture competition and festival that includes live music, kids' activities, food and onsite camping.



One of Thomas Dambo's giant trolls enjoys its natural surroundings at Ninigret Park. PHOTO COURTESY NINA HARADA

In Wakefield, we visited [The Glass Station](#), glass artists Eben Horton's and wife Jennifer Nauck's studio and gallery. Horton is known for his interactive art installation, [Glass Float Project](#) on Block Island, where he's been hiding hundreds of glass-blown orbs around the island every summer since 2011. "Floats bring such joy to people," Horton told us as he casually made one of the orbs that will be hidden this summer.

In Westerly, well known to Swifties as the location of Taylor Swift's vacation home, we visited another historical landmark, [Watch Hill Lighthouse](#) and its museum. Though the lighthouse isn't open to the public, it's still worth a visit to walk down the private road to the southerly most point of mainland Rhode Island. Overlooking the vastness of the Atlantic and breathing in its salty air, I was reminded once again to slow down and savor this moment.



Artist Eben Horton's orbs are hidden all around Block Island each year as part of his Glass Float Project. PHOTO BY NINA HARADA

When we dined at [River Bar](#), a few miles north, I needed no reminder to savor each bite of fresh oysters, homemade bread and uninterrupted conversations.

Hobbit houses, horseback riding and other not-so-rugged adventures

We spent our final two nights at [The Preserve Sporting Club & Resort](#), an upscale, all-ages playground of sorts in Richmond, R.I. During our property tour, which is one of the many complimentary resort activities, we realized just how expansive both the grounds (3,500 acres) and the amenities are. In one day, you can take an off-roading adventure in one of their exclusive Bentley Bentaygas, learn to fly fish, go clay shooting, take a yoga class, have tea time with a pony, relax with a luxurious spa treatment or, my favorite, enjoy trail riding on one of their happy-go-lucky horses.



Enjoy a four-course meal in one of the Maker's Mark Hobbit Houses. PHOTO BY NINA HARADA

Though the resort is most certainly luxury, to my surprise it's also very family friendly. From [paint the pony](#) experiences and ice cream manicure/pedicures to sling-shot crafting and archery, Rhode Island native and owner Paul Mihailides made the resort as kid-friendly as possible, in large part due to his own children and grandchildren who are often on the property.



Cam was the best trail-riding buddy at The Preserve. PHOTO COURTESY NINA HARADA

Even the The Preserve's signature dining experience at the [Maker's Mark Hobbit Houses](#) is enchanting to kids and adults alike. Guests can book this whimsical four-course private dining experience with whiskey pairing or take advantage of the seasonal décor for a [special photo opportunity](#), perfect for Easter or holiday cards.

I find myself itching to give my California girls a taste of those quintessential summers along the Atlantic shoreline, too, a glimpse into world-renowned Ivy Leagues, historic museums and, of course, New England's signature seafood. But perhaps East Coast adventures can happen at any time, for any reason, always there to remind us West Coasters of the distinct food, beauty and charm of the other coast.

Nina Harada is a native Angeleno, mom of two daughters and Digital Editor of L.A. Parent.