


# SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{St. Louis' Finest}







Castle Hill Inn in Newport was built in 1875  
by Alexander Agassiz as a summer residence.  
Photo by Alex Paul.

# TINY BUT MIGHTY

If you're a foodie and history buff, head straight to Rhode Island.  
The Ocean State won't disappoint.

*Written by Christy Marshall*

After being banished in 1636 from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in Salem by its Puritanical leaders, Roger Williams bought land from the Narragansett people and founded the Providence Plantations (which turned into the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations and then the State of Rhode Island) as a haven for religious freedom — for people, he said, were "distressed of conscience."

Before long, the area had become home to religious and political dissenters, as well as some social outcasts. It was dubbed "Rogue Island."

There is nothing rogue about Rhode Island now.

In terms of area, the state is the nation's smallest. It could fit comfortably into the Grand Canyon with about 700 square miles to spare. The state is 48 miles long and 37 miles wide, comprising six areas: Block Island, South County, Blackstone Valley, Warwick, Providence, and Newport. The top of Rhode Island borders Massachusetts to its north and east and Connecticut to the west. Eastern Rhode Island contains the lowlands of the Narragansett Bay, and Western Rhode Island forms part of the New England upland.

The state sparkles from the T.F. Green Airport in Providence (with its fresh flowers in the ladies' room) to the magnificent

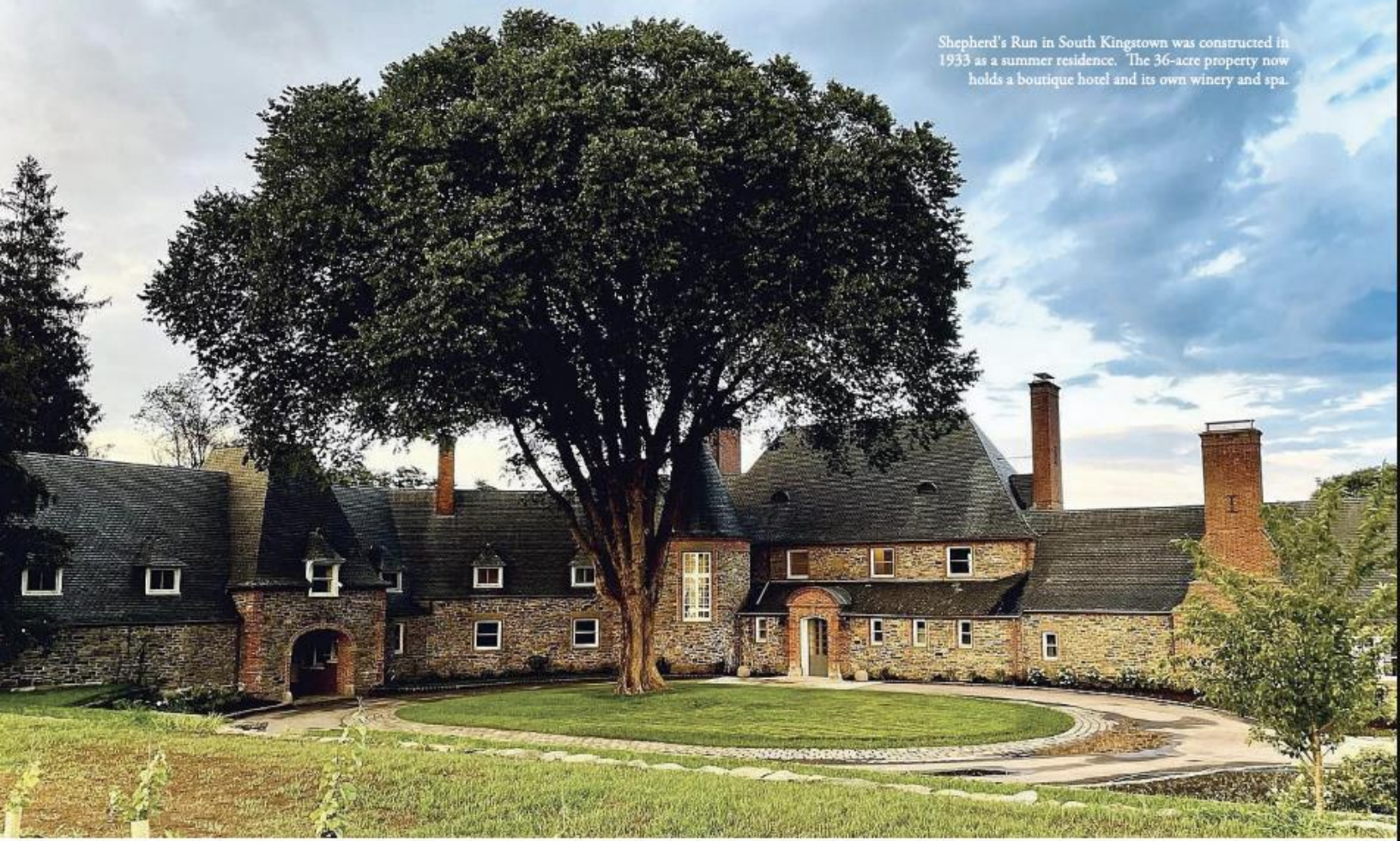
mansions on its coast. Picking Warwick as a first stop, the Hotel NYLO is a lovely tribute to industrial chic. From there, make a quick jaunt to the famed Victorian mansions of Newport.

The state has a new marketing motto: "Come for the food. Stay for the stories." It's apt. Rhode Island abounds in both culinary delights and history.

Castle Hill Inn ([castlehillinn.com](http://castlehillinn.com)) in Newport is a great place to start on both counts. Established in 1875, the "summer house" was originally commissioned by Alexander Agassiz, a marine biologist and naturalist at Harvard University and a man who made a fortune in copper mining. During World War II, the mansion was used as an impromptu base for naval officers. Later, it became a summer hotel. Following winterization, it started running year-round. Today, Castle Hill is owned by its employees and retains its old-world charm and elegance. On the culinary side, I must recommend the Truffled Onion Dip with house-fried kettle chips, the Arancini, and "Cornbread's" Clam Chowder for your lunch order at The Lawn. If the weather is amenable, take a break sitting on one of the ubiquitous Adirondack chairs and watch the boats sail by.



Shepherd's Run in South Kingstown was constructed in 1933 as a summer residence. The 36-acre property now holds a boutique hotel and its own winery and spa.



Located on a spit of land between the Atlantic Ocean and a pond, this Weekapaug Inn dates back to 1939.





Today the Weekapaug is part of the Ocean House Collection and is one of Relais and Châteaux 580-hotel properties.



Rhode Island boasts dishes unique to the state. There's the "Stuffie," a clam stuffed with bread. Coffee Milk: coffee syrup served in milk (and the official state drink). The "Saugy Dog": a hot dog with a touch of spice (which originated in 1869). The state also boasts an International Food Trail featuring restaurants in 10 Rhode Island towns with menus from 40 different countries.

You might want to start that trek in Central Falls at Tuxpan Taqueria, a 2024 James Beard finalist for Best New Restaurant. The chef and owner, Diego Alcantar, named it after his hometown in Mexico. The restaurant is minute, and the food is spectacular. His mother helps in the kitchen, and as she said, "The food is love." It's a must-stop.

In Chepachet, make reservations at the Portuguese restaurant, Assado's Kitchen + Bar, and order the Quahogs Recheados, the Portuguese take on the "Stuffie."

On the history and food side, slip into The Guild Brewing Co., a pub/restaurant/event space set along the Providence River in Pawtucket, the home of the American Industrial Revolution. Located in the former Haskell Manufacturing Nut and Bolt factory, the Guild's owners kept as many elements of the original building as possible, right down to the beams and crank windows. Be sure to sample some of The Guild's own brews.

As for the stories and aside from the magnificent Gilded Age mansions of the Vanderbilts, Astors, and their ilk, slip into the St. Ann's Arts & Cultural Center ([stannsartsandculturalcenter.org](http://stannsartsandculturalcenter.org)) in Woonsocket to see the nation's most extensive collection of fresco paintings. The church was built in 1918 as one of the country's eight French Canadian parishes. A Central Falls fresco artist, Guido Nigari, came and spent two years painting the frescos. Locals were paid 25 cents and a peanut butter sandwich to sit and be painted into the scenes.

All the delectable dishes and forays into the country's past certainly warrant a visit. But for me, I'd beat a fast path for a stay at one (or both) of the Ocean House Collection's Rhode Island holdings.

Let's start at The Weekapaug Inn in Westerly ([weekapaughinn.com](http://weekapaughinn.com)). The Inn welcomes you just as if you were walking into a very affluent friend's warm and beautifully decorated home. Inside the front foyer is the Hunter Lending Closet. A trove of classic Hunter boots awaits guests ready to wander the hills or, on a wet and windy day, saunter down the beach. It is the only U.S. hotel to pair with the famous British bootery.

The foyer walls are cloaked in hand-painted scenes of shorebirds. The murals were painted in 2012 by Sonja Vaccari, a local artist, and Kathy Metcalf, the wife of co-owner Lang Wheeler, apprenticed on the job.

"Our art is a little different here," said Dan Abrashoff, the general manager of the Weekapaug Inn. "You'll see Audubon prints throughout the Inn. Those are all the birds that call the pond home. So they either migrate through here or they live here."

Now in its 125th year, the original 1899 building was destroyed in the epic hurricane of 1938. However, they salvaged as much of the original structure and furniture as possible and used it the following year to rebuild the current Weekapaug Inn in its new location.

In 2007, the Inn partially closed only to be revived three years later when Weekapaug resident Lang Wheeler joined Watch Hill resident Chuck Royce to take over and make the hotel part of the Ocean House Collection and one of 580 Relais and Châteaux hotel properties.

The Inn has 24 rooms, three Fenway suites, two Carriage House suites, and four Signature suites. For those curious about the surroundings and its native inhabitants, a full-time naturalist



The first and only AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five-Star hotel in Rhode Island, Ocean House is perched high on the bluffs of Watch Hill.



is on Weekapaug's staff. In the summer, barbecues are held on Thursday nights, and lobster boils on Sundays. Fresh-baked pizzas are served on the beach. The chef sources ingredients grown on the grounds and from nearby purveyors. The Inn is also renowned for its Sunday Family Dinners, a three-course family-style menu. The Inn has morning yoga, fine food, welcoming vignettes in the common spaces with jigsaw puzzles to board games, card games, reading nooks. It's what everyone dreams of as the perfect home away from home.

But as lovely as Weekapaug Inn is—and it really is—the jewel in the OHC crown is Ocean House in nearby Watch Hill.

Ocean House is the only AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five-Star hotel in Rhode Island. It is set on 13 acres with a 650-foot private beach. The hotel's Ocean & Harvest Spa and COAST restaurant are also Forbes Five-Star rated, making Ocean House one of only 14 Five-Star resorts in the world to have the designation. And, as a bonus for all the Swifties out there, you can see Taylor Swift's house just down the beach.

The yellow-and-white Victorian mansion on the Atlantic opened in 1868, just after the Civil War. But time took its toll, and in 2003, the Ocean House was declared beyond feasible repair and shuttered. More than 5,000 salvageable artifacts and furnishing elements were spared. Under the auspices of Wheeler and Royce, the original building was replicated, complete with all the resort's 247 windows in their original positions and opened in 2004. It holds 49 guestrooms, 20 signature suites, and a slew of cottages available to rent.

The hotel is beautifully designed and appropriately grand. But there's more to it than fine dining and high-end amenities. The spa is the ultimate sea of serenity.

My favorite find among the treasures stashed in the Ocean House is a vast collection of work created by Ludwig Bemelmans, the creator of the classic *Madeline* series. The assemblage is the largest private collection on permanent public display in the world. Curated by Hilary Hatfield, the collection is owned by Deborah and Charles Royce, the inn's proprietors.

Among the sketches from the original books and 21 of Bemelmans' drawings titled "Farewell to the Ritz" (Bemelmans' former employer), there hang two oversized paintings commissioned for the children's dining room on Aristotle Onassis' yacht, the *Christina O*. There are also frescos taken from a bar Bemelman owned in Paris.

"Ludwig Bemelmans was an iconic, prolific, and witty artist and writer who continues to appeal to people of all ages," said Deborah Royce when the gallery opened. "Many of his works portray all levels of society with humorous 'behind the scenes' glimpses of café and hotel life. Naturally, these playful pieces fit perfectly into our hotel setting."

Another lovely spot to stop and stay is Shepherd's Run ([shepherds.run](http://shepherds.run)) in South Kingstown. The Norman Romanesque building was constructed in 1933 as yet another summer residence. The small hotel (26 rooms), located on 36 acres, has its own winery and spa, BODY + MIND. But then again, Rhode Island is overrun with wonderful spots to see.

There probably isn't a terrible time to visit, but according to Daniel Abrashoff of Weekapaug Inn, Rhode Island is "magical" in the fall. The summers are beautiful, but everywhere is packed with people who have fled New York, New Jersey, and places beyond.

Irrespective of when you go, leave yourself plenty of time to explore the entirety of the Ocean State. Enjoy every bite; visit every town.

Rhode Island may be tiny, but it's magnificently mighty. **sl**