

The 19 best things to do in Rhode Island

[Lonely Planet Editors](#)

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Despite the proximity of New York and Boston, Rhode Island offers plenty of relaxing things to do. Marianne Campolongo/Shutterstock

[Rhode Island](#) may be the smallest state in the [US](#), but it has plenty for travelers to do. This is a destination where land and sea are intertwined, promising 400 miles of coastal adventures, a passion for local produce and sustainable seafood and a captivating blend of history and innovation.

On a trip to Rhode Island, you can [hit the beaches](#), explore arts, academia and foodie culture in Providence, admire ocean views and Gilded Age sparkle in Newport, or go seal-watching and kayaking between the islets in Narragansett Bay. Rhode Island sure knows how to keep travelers busy!

There is a strong sense of place here, perhaps because you're never far from the inspiring beauty and power of the sea. You can [road trip](#) from any corner of Rhode Island to the far side of the state in under an hour, but give yourself plenty of time – these 1034 sq miles are densely packed with sights and activities.

Whether you're day-tripping from [Boston](#) or [New York City](#), or visiting from across the country, here are the top things to do in Rhode Island to experience the best of the Ocean State.



Downtown Providence mixes history and contemporary sparkle. Sean Pavone/Shutterstock

1. Explore vibrant Downtown Providence

[Providence](#) is the only major US city whose entire downtown is on the National Register of Historic Places, but the city definitely isn't living in the past. Instead, the "Creative Capital" buzzes with modern, progressive energy.

The city tourism department has created a series of [self-guided walking tours](#) to help visitors get a feel for the Rhode Island capital. Start by exploring the historic buildings and cultural landmarks of Downtown, including the [Trinity Rep](#) and [Providence Performing Arts Center](#) theaters, and Johnson & Wales University, with its quirky [culinary museum](#).

Planning tip: If you're willing to put in some mileage on foot, you won't need a car to explore. But if you do bring one, street parking is plentiful in most neighborhoods – and not prohibitively expensive downtown.

2. Go on a scenic kayak tour along the Providence River

You'll likely spend time alongside the Providence River while exploring downtown Providence, but slipping onto the water's surface gives you a whole new view of the city. [Providence Kayak Co](#) offers 45- and 75-minute rentals of single and tandem kayaks, the perfect amount of time to paddle up and down the main stretch of the river. When you've finished kayaking under bridges and admiring the stunning architecture, head back to Providence Kayak Co. It's located inside [The Landing Cafe](#), where you'll find coffee and ice cream – a great way to refuel after some time on the water.

Planning tip: Rentals sell out quickly in the summer months, so make a reservation ahead of time.

3. Marvel at the WaterFire bonfire extravaganza

All three rivers running through downtown Providence flicker gold during the city's famous [WaterFire nights](#), when more than 100 bonfires are lit on the surface of the waterways on select Saturday nights, drawing close to a million people to Providence each summer.

These floating flames are part of a mesmerizing art installation by [Brown](#) graduate Barnaby Evans. The bonfires are lit by torchbearers in gondolas, and musical performances take place in parks along the banks, while thousands of visitors descend on the city center to take it all in.

Planning tip: You'll want to come early to the show to find parking and claim a spot along the waterfront. The bonfires are lit around sunset, and the fires burn until midnight. WaterFire takes place from May through November, on roughly two Saturday evenings each month.



An air of learning and knowledge hangs over Providence's historic Athenaeum. Nagel Photography/Shutterstock

4. Step into the historic Providence Athenaeum

About halfway up a steep hill on Benefit Street, you'll find a quiet but exciting refuge of literature and learning – the [Providence Athenaeum](#), housed in a Greek Revivalist building built in 1838. The interior of this historic library, filled with densely lined shelves, is drenched in sunlight on clear days.

Despite its prestige, the Athenaeum is a warm and welcoming space. As well as being a literary haven and a historic space for thinking and reading, the library has an impressive collection of rare books and an art collection with rotating exhibits. Visitors can view items in the rare books and special collections by appointment.

Planning tip: Visitors are invited to make a small donation (the recommended amount is \$5) to enter the library. Plan for an hour or two if you want to hang out and read – or swing by for a quick stop while touring the Brown campus.

5. Light up for PrideFest

Providence's annual [PrideFest](#) is one of the state's biggest and most celebrated annual events, and the only illuminated night parade in the region. Providence supports LGBTIQ+ inclusivity year-round, so it's no surprise that the city hosts [New England's](#) largest celebration of queer identity and liberation.

Dates and times vary each year, but PrideFest usually kicks off mid-morning in District Park, where over 100,000 people come to enjoy street vendors, music and lively celebrations. Well-known acts hit the main stage throughout the day, and there's a kid-friendly section in the park for families.

As nightfall nears, find a spot to watch the illuminated parade, which is really more of a roving party, full of sparkling floats and participants wearing all kinds of costumes and twinkling lights. If you're here for the nightlife, you can join a block party or hit the bars after the parade ([GayCities](#) has listings).

Planning tip: Celebrating the festival and parade makes for a long day, especially if you're drinking so take it slow, wear comfortable shoes and let your pride sparkle!



Quahogs (clams) are a favorite Rhode Island treat. Patricia Gee/Getty Images

6. Try all the Little Rhody state delicacies

Spend just a few hours in Providence and you'll hear locals talking about some unfamiliar foods. Look out for quahogs (clams), stuffies (stuffed quahogs), clam cakes (clams fried in a doughy ball of cornmeal), coffee milk (coffee-flavored syrup stirred into milk), johnnycakes (unleavened cornmeal pancakes), hot wieners (like a hot dog but smaller, slathered in meat sauce and mustard), and Rhode Island clam chowder (with a base of clear, briny broth).

Planning tip: You can find many of these treats in downtown Providence, but a car is helpful to reach the best versions in and around the city. If you're vegan or vegetarian, worry not – the city has some of the [best vegan food](#) in New England.

7. Experience design and creativity at the RISD Museum in Providence

The [Rhode Island School of Design](#) was founded in 1877 by a group of women – more than 40 years before women gained the right to vote in Rhode Island – with a focus on progressive thinking and curiosity. But you don't have to be a student to learn about art here; you can visit the [RISD Museum](#), located between the river and Brown University.

The stunning collections here range from ancient Greek and Egyptian artworks to designer items from the 21st century, with over 100,000 objects on display. Before or after your museum visit, take a walk around the RISD campus and along the river.

Planning tip: If you love art, plan to spend a few hours here. Adult admission costs \$20, but it's free on Sundays and Thursday evenings; reserve free tickets in advance for these popular days.

8. Soak up ocean views in Newport

Let the ocean breeze carry you back in time, down [Newport's cobblestone streets](#), to a shimmering vision of history and opulence. Located at the southern tip of Aquidneck Island, [Newport](#) is bordered by Narragansett Bay to the northwest, with the Atlantic Ocean at its rocky southern edge.

Long a hub for seafaring types, Newport is dotted with marinas graced by sleek sailboats and yachts, and the city's colonial-era architecture is meticulously preserved. In the summer months, tourists fill the walkable downtown area looking for seafood and ocean views.

Planning tip: The city is great for walking and biking, with mostly flat streets and a compact downtown. Popular attractions can be reached by the city's trolley, which offers a free hop-on-hop-off service from May through October, departing from the Newport Transportation Center.



Newport is famous for its flamboyant Gilded Age mansions. Wangkun Jia/Shutterstock

9. Tour the Gilded Age-era mansions of Newport

In the late 19th century, the wealthiest citizens of [New York](#) and [Philadelphia](#) spent millions building extravagant mansions on rolling estates with views of the Atlantic Ocean. Today, you can tour a handful of these lavish homes in the city of Newport for a look inside the Gilded Age.

The house tours are self-guided, and you can download the [Newport Mansions](#) app for an audio tour of each of them. You can purchase a tour ticket covering one, two or three

mansions, either online or in person at [The Breakers](#), [Marble House](#), [the Elms](#), [Rosecliff](#), or the Green Animals Topiary Garden.

Once you have your ticket, you can visit the properties at any time. Mansions are open at different times on different days, so check the schedule before picking which ones you'll visit.

Planning tip: If you're interested in going deeper into the history of the Gilded Age mansions, book a [guided tour](#). Guides explore themes such as "Beneath the Breakers," visiting the subterranean levels of the houses, or "Servant Life," exploring how the help kept things running in these extravagant homes.

10. Pedal the rails on a historic route

In the 1850s, maintenance workers on America's railroads used handcars with a seesaw-like crank arm to move along the tracks. Today, visitors to Portsmouth near Newport can enjoy a similar concept - but the vehicles used by [Rail Explorers](#) are pedal-powered, hands-free and much more fun.

Utilizing old railway tracks and custom-designed, four-wheeled vehicles, this is a unique way to view the scenery along Narragansett Bay, just north of Newport. Book a two- or four-seater vehicle in advance and it will have your name on it when you arrive. You can choose between a 3-mile, one-way trip or a 6-mile round-trip ride. It's a great bit of exercise after a foodie day in Newport, but it's also easy enough for travelers of all ages.

Planning tip: Consider taking one of their popular brunch excursions – you'll stop halfway at a picnic spot and enjoy local pastries, coffee and a mimosa or a Bloody Mary. On the evening lantern ride, you can bring a dinner picnic to enjoy beside a roaring bonfire – a beautiful way to enjoy a cool evening in Newport.

11. Take a birding hike at Norman Bird Sanctuary

Just outside of Newport, [Norman Bird Sanctuary](#) is a 300-acre habitat dedicated to the conservation and restoration of coastal grasslands, woodlands and wetlands. Every year, the sanctuary installs 300 nest boxes for tree swallows and eastern bluebirds. Visitors can enjoy the quiet woodlands of the sanctuary on a mile-long hike to Hanging Rock for ocean views, or bring binoculars for bird-watching from the cliffs on the Nelson Pond Trail.

Planning tip: The sanctuary hosts regular activities to educate visitors and promote a personal connection to the area, from outdoor yoga classes to free nature walks. Check their [calendar](#) for upcoming events before you visit.



Meet Rhode Island's harbor seals on a boat tour around Narragansett Bay. SEALANDSKYPHOTO/Shutterstock

12. Say hello to seals in Narragansett Bay

Winter isn't a popular time for humans to be out on the icy waters of the North Atlantic, but harbor seals love the chill. Over 400 of them hang out in Narragansett Bay from November to April, and if you want to see them, you'll need to bundle up and join the largest environmental nonprofit in New England, [Save the Bay](#), for a seal tour.

You'll board their boat in Newport and cruise out to the seals' favorite spots, learning about these adorable, semi-aquatic mammals along the way. After the hour-long tour, you can visit Save the Bay's [aquarium](#) to learn more about the underwater world of Narragansett Bay and the North Atlantic, and efforts to protect these precious waters.

13. Sleep on an island among the birds and stars

Just a mile offshore from Newport lies Rose Island, in the east passage of lower Narragansett Bay. The 18-acre island is a peaceful wildlife refuge, home to nesting American oystercatchers, glossy ibis, snowy egrets, Canada geese and seagulls – and the [Rose Island Lighthouse](#), perched on the island's highest point.

The best way to visit Rose Island is to stay overnight. The island has four rooms available to rent, three of which are in the lighthouse and one in the former barracks building. Staying here falls somewhere between camping on the beach and staying at a cozy bed and breakfast.

Amenities are comfortable but basic, and you're close to the elements – the water just outside of your window, the star-speckled sky on clear nights and the cool morning fog.

The lack of wi-fi is a great excuse to ignore emails and let yourself sink into the surroundings.

Planning tip: Bookings become available in December of the year before, so set a calendar reminder – they book up fast!

14. Traverse the stunning Cliff Walk in Newport

You're never far from the ocean in Rhode Island, but Newport's [Cliff Walk](#) is one of the loveliest ways to be right beside it, enjoying the caw of gulls and the crash of the waves on the rocks.

This National Recreation Trail passes through a National Historic District, offering a unique tour of both wildlife and architecture. You can start your walk at one of seven entrances, depending on how much of the 3.5-mile path you want to cover. Along the way, you'll enjoy views of the ocean to one side and the iconic mansions of Newport on the other.



Paths lead across the dunes to sandy beaches all around Block Island. Ellen McKnight/Shutterstock

15. Take a two-wheeled Block Island tour

Hop on the ferry in Newport or Point Judith, travel just 12 miles into the ocean, and you'll find all you could want from a beach vacation. [Block Island](#) is lush and dramatic, with green hills, craggy bluffs dropping into the ocean and 17 miles of public beaches wrapped around its rim. The island covers just 9 sq miles, and often feels wonderfully remote, yet there's still an abundance of shops, restaurants and hotels.

A popular self-guided cycling route loops around Block Island's varied terrain, with stops at beaches, lighthouses, and viewpoints. The circuit involves about 7.5 miles of mostly easy riding, but there is some hill climbing; if you prefer to coast, consider renting a moped.

16. Watch sunsets at the lighthouse

The [Southeast Lighthouse](#) is a Gothic brick structure sitting atop the 200ft-tall, red-clay cliffs known as the Mohegan Bluffs at the southeast end of Block Island. Built in 1873, it's one of the most recognizable and iconic sites on the island and the tallest lighthouse in New England.

Beyond the tower, there's a dramatic drop-off into the ocean. The bluffs are exposed to the full force of the elements, and in 1993, the lighthouse had to be moved back from the eroding cliff edge so it wouldn't tumble into the water.

Planning tip: You can take a guided tour of the tower for \$15 or check out the lighthouse museum for \$10. After admiring the lighthouse, walk down the steep steps to a narrow beach, backed by bluffs. It's the perfect spot to watch the sunset.



Meet myriad animals in topiary form at Newport's Green Animals Topiary Gardens. LEE SNIDER PHOTO IMAGES/Shutterstock

17. Visit the oldest topiary garden in the US

A green expanse of shrubs and whimsy, [Newport's Green Animals Topiary Garden](#) is home to over 80 topiary animals and figures. This 7-acre property is packed with delightfully clipped and trained perennials and pretty walking paths.

The garden comes to life in the spring and summer, when flowers paint the paths between bushes shaped like lions, giraffes, bears and more, making for an even lovelier stroll. In the early spring, 37,000 tulips erupt into a rainbow of colors. Tours are available every day from 10am to 5pm.

Planning tip: On a sunny day, this is the perfect place to bring a picnic and relax, surrounded by nature. If you visit in May, you might catch their annual plant sale, where you can purchase a variety of flowers, vegetables and herbs.

18. Tour a Rhode Island oyster farm

At [Matunuck Oyster Bar](#) near [East Matunuck State Beach](#), you can join a morning tour of the oyster farm in Potter Pond, the inlet just outside this acclaimed seafood restaurant. You'll board a small boat and motor out onto the water where floating lines stretch out like a field of crops, attached to 9000 mesh bags containing growing oysters. You'll finish the one-hour tour with a new appreciation for the work and care that goes into oyster farming.

A tour ticket also gets you a reservation for brunch in their massive, tented dining room with big windows looking out on the water. Obviously, you'll want to try the Matunuck oysters, whose taste is unique to the pond you were just exploring. The jumbo shrimp, sushi, stuffies and steamers are all excellent too – you really can't go wrong here!

19. Kayak the Pawcatuck River

The ocean isn't the only body of water worth exploring from the Atlantic shore of Rhode Island. In the town of Westerly, you'll find [Watch Hill Outfitters](#), a friendly little fishing shop with kayak rentals on the Pawcatuck River. Pack a picnic lunch and your beverages of choice for a full or half day of kayaking.

Use the launch behind the shop or the folks at Watch Hill can drive you to another launch spot to paddle your way back. Along the way, you can stop for lunch and say hello to the cows grazing along the river. It's a lovely way to spend some time on the water, and a peaceful alternative to the beach crowds in the summer.

This article was adapted from the [New England guidebook](#).