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Newport's historic  
Chanler hotel

**Opposite page:**  
The view from  
the grounds at the  
Castle Hill Inn



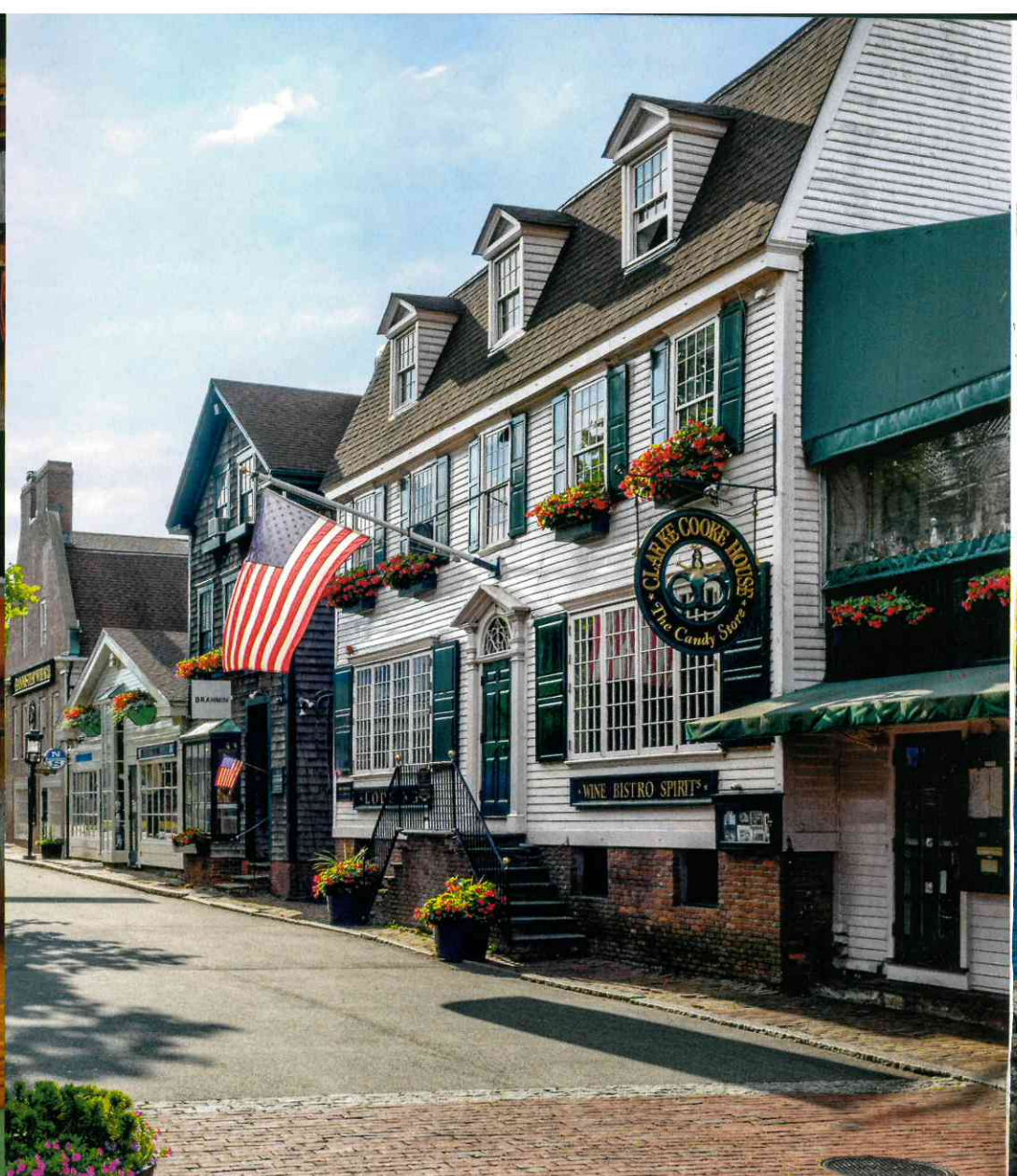
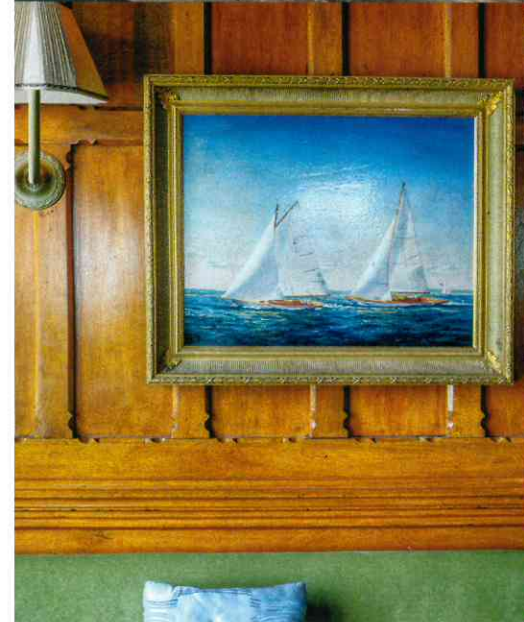
# mind your manors

Newport's historic estates, along with a wave of chic hotels and restaurants, are drawing a new generation of glitz-and-glamour seekers to one of America's original seaside resort towns

**By Christopher Bollen Photographs by Marcus Lloyd**







n a hot afternoon in the waning days of Newport's high season, I found myself outside an enormous red sandstone estate called Rough Point, trying desperately to get a green 1969 MG Roadster into gear. The last resident of the late-19th-century mansion, commissioned by a scion of the Vanderbilt family in the English country manner, was the tobacco heiress Doris Duke. Late in her fascinating, scandal-ridden life, she founded the Newport

Restoration Foundation, which is credited with saving many of the town's historic buildings. After her death, Rough Point became a museum decked out in her extravagant and whimsical furniture—an everlasting tribute to how the 1 percent of the 1 percent once lived.

The car had been arranged by The Vanderbilt, where I was staying, and I was late for an “experience” that had been planned for me—sampling absinthe at the hotel's clandestine bar. As I finally found first gear and haltingly exited the enormous circular driveway, two tourists walked past. “Did they film any scenes here?” one asked excitedly.

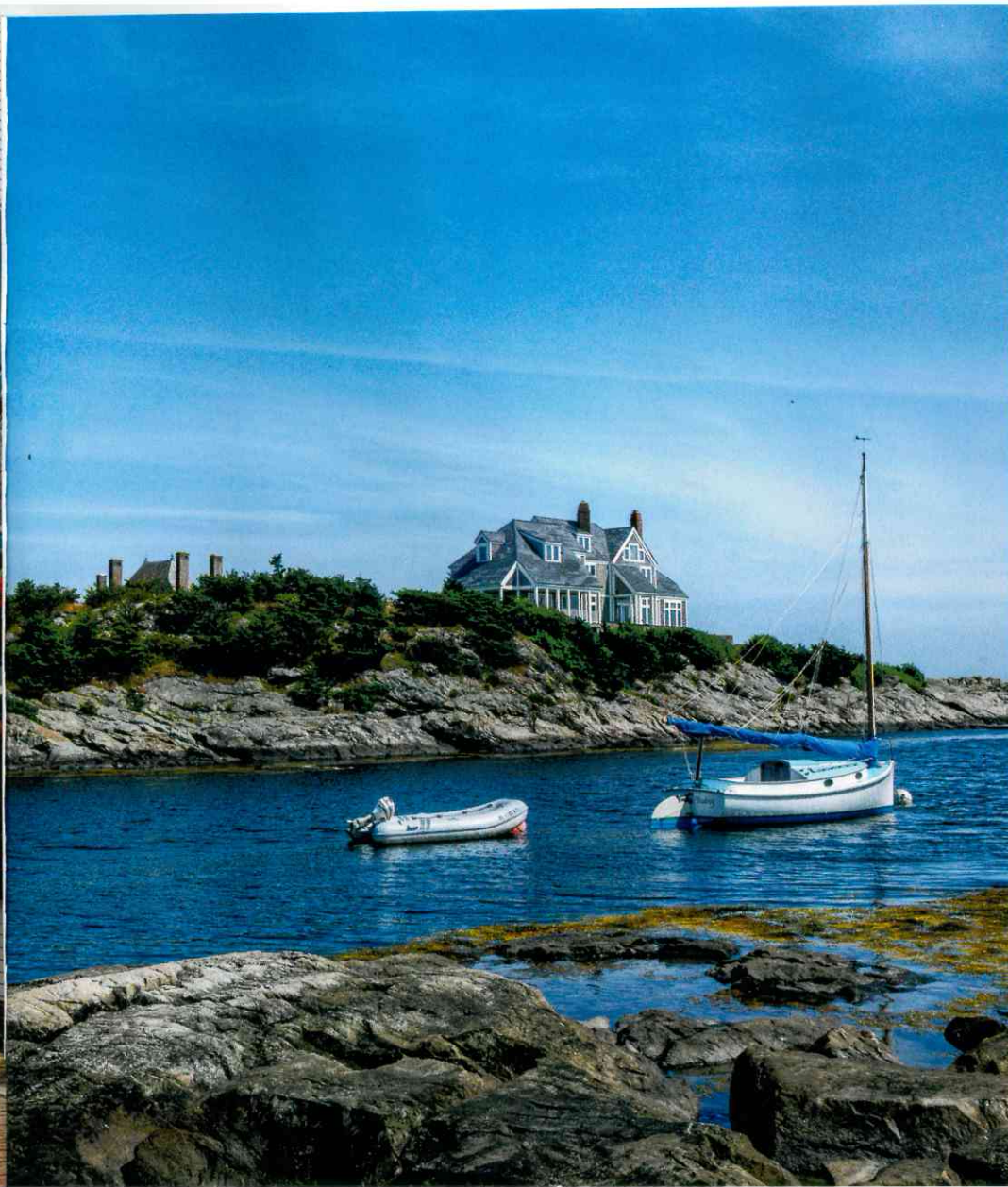
“Not that I saw,” replied the other. “But I’m only on episode four! I did hear,

though, that the owner ran over her decorator by the front gate.”

The tourists were chattering about *The Gilded Age*, the hit HBO television series that has added yet another incentive for travelers to visit this storied enclave, in addition to the rich American history, the over-the-top ostentation, the epicurean delights, and the never-ending social scandal. Set just off the mainland, on Aquidneck Island, Newport is arguably America's most enduring playground for extreme wealth—a position, it must be acknowledged, that the city achieved partly through its role in the trade of enslaved people, an aspect of its history that it has only recently begun to acknowledge.

Newport's reputation as a summer paradise for the rich dates to the late 19th century, when America's empire builders and robber barons arrived in droves to build gaudy estates they





winkingly referred to as summer “cottages” along a shelf of picturesque Rhode Island shoreline. For the “Four Hundred” (the mythical list of those at the top of the pecking order, invented by social maven Ward McAllister), summering in Newport provided not so much an escape from the world as a sporting arena to show off their privileged place in it. They hired the most sought-after architects and gardeners, importing European tastes and traditions—and sometimes paintings lifted from Venetian palazzos—to create a colony of mega-mansions that strove to out-glint Versailles. The novelist Henry James derisively called them “white elephants.”

“Newport, with its ocean and its palaces, was the Queen of the Watering Places,” wrote the historian Cleveland Amory in *The Last Resorts*, his definitive 1952 account of American society’s leisure capitals. But by then the city’s star

had begun to fade, and in midcentury more than a few of Newport’s cottages, hugely expensive to maintain, were slated to be demolished to make space for parking lots. Thanks to the work of Duke and the Preservation Society of Newport County, most were saved, with some—like The Breakers, one of the city’s most popular attractions—becoming house museums, often with audio guides that catalog both the perverse excesses and the real artistry involved in erecting and maintaining these extravagant jewel boxes.

As large as the past looms in Newport, in our current gilded age the town’s pedigree has also made it very much a place of the present. Contemporary hotels and restaurants have been opening right and left, bringing balance to the historical cachet. Billionaires and celebrities, including Oracle cofounder Larry Ellison,

**Clockwise from far left:** Audrey Finocchiaro and Sam Lancaster, owners of the Nitro Bar; Newport’s roots go back to the 1600s; the view from Ocean Drive; Kingscote, a Gothic Revival mansion; executive chef Glaister Knight at the Brenton hotel; the well-preserved interiors of Castle Hill Inn





Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman, and comedian Jay Leno, have all recently purchased iconic estates on the waterfront. Demand for historic estates as wedding venues has spiked since Jennifer Lawrence married art dealer Cooke Maroney at the Belcourt of Newport mansion on Bellevue Avenue in 2019. And now *The Gilded Age*, which began airing in January 2022, has done for Newport what *Game of Thrones* did for Iceland. Several of the iconic mansions, including The Breakers, Marble House, Rosecliff, and The Elms, appear in the show, as do the grass courts of the International Tennis Hall of Fame. Again and again while touring the houses, I heard the same refrains: “What scene did they film here?” “Did the actors actually sit on these exact beds?”

“That’s the power of screen tourism,” Steven Feinberg proudly declared. As the executive

director of the Rhode Island Film and Television Office, he had a major hand in welcoming the production of *The Gilded Age* to Newport. Feinberg, who grew up in the area, said he wanted to be involved in the local cinema industry ever since he learned as a kid about the 1974 adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, which used two Newport cottages as stand-ins for the eponymous bootlegger’s home in West Egg. In 2019, the week the *Downton Abbey* movie first premiered, Feinberg persuaded series creator Julian Fellowes and his team to visit, hosting an intimate dinner in one of the grandest of Newport rooms, the pink-marble-enshrined dining room of Marble House. “It was a magical opportunity,” he said. A second season wrapped filming here last year.

Perhaps no hotel offers a more *Gilded Age*—worthy stay than The Vanderbilt, tucked into

**Clockwise from left:** Prepping bivalves at Matunuck Oyster Bar; the modern interiors at Hammetts Hotel; Le Bec Sucre, a popular bakery in nearby Middletown

**Opposite page:** The Elms, one of Newport’s famous mansions





the downtown historic district a short walk from the Newport Harbor. Financed by the playboy heir Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, the 1909 brick structure was rumored to have been a gift to his mistress. After she ran off to London and later died by suicide, it was used instead as the city's YMCA. It was recently acquired by Auberge Resorts Collection, which gave it an extensive makeover that has resulted in a stunning balance of moody decadence and clean, classic modernism, with many signature winks to the bygone era of clubby American splendor. My absinthe tasting, when I finally made it, was called "The Green Hour" and took place in a hidden parlor named after a dead Vanderbilt heir's wife. It involved a beaker-like fountain slowly dripping the cloudy alcohol over a sugar cube while gourmet treats were sent in from the chef.

A stroll through town reveals additional history beyond the Gilded Age relics: the country's oldest continuously operating tavern; its oldest surviving synagogue; its oldest lending library. There's the Francis Malbone House, a cozy, antiques-filled inn inside a 1760 home. Near the harbor, a cult diner called Franklin Spa still has its original 1940s counter and swivel stools and looks largely unchanged from the morning in 1953 when a young Massachusetts senator named John F. Kennedy married Jacqueline Bouvier at the Catholic church across the street.

Still, not everything in Newport is sepia-tinted. Perhaps no other locale in town

## where to stay



### Castle Hill Inn

Sitting on 40 acres, this Relais & Châteaux mansion has breezy white-on-white guest rooms with Atlantic-facing decks. At cocktail hour, its lawn is packed with glamorous locals and out-of-towners. From \$535; [castlehillinn.com](http://castlehillinn.com)

### The Brenton

This contemporary newcomer on the waterfront has 57 stylish rooms with nautical decor and harbor views, plus a happening rooftop bar. From \$299; [brentonhotel.com](http://brentonhotel.com)

### The Chanler

Located on Newport's famous Cliff Walk, this 19th-century mansion oozes historic charm, like the dark wood paneling and ruffled bedspreads in the ocean-facing rooms. From \$1,025; [thechanler.com](http://thechanler.com)

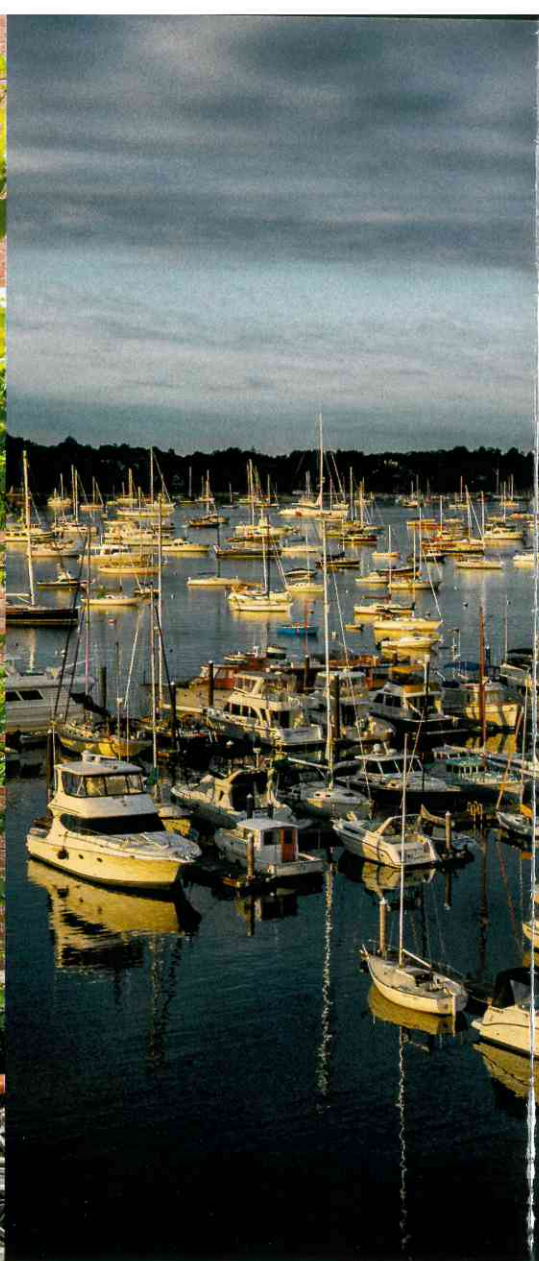
### The Francis Malbone House

This charming inn occupies a former 1760 private residence on the harbor. Its original owner built secret tunnels from the basement to the wharf to avoid paying the British taxes on imported goods. From \$275; [malbone.com](http://malbone.com)

### The Vanderbilt, Auberge Resorts Collection

Auberge relaunched this grande dame in 2021 with bold touches like cobalt blue tiles, but made sure to preserve its rich history, including at a secret bar. From \$629; [aubergeresorts.com](http://aubergeresorts.com)





delivers such a happening scene as Castle Hill Inn. Standing atop a peninsula jutting out into Narragansett Bay, the Victorian mansion offers a panorama of sailboats gliding out of the harbor, with an outdoor bar doing a steady business of vodka sodas and white wine while doubling as Newport's premier selfie spot. On my visit, I briefly became an in-demand photographer, helping no fewer than four couples who wanted shots of themselves hugging in the light of the dipping sun.

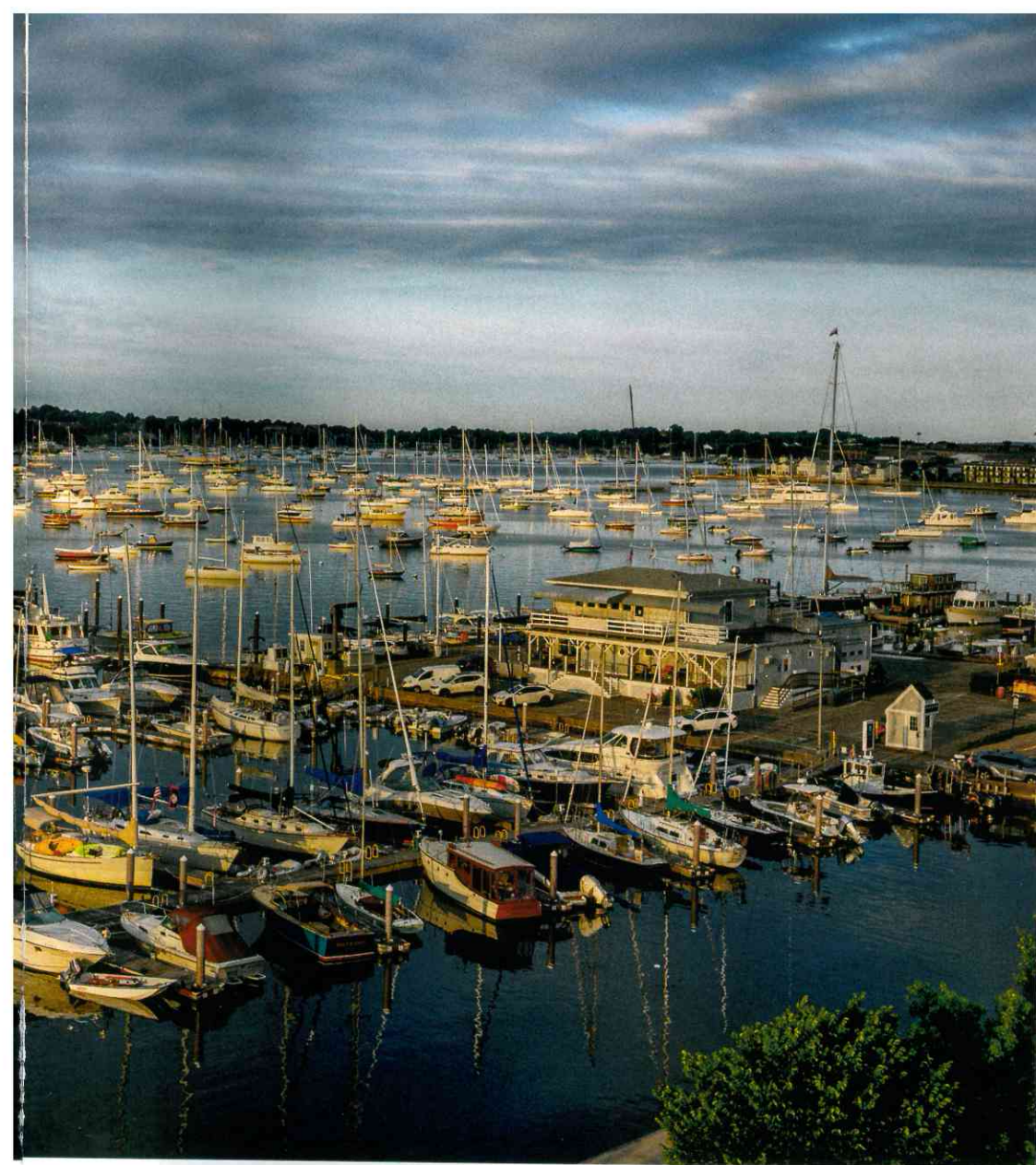
Afterward, some headed to dinner at Giusto, a cutting-edge Italian spot on Commercial Wharf in the new Hammetts Hotel complex. "Excuse me, are you from around here?" asked a young woman as I squeezed into the only available seat at the marble-topped bar. It sounded like a pickup line, but she just wanted to rave about the lettuce-wrapped fresh crab appetizer dressed in

mango and chili. Owner Kevin O'Donnell, who grew up in nearby North Kingstown, returned home in 2020 after years of working in kitchens in New York and Paris. "I wanted to make this restaurant different from what else was available in Newport," he said, "more than the basic clam chowder and fried calamari."

Nearby, a new museum devoted to the sport of sailing opened in 2022 along the souvenir strip of Thames Street. Naturally, sailing is huge in Newport, home to one of America's biggest annual regattas. But when I wasn't grinding the gears of my MG, I chose to tour the city in a 2001 Jaguar XJ8 in British racing green, thanks to Bruce Spitzer's unconventional new business, Newport Jaguar Tours. As we looped through the historic center, he recounted the religious groups of all faiths who had gravitated to tolerant, bohemian Newport as Puritanism

**From left:** Housed in a building once used as a YMCA, The Vanderbilt today has a rooftop where locals shop for oysters and champagne; Newport Harbor, a key Revolutionary War site





swept New England. (The titans of industry and future presidents came later.)

At the same time, much of Newport's early, pre-Gilded Age prosperity owed to its involvement in the "triangular trade"—ships sent first to West Africa for enslaved people, then to the West Indies for sugarcane and molasses, and finally back to Newport for exploitation. No amount of gold leaf can obscure that Newport was once the capital of enslaved people in New England. A monument memorializing those who died in the Middle Passage is in development for Liberty Square.

On my last day, I visited a windswept cemetery blocks from the suspension bridge that takes visitors back to the mainland. The Common Burial Ground is home to nearly 8,000 historic graves, the oldest dating to 1665. Among the figures buried here are a Rhode Island governor, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, an abolitionist, and several heirs to high-ranking families. But I'd come to pay my respects in a section known as God's Little Acre. It holds the largest and oldest surviving markers of enslaved and free Africans in America. Several of the granite stones have been rendered illegible by three centuries of New England winters, but others still bear names and dates and beautiful hand-carved engravings of winged cherubs and flying death's-heads. According to the map on my phone, this tiny, forlorn cemetery is less than a mile from the gilded palaces of Bellevue Avenue, which isn't very far at all.

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## where to eat



### Cru Cafe

This cozy all-day bistro does high-end comfort food like smoked-salmon avocado toast.

*About \$30 for two;*  
*crucafenewport.com*

### Franklin Spa

Ever popular for breakfast and lunch, this greasy spoon has been a mainstay for decades. Don't skip the hearty waffles and omelets.

*About \$30 for two; no website*

### Giusto

In dishes like littleneck clams loaded with garlic and guanciale, owner Kevin O'Donnell spices up local ingredients with Italian flavors. In warmer months, the terrace is a favorite for its harbor views.

*About \$100 for two;*  
*giustonewport.com*

### Matunuck Oyster Bar

Located in neighboring South Kingstown, this waterfront spot also offers tours of its oyster farms. Visitors shouldn't miss the legendary lobsters, crabs, and bivalves.

*About \$100 for two;*  
*rhodyoysters.com*

### The Grill

Newport's premier dockside dining destination is the type of place to dress up for. Beyond the requisite seafood towers and lobsters, it offers an exceptional tomahawk steak and weekend brunch.

*About \$100 for two;*  
*forty1north.com*