



# A Visitor's Guide to Doing the Rhode Island Coast Like a Celebrity

Dreaming of a star-worthy getaway to Newport and Watch Hill but don't exactly have an A-listers' budget? Here are the best places to hit

By **Alex Apatoff** | Updated on October 27, 2023 12:15PM EDT



PHOTO: THE ZIMMERMAN AGENCY

There are only a few places in the United States that have been a getaway for the rich and famous since time immemorial, and the Rhode Island coast is one of them. From Newport to Watch Hill, the scenic area has welcomed big names from Astor to [Swift](#) over the past 150 years or so, and the glamour and elegance of the area hasn't changed one bit.

However, these days, it's having a major moment in the spotlight, whether that's because of the famous Fourth of July parties hosted by the superstar singer, or HBO's *Gilded Age* filming some of its most opulent scenes on location in the area. And with the show coming back on Oct. 29, there's a high chance Newport is going to shoot to the top of your travel vision board.

Dying to go for a sail and slurp an oyster along the Rhode Island coast? While you can still spend Astor- (or Swift-) levels of cash on luxurious accommodations and yacht trips, you can also capture a little of that Gilded Age magic just by being in the area. Below, check out some of our favorite ways to live like an A-lister in the area, even if you haven't been invited to Taylor Swift's annual summer bash.



Taylor Swift 4th of July weekend with friends in Rhode Island. PHOTO: INSTAGRAM/TAYLORSWIFT

## What to See

Newport and Watch Hill are perhaps best-known for their enormous coastal mansions that date back to the Gilded Age of the 1870s, when industry was making certain families enormously wealthy and transportation was rapidly improving. That made it easy for city dwellers to build a "cottage" by the sea and get to it by train. Many of those mansions are still standing; some ([like The Breakers, the Vanderbilts' mansion](#)) are available to tour, while others (like the Astors' Beechwood Mansion) are now privately owned. ([Taylor Swift's "Holiday House" has a long history and socialite pedigree as well](#) — which is what [the song "The Last Great American Dynasty" is about.](#))

Not quite on "buy your own mansion" budget? You can still enjoy them for exactly zero dollars by going for a stroll along Newport's famous

"Cliff Walk," which enables you to see the most majestic mansions unobstructed from the coast.

You can also, of course, take the museum tours offered at properties including Rosecliff, Marble House and The Elms, and visitors to any of the mansions are allowed to picnic on the lawn during museum hours (feel free to bring "picnic baskets, lawn chairs, blankets or a cooler full of drinks," the Breakers advises) — you'll likely recognize some of the locations from [\*The Gilded Age\* on HBO, which shot scenes for the first and second season at many of the famous locales.](#)



PHOTO: THE ZIMMERMAN AGENCY

## What to Do

Newport Mayor Xay Khamsyvovavong said it best, so we'll just quote him entirely:

"One of the best things about Newport is all the hidden spots where the locals go, where it doesn't matter if you're a billionaire or a shipyard worker. Places like Pour Judgement, a small pub with live music and an incredible selection of beers; or Franklin Spa, a classic diner with an amazing menu.

Dodge the tourists and shop Washington Square where there's a stretch of women-owned boutiques on one side and a great set of restaurants on the other. I'd also check out Jane Pickens Theatre where they play classics like *Jaws* and host shows with celebrities like Bill Murray when they're in town.

Further up Broadway is the Firehouse Theater which features improv, stand-up comedy and live music. Jay Leno is known to drop in for sets when he's at his Newport home.

The Cliff Walk is one of the more notable walking attractions but I always encourage people to check out the Point neighborhood, one of the largest collections of colonial homes in America. And while you're there, stop at Belle's Cafe in the world-famous Newport Shipyard to have breakfast or lunch sitting alongside some of the most spectacular yachts in the world."

Looking to travel beyond the city confines a bit? A perfect day on the Rhode Island coast might include a drive along the water to appreciate the scenery (perhaps on Newport's famed Ocean Drive), stop into a hotel like the Chanler or Ocean House for lunch to get a sense of the splendor of the old architecture without splashing out for a room.

Next up, all the experts agree, would be sampling the seafood. You could go somewhere upscale, like the Clarke Cooke House in Newport (where Tinsley Mortimer has been spotted!) or go right to the source to see them being farmed, at a place like the Matunuck Oyster Bar about half an hour away. ([They'll even take you on a tour!](#))

## How to Get the Experience on a Budget





PHOTO: THE ZIMMERMAN AGENCY

Dying to check out some of the Gilded Age-esque attractions but can't quite spring for a suite at the Ocean House? Many of the high-end hotels have events that are open to the public to give you a taste of the A-list glamour at an accessible price point.

Rhode Island Commerce Corporation's chief marketing officer, Anika Kimble-Huntley, points out that many of the reasons celebrities love quiet Watch Hill are "public beaches, dozens of boutiques, amazing dining (including non-guest access to most of the amenities at the world class Ocean House), hiking along Napatree Point ... or maybe a ride for the children on the oldest Flying Horse Carousel in America. Watch Hill is a step back in time to a graceful period in history, still preserved and greatly enhanced and open to all visitors."

Some of those [non-guest-access amenities at Ocean House](#) include sipping a cocktail on their elegant veranda during the summer, by the fireplace in their Bistro in the fall or [in a restored ski gondola in the winter](#). They also host events for the public, including a tree lighting; coming in the non-summer season [might score you special pricing at their luxurious spa](#).

In Newport, you can sample some of the elegant amenities without staying on site. In the fall, the [Chanler](#) invites the public to take part

in [their famous cider bar](#), while the Vanderbilt serves a [Gilded Age punch bowl](#) in their library for visitors. (And for a [true robber-baron-for-the-night experience](#), you can arrange an absinthe tasting at the [Vanderbilt](#), which comes with caviar and snacks, for \$300 a couple.)

Many of the museums can also give a taste of the high life on a low budget. Newport has three "sporting museums" — the [Audrain Auto Museum](#), the [International Tennis Hall of Fame](#), and the just-renovated [Sailing Museum](#) (which puts you virtually at the helm of a boat, complete with sea breeze in your hair) — all of which allow you to get a sense of what it might be like to have a friend with a yacht. Being right on the water, there are no shortage of sailing lessons and charters available, which have the added bonus of giving you a unique vantage point of the coast's many mansions and estates.

## And If You Want the A-List Experience...

...invite us with you!



PHOTO: CHIP RIEGEL

Of course, as any celebrity visitor to either Newport or Rhode Island since the Gilded Age knows, there is no shortage of ways to splurge.

And because it's not a paparazzi hotspot, stars appreciate the low-key way to have a truly luxe experience; those in the know were reluctant to divulge visitor names because, as Kimble-Huntley says, "Historically, guests select Watch Hill to get away from being seen."

You might find celebrities staying under the radar in Ocean House's Penthouse Suite, which has a large deck for grilling and entertaining as well as gorgeous views, or taking the hotel's private 1930s yacht or a car from their Mercedes-Benz fleet out for a day trip.

In Newport, guests at the Vanderbilt can borrow a classic car from the Audrain museum to drive through the unparalleled fall foliage or explore the town for the day, while foodies staying at the Chanler can enjoy an exclusive eight-course meal at the Cara restaurant (or even better, order the restaurant's food up to their room).



PHOTO: THE PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF NEWPORT

And those who truly want to know how the other half lived can book VIP tours of the palatial mansions, [including the Breakers](#), to get access to off-tour rooms and guides booked specifically to your interests (the stables, anyone?). You can also propose in one of the grand rooms — though meddling aunts and society matchmakers aren't included. For that, you'll just have to tune into *The Gilded Age* on Sunday.