

Charming Coastal Connecticut

Saybrook Point Sunrise with Lighthouse. Photo by Frank Gilroy

Saybrook Point Inn



Awaken your senses as you rediscover the many wonders of New England in autumn

Photos and Story By DAN SCHLOSSBERG

Saybrook Point Marina



Mystic Cove



Coastal Connecticut, so photogenic in summer, is even more brilliant when dressed in an autumnal bed of reds, yellows, and golds.

The 27-mile stretch from Saybrook to Mystic is a virtual painter's palette that makes a perfect backdrop to the inns, resorts, and villages that hug the banks of rivers perpendicular to I-95, the major north-south route. Even Katharine Hepburn, a raving beauty herself, admired it.

The name and fame of the celebrated actress live on in the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, a vintage 1911 theater and museum listed on the National Register of Historic Places. "The Kate" is not far from the Saybrook Point Inn, a handsome 104-room riverfront property that includes a spa and marina. During its early incarnation as the Terra Mar, it was frequented by nefarious characters from gangsters to Hollywood's Rat Pack, led by Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. A room full of historic pictures and documents includes a First Day Issue 44-cent stamp bearing Hepburn's signature and a menu showing that a complete breakfast once went for a dollar.

Prices have changed with the times but so has service, not to mention the long list of amenities. A popular spot for weddings and business meetings, the inn features a main building, two guesthouses, a three-bedroom cottage, and a seasonal lighthouse suite concealed in a white tower above the marina's dock house. The inn also has two-story villas, a three-bedroom cottage, and a restaurant with the unlikely name of Fresh Salt — since its fishy fare is culled from both the saltwater of Long Island Sound and the fresh water of the Connecticut River.

John Lombardo, in his second stint as general manager at Saybrook Point Inn, spearheads a staff-wide environmental awareness that has steadily reduced the resort's use of oil, gas, and electricity — and earned recognition as the "greenest" resort in the Nutmeg State. His wife tends to the multiple plants and flowerbeds that make the 28-year-old resort look much newer.

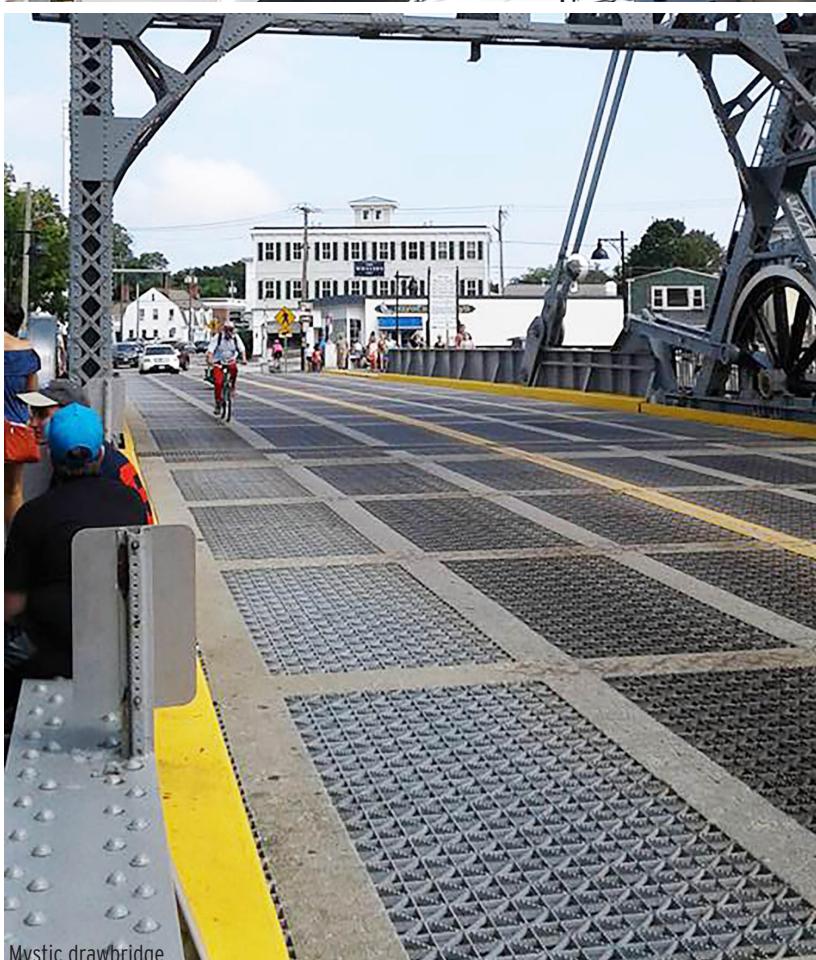
Guests seeking serenity can jump in the pool or hop onto a massage table at Sanno, a full-service spa with 11 treatment rooms. With a 125-slip marina, the Saybrook Point Inn has the potential to host more boats than people. That's not a problem, however, because many vessels contain comfortable sleeping quarters.

Anyone considering fishing, sailing, or sightseeing by boat will enjoy the inn's proximity to the marina. The Fire Bar on the terrace of the main building faces the river, making it a perfect place to nurse a drink at twilight time. Balconies of the guest houses across the street offer privacy for those who prefer a quiet commune with nature.

Walking is also a popular pastime, with the Old Saybrook Causeway, a section of Route 154, carrying cars, bicycles, and pedestrians nearly a mile around scenic South Cove on the Connecticut River. All seem most abundant at dawn and dusk because the sight of the early and late sun translates into the area's best photo ops.

Not that there aren't others: there are two working lighthouses, two taverns with even longer histories, and more than a half-dozen historic homes. Even the trees have been around for hundreds of years. Fort Saybrook Monument Park, across the street from the inn's main lodge, is a 17-acre park tracing the history of Saybrook Colony, founded in 1635. It

Saybrook Inn Marina



Mystic drawbridge

A sailboat in Mystic River



Carved lighthouse at Saybrook Inn



Mystic Pizza that spawned the movie of the same name



LIFESTYLE TRAVEL

includes a boardwalk, bird sanctuary, and railroad roundhouse.

Old Saybrook itself deserves its designation; its history, and some of its homes, pre-date the Revolutionary War. Bistros, boutiques, plus a plethora of art and antique galleries can keep curious visitors entertained for hours.

And it's just a short hop to Essex, home of the Connecticut River Museum and an excursion that includes a steam train in one direction and a paddlewheel steamboat in the other.

There's also a steamboat in Mystic, a tiny port town known for its world-class aquarium, elaborate maritime museum, and a drawbridge that opens with a hoot that sounds like a steam locomotive. The bridge, built in 1922, is a tourist attraction of its own — though motorists trying to get through town on Route 1 find themselves frustrated while waiting for the enormous concrete blocks of the bascule bridge to come down after boat traffic has cleared.

Vessels of every description ply the Mystic River with regularity. The list includes yachts, sailboats, tall ships, a 1908 steamboat named the *s/s Sabino*, and the *Charles W. Morgan*, last of the great wooden whaling ships. Built in 1841, it is moored at Mystic Seaport, which also harbors three other floating National Historic Landmarks.

Views of the boats, harbor, and busy train tracks are best from The Inn at Mystic, built into the hillside above Williams Avenue, near the junction of Routes 1 and 27. The only Mystic lodging to give guests views of Mystic Harbor and Fisher's Island Sound, the Inn has three main buildings, dozens of different room configurations, and a chef wise enough to include chunks of fresh lobster in the lobster salad served at the popular Harbour House, adjacent to the inn's pool. When weather permits, outdoor dining on the deck is both a spectator and participation sport. No artist could paint a prettier picture than the sight of lighted boats, buildings, and marinas as dusk fades into evening.

Wedding parties often stay at the Haley Mansion, a five-room 1904 structure adjacent to both the tent and parking areas reserved for such events. The remainder of the rooms are located in the Main Building, where breakfast is served on weekdays, and in the East Wing. The inn is built like a wedding cake — in layers — and cars climb the hilly terrain with little difficulty. Guests can also borrow bicycles, paddle kayaks through Pequotsepos Cove, or explore the scenic walking trail that hugs the eastern side of the enormous property.

Visitors who plan ahead would be wise to invest in the Mystic Pass Card, which provides discounts for the aquarium, seaport, and the Mashantucket Pequot Museum. All are worthwhile, with Mystic Seaport tops on the must-see list. The top maritime museum in the United States, it includes a 19th century coastal village, working preservation shipyard, and planetarium in addition to its fleet of historic vessels.

History even lives at B.F. Clyde's Cider Mill, the last steam-powered cider mill in New England. Family-owned and operated since 1881, it dispenses fresh cider daily during the months of autumn.

A short hop from downtown Mystic are the enormous Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos, the seaside village of Stonington, and a submarine museum where visitors can board the Nautilus, the world's first nuclear-powered U-boat. And don't leave the area without sampling a slice from Mystic Pizza, the little shop that spawned the movie of the same name. It was the first film appearance by an unknown actress named Julia Roberts.

For further information, contact the Saybrook Point Inn & Spa, Two Bridge Street, Old Saybrook CT 06475, Tel. 860-395-2000, www.saybrook.com; The Inn at Mystic, 3 Williams Avenue, Mystic CT 06355, Tel. 860-536-9604, www.innatmystic.com; Mystic Seaport, 75 Greenmanville Avenue, Mystic CT 06355, Tel. 888-973-2767, www.mysticseaport.org; Mystic Aquarium, 55 Coogan Boulevard, Mystic CT 06355, Tel. 860-572-5955, www.mysticaquarium.org. ■

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