

► Rhode Island

Southern Comfort

In late summer and early fall, the Ocean State's southernmost coastal communities usher in a majestic season

BY ANDREW E. McHUGH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN DUCA

If you're looking for South County, Rhode Island on a map, you likely won't find it.

King Charles II of England's 1663 land grants divided the then-colony into North and South Counties. Today, the 11 towns that make up this diverse expanse of the Ocean State are still known colloquially as "South County," but visitors will nary find a sign or map identifying the region as such.

And that might be a good thing. This quieter gem in the littlest state in the country might just be its best-kept secret.

From golf and tennis to boating and dining, South County offers something for everyone.

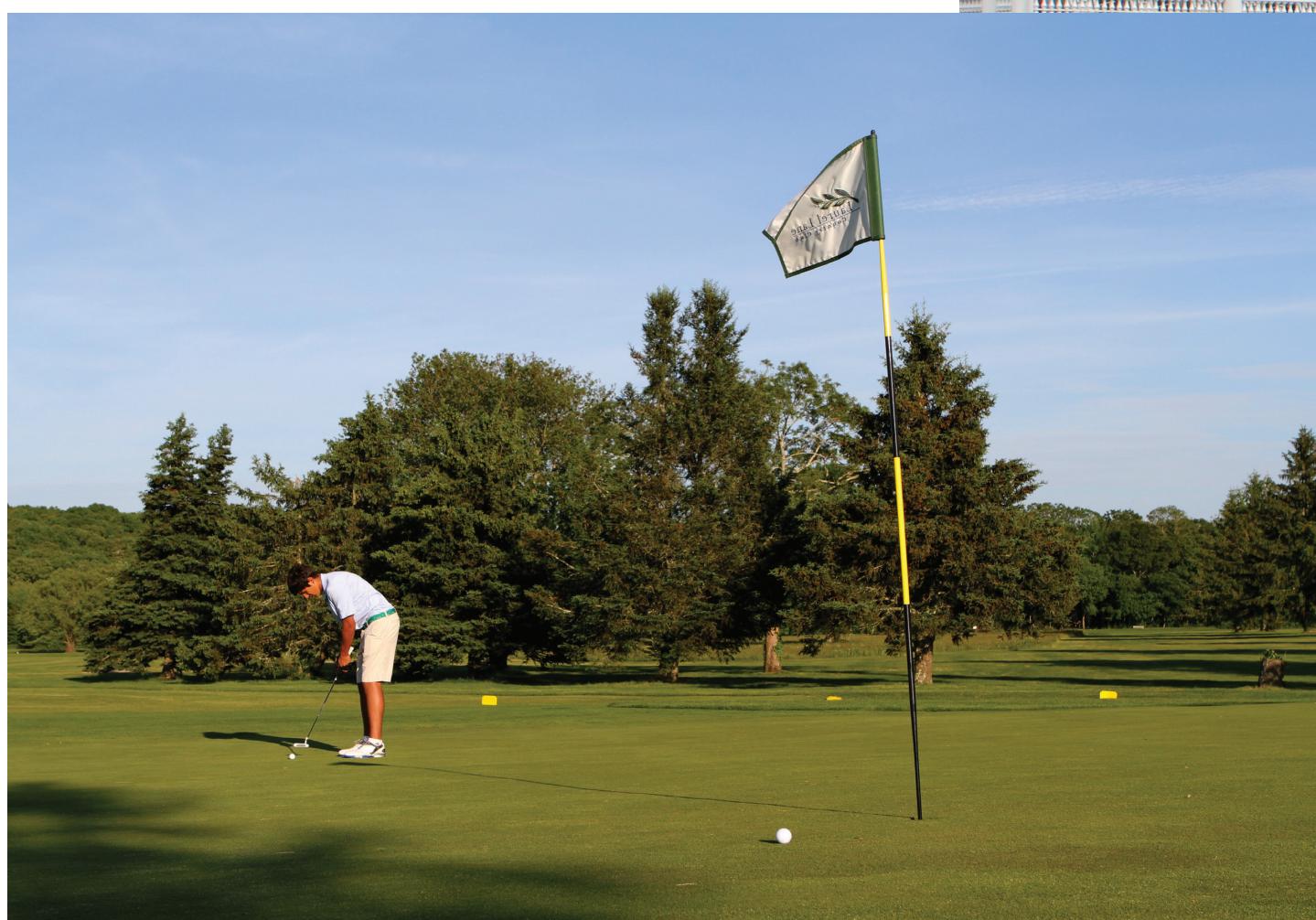
► Rhode Island

Peppered with outstanding golf courses, barrier beaches, tranquil salt ponds, veiled inlets, pastoral nature preserves and sprawling state parks, South County is an outdoor enthusiast's paradise. That doesn't mean that you can't be spoiled in the lap of luxury.

When it comes to hitting the links, it's hard to find a wider array of courses per square mile. The 17 public courses throughout South County range from easily attainable tee times at leisurely nine-hole courses to 18-hole layouts meant to challenge the competitive player.

Laurel Lane Country Club in South Kingston is an 18-hole par-71 located in a rural setting. With rates averaging \$64 per person, including greens fees and cart rental, Laurel Lane is affordable and ideal for the casual golfer.

Winnapaug Golf & Country Club in Westerly, established in 1922, is only 6,361 yards from the back, but it's a Donald Ross masterpiece. Thanks to Ross, best known as the designer of Pinehurst No. 2, many holes enjoy ocean views.



Play Laurel Lane Golf Club in South Kingston, left, then head to Watch Hill for a beverage on the porch at the stunning Ocean House.

The area's southernmost town, Westerly, is home to The Ocean House, the shining jewel in the coastal crown of the tony village of Watch Hill. The grand Victorian-style hotel opened in 1868 as an addendum to the surrounding summer homes of the ultra-wealthy. Considered a genteel beach resort with its desirable location atop a bluff overlooking the Atlantic, The Ocean House was considered the pinnacle of summer society until its prominence faded and it fell into disrepair. After an extensive rebuild, the hotel reopened in 2010 with the same iconic warm yellow façade plus 49 guestrooms, 15 signature suites, 23 private residences, a private beach, renowned dining and a 12,000-square-foot luxury spa. Capturing its 19th-century grandeur, all of the resort's 247 windows remain in their original positions and more than 5,000 artifacts and furnishing elements were lovingly salvaged from the original historic interiors.

► Rhode Island

In the beach resort town of Narragansett, the newly opened Break Hotel is the only boutique property of its kind. Twenty-first century amenities like in-room iPads, iPod docking stations and Apple TV keep you connected while guestroom fireplaces, an outdoor heated pool and rooftop lounge with ocean views beg you to unplug.

In a state that includes 400 miles of coastline, dining in South County affords some of the most tempting and creative dishes inspired by the sea. Matunuck Oyster Bar, an homage to owner/waterman Perry Raso's passion for local seafood and farm fresh produce, is a casual outpost conveniently situated on Potter's Pond, where it's not uncommon to see Raso zipping around on his weather skiff hauling up matured oyster clusters.



Laurel Lane, left and above, is one of 17 public courses in South County. Matunuck Oyster Bar, right, is a popular spot, while Watch Hill attracts plenty of celebrities like Taylor Swift, whose home overlooks East Beach, far right.

Since opening in 2009, word has quickly spread about this laid-back culinary treasure. The wait time is considerably less in the fall, though dining mid-week still might land you a table faster.

Further south in Westerly, it's easy to be distracted by the architectural adaptive reuse at Bridge, a former wheelhouse used to power 19th-century textile mills. The restaurant extends over the flowing Pawcatuck River that dissects the Rhode Island-Connecticut state line. Like most South County eateries, there is no shortage of seafood options. Don't overlook the grass-fed burgers or the robust choice of vegetarian and vegan plates.



WWW.NEGOLFANDLEISURE.COM

Part of South County's lure is discovering its charismatic hamlets. Historic Wickford Village, tucked on a quiet cove off Narragansett Bay, emanates a decidedly Mayberry-esque atmosphere with mom-and-pop shops and restaurants surrounded by 18th-century homes, but one of the best ways to experience the village is by water. The Kayak Centre on Wickford Harbor offers gentle kayak tours and sunset paddle excursions where you'll experience captivating views of the town and its waterways. Both experienced and novice paddlers can explore the waterway's nooks and crannies well into early fall.

East Greenwich is equally alluring with its Main Street corridor, just a block from Greenwich Cove. Restaurants – and there are dozens – span from Jiggers Diner housed in a Worcester 826 train car to La Masseria, a sister restaurant to the original Manhattan location where simple Southern Italian cuisine is served atop white table linens.

Though not easily found on a map, South County is certainly worth seeking out. ☺



NEW ENGLAND GOLF & LEISURE