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Westport: The Beverly Hills of the East

This Connecticut town has a star-spangled community and is a magnet for creative types.

By STACEY MORRIS, SPECIAL TO THE JERUSALEM POST
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WESTPORT, Connecticut – If you've been searching for a coastal getaway that's antithetical to the tourist-trappings of so many New England seaside towns, Westport fits the bill perfectly.

The town of approximately 30,000 sits quietly at the edge of Long Island Sound and is close enough to New York City for an easy day trip or weekend getaway. It may not be a red-hot vacation destination, but Westport is chock full of the elements that make it ideal for those seeking quiet doses of sea breezes, boating, plentiful seafood and shopping.

Long known as an affluent bedroom community of Manhattan, the first "urbanites" were said to have started fanning out to Westport as early as 1640, when the city was still known as New Amsterdam. THE WESTPORT Country Playhouse, widely known as one of the country's most respected summer theaters. Photo by: Westport Chamber of Commerce



Westport has often been called the Beverly Hills of the East, a star-spangled community where Broadway and Hollywood luminaries have quietly chosen to live. Topping the list are Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, who moved to town in 1960 and several years later, became the driving force behind the Westport Country Playhouse, widely known as one the country's most respected summer theaters. Other past and present residents of Westport's manicured hills include Bette Davis, singers Michael Bolton and Neil Sedaka, sports personality Chris "Mad Dog" Russo and talk show legend Phil Donohue.

Perhaps because Westport has been a magnet for creative types, its devotion to the performing arts is evident. Aside from the Westport Country Playhouse, the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts hosts live performances of jazz, ballet, vocalists and classical theater throughout the summer and the Westport Public Library offers symphonies, lectures, book signings and films year-round.

"I enjoy Westport for the art and music events happening all the time. And the rural atmosphere is very charming, even though we're so close to New York City," said musician Rene Valentine, who moved from New Jersey five years ago. "My boyfriend and I are boaters, so here we have the luxury of being at the shore in 10 minutes, compared to driving hours in traffic to get to the New Jersey shore."

Not surprisingly, summers mean restaurants and beaches brimming with tourists; but there's no wrong time to visit. Westport's winters are fairly mild, and spring and fall are known for perfect, middle-of-the-road temperatures. So just zero in on a month to visit, and enjoy.

The writer is a freelancer based in Lake George, New York. www.staceymorris.com

GETTING THERE

Westport is approximately 50 miles northeast of New York City via I-95 North. Visit www.westportchamber.com or call (203) 227-9234 for more information.

ATTRACTIONS

Compo Beach, 170 Riverside Avenue, Westport. The 29-acre park features miles of sandy shoreline overlooking Long Island Sound, a boardwalk and pavilion, picnic and grilling areas, a softball field, volleyball courts, basketball courts and a new playground. Open year-round.

Earthplace, 10 Woodside Lane, Westport (203) 227-7253 www.earthplace.org. A nature education center that is accredited by the American Association of Museums features hands-on natural history museum, live animals, native plant court and trails through the 62-acre sanctuary.

Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts, (203) 226-7600 (203) 221-2153 (concert hot line), Jesup Road (located behind Westport Public Library), www.levittpavilion.com. Westport's version of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center is located on the banks of the Saugatuck River. The amphitheater provides more than 50 nights of free entertainment (plus some special ticketed events) from mid-June-August.

Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk, 10 North Water Street, Norwalk, Connecticut, (203) 852-9700, www.maritimeaquarium.org. Located in neighboring Norwalk, the aquarium is rich in the region's maritime history, and features dozens of sea animals from sea otters to tiger sharks, a harbor seal pool, a stingray touch pool and an IMAX theater.

Music for Youth, Westport, (203) 227-1611, www.musicforyouth.net. A not-for-profit organization dedicated to bringing classical music to the community's youth through a monthly series of free concerts performed by award-winning artists with special skills in audience communication. The concerts, featuring virtuosic pianists, violinists, string quartets, etc., take place at 2 p.m. on Saturday afternoons, September through May at the Pequot Library in Southport.

Sherwood Island, (860) 424-3200. The 235-acre state park is in the Greens Farms section of Westport. It features interpretative nature programs, hiking, beaches and picnic areas.

Weston Historical Society-Coley House and Farm, 104 Weston Road, Weston, (203) 226-1804, www.westonhistoricalsociety.org. Features an 1841 furnished house, barn, outbuildings and farm implements. Tours are available by appointment. Open Saturdays from 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. year-round.

Westport Arts Center, 51 Riverside Avenue, Westport, (203) 222-7070, www.westportartscenter.org. The visual and performing arts organization offers programming that includes contemporary art exhibits and gallery talks, chamber music, jazz, literature and film.

Westport Astronomical Society, 182 Bayberry Lane, Westport, (203) 293-8759, www.was-ct.org. The Rolnick Observatory is free and open to the public every Wednesday and Thursday night from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. (weather permitting). The Dome Observatory houses a 12.5-inch f/4.8 Newtonian telescope. On moonless nights, the society takes out the portable 25-inch Obsession telescope, the largest in the state available to the public.

Westport Community Theatre, Inc., 110 Myrtle Avenue, Westport Town Hall, Westport, (203) 226-1983, www.westportcommunitytheatre.com. The critically acclaimed local theater group puts on five main stage productions and hosts the Experimental Theatre Company, a training ground for new directors, actors and playwrights.

Westport Country Playhouse, 25 Powers Court, Westport, (203) 227-4177 (888) 927-7529, www.westportplayhouse.org. Known for providing relevant, challenging and innovative programming, the playhouse offers eight main productions each year, as well as a variety of additional programming. Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, James Earle Jones and Jane Fonda are some of the luminaries who have performed there.

Westport Historical Society, 25 Avery Place, Westport, (203) 222-1424, www.westporthistory.org. The Westport Historical Society, founded in 1889, is an educational organization dedicated to preserving, presenting and celebrating the town's history. The society's headquarters is located at the Wheeler House, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Also on the property is the Bradley-Wheeler Barn, the only octagonal-roof, cobblestone barn in Connecticut; it houses the Museum of Westport History. The society also hosts lectures, exhibits, events and other programs throughout the year.

DINING

Dressing Room, 27 Powers Court, Westport. (203) 226-1114, www.dressingroomhomegrown.com. Serving local, organic and heirloom fare, the restaurant is the brainchild of food activist Michael Nischan and the late Paul Newman. Specialties include kettle macaroni and cheese with cured pork belly, sunburst trout and mixed grains risotto style.

LODGING

The Inn at Longshore, 260 South Compo Road, Westport, (203) 226-3316, www.innatlongshore.com. The Inn at National Hall, 2 Post Road West, Westport, (800) 628-4255, www.innatnationalhall.com.