

# Life is but a dream: Local cruises offer unforgettable views from the water

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Darin Keech is the captain of a 39-foot charter ocean racer called Poet's Lounge, so there's something pleasing about hearing him, in salty tones, wax lyrical about the coast of southeastern Connecticut. "There's a magnetism to the nature here," Keech said recently, after listing some of his favorite spots in and around Fishers Island Sound, with quirky names such as Dumpling Island and Flat Hammock Island. Certainly, the region's maritime setting has been a draw for tourists and source of pride for locals, but taking a sea excursion can offer new perspective on the Connecticut coast.

"You can't come here and not get out on the water," said Amy Bloomburg, the general manager of the 81-foot schooner Argia, based in downtown Mystic.

Fortunately for vacationers and stay-cationers, there's a variety of trips and vessels that offer explorations of the region's deep maritime history, scientific investigations into the aquatic wildlife in the region and, of course, pure sunsplashed, wine-and-cheese pleasure sailing.

"There's tons to see," Bloomberg said.

Keech said that the area's sea excursions are a great way not only to explore Connecticut Colonial history, but to get a sense of what it was like here for Native Americans before European settlers arrived.

The Argia, which moors on the north side of the iconic Mystic River Highway Bridge, takes passengers out into Fishers Island Sound past some of region's large homes and allows for splendid views of the Morgan Point Lighthouse, a favorite of Bloomberg's when she's piloting the schooner.

"That's the best lighthouse around here, in my opinion," she said.

The 115-year old Steamboat Sabino, one of the attractions at Mystic Seaport, fires up its steam engines for 30- and 90-minute journeys on the Mystic River. The craft, which was originally a ferry in several locations in Maine, changed hands a few times before it came to Mystic Seaport as a tourist attraction in 1974.

Keech's Poet's Lounge, which was named for a song in a play that he wrote and performed locally, calls Noank home, making for easy access to Fishers Island Sound.

The craft, which is available for charter, can accommodate up to six people, and offers a choice of sailing locations, including overnights to ports such as Newport, R.I., or Sag Harbor, N.Y.

Keech says there's often some impromptu seal watching, and Poet's Lounge will even drop anchor close to shore so passengers can swim to area beaches.

A favorite of Keech's sights are sunsets in Fishers Island Sound, where his guests can stare westward toward New York. For business travelers and commuters who are perhaps (sea) sick of high-speed ferries and the Acela during the workweek, the Essex Steam Train and Riverboat can certainly slow matters down.

There, visitors can take the iconic steam locomotive to Deep River, where they can board the Mark Twain-inspired steamboat Becky Thatcher, for a trip along the Connecticut River, where architectural treasures such as Gillette Castle and the Goodspeed Opera House poke out from the verdant wash of trees.

Another relaxing option that combines sightseeing with education is the environmentally oriented Riverquest. It departs from Eagle Landing State Park in Haddam, right across the river from the Goodspeed.

In addition to special cruises for kids and families — including a Father's Day trip on June 16 — Riverquest offers sunset, bird-spotting and foliage tours. Programs on geology, natural history, islands and the ecology of the river are also available.

Looking for an indulgent experience with great food? Celebrating its 10th year in business, Lady Katharine Cruises and its luxury yacht, the *Mystique*, offer a variety of Sunday cruises from Hartford to Haddam and other points in the Connecticut River. The boat, which spends its winters in Old Saybrook, hosts special matinee lunch cruises in conjunction with Goodspeed Opera House and is also available for charters.

In an industry where individuals tend to move around, Lady Katharine Cruises proudly says that most of its crew has been with the company since the beginning.

Captain Kevin Turner has been working the *Mystique* since he was a teenager and has witnessed the yacht's transformation to her current luxurious interior. Captain Jim LeGeyt oversees lunch charters. "People are more relaxed here," he observed. "They can sit and observe the river birds and the river's shoreline. Seeing a recognizable spot from another vantage point is exciting."

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A new perspective on familiar landscapes also drives passengers to boats around New London. The busy, blue-collar Thames River, which sees daily ferry traffic and the occasional submarine, is also home to the elegant 83-foot schooner Mystic Whaler. The craft calls City Pier home for most of the summer, before heading to Baltimore in the fall. But while Mystic Whaler is moored in Connecticut, guests can go for one-day and multiple-day cruises and enjoy lobster at sunset.

As part of its Sentinels on the Sound exhibit, the New London Maritime Society, which runs the downtown New London Custom House Museum, will offer three boat tours on July 20, Aug. 17, and Sept. 7, which will give an up-close view of the coast's superb lighthouses, including the Second Empire beauty of Ledge Light and the picture-postcard perfect New London Light.

Visitors to the region can also get a taste of a Connecticut high school right of passage, a trip on Project Oceanology, an educational program based out of the University of Connecticut Avery Point campus in Groton. Once aboard, instructors cast a net and trawl for sea life and perform tests on the water near the mouth of the Thames. "Project O," as it's known, also offers seal watches and its own guided lighthouse tours.

Part of the reason there's such variety in charter boats and sea excursions has to do with the region's sheltered, calm waters in both Long Island Sound and Fishers Island Sound, as well as the Connecticut and Thames rivers.

Keech explained that, unlike other starting points in the Northeast, where boats are instantly thrust out into the Atlantic, Fishers Island and other tiny islands act as a barrier to high seas.

**\*\***"It's such a great location to sail," Keech said. "It's similar to the Caribbean in that respect. You don't get 7-foot waves."

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And once they shove off, the passengers ask questions and engage in some small talk, then the gabfest stops as they are soothed by the sound of the hull splashing through waves and gaze at the coast's harmony of manmade and natural beauty.

"They get very quiet," Keech said. "Then they get it."



Poet's Lounge Sailing Charters

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