

# TREASURED

A scenic view of High Island and Kidd Harbor. The foreground is dominated by a dense forest of green trees, with a rocky shoreline in the lower left. In the background, a small white house with a porch is visible on a hill overlooking the water. The sky is clear and blue.

High Island and Kidd Harbor  
(no treasure-hunting allowed!)



# ISLANDS

An aerial photograph of a coastal area. In the foreground, a long wooden pier extends from a rocky shore into the water. A small white boat is moored at the end of the pier. The water is a deep blue. In the background, a small island with a house and trees is visible. The sky is clear and blue.

BRANFORD'S MYTHIC  
**THIMBLE ISLANDS**  
AND THE SHORELINE  
VILLAGE OF STONY CREEK  
PACK A PIRATE'S PRIZE OF  
HISTORY, NATURE, LEGEND  
AND COASTAL ADVENTURE.

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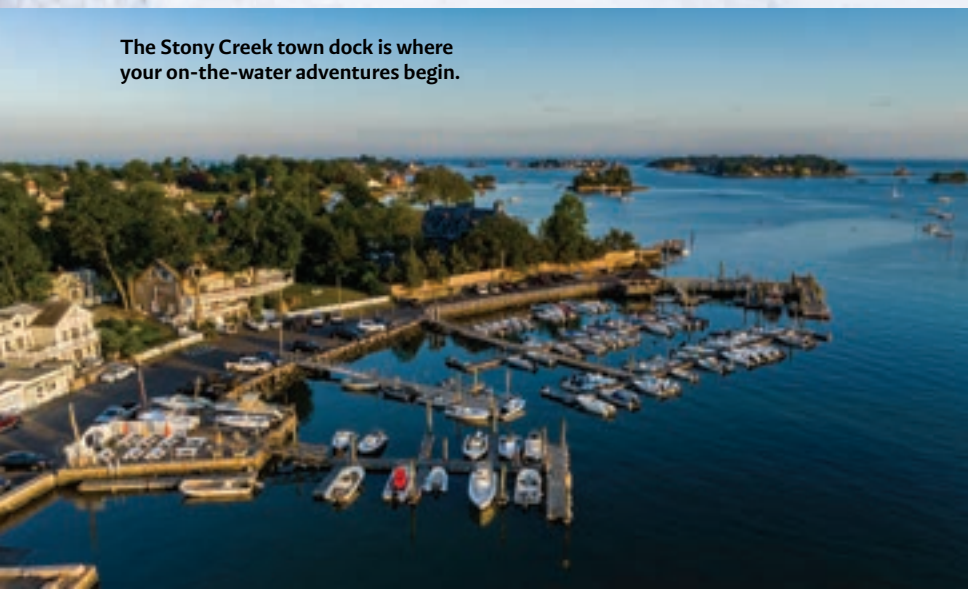




**A**ll it takes is the merest of glances to spy it—a sign on I-95 declaring an exit ahead for the Thimble Islands. As if by some magical lure, vehicles find themselves veering off to explore. Questions immediately arise. How many islands are there? Can you visit them, and what can you do there? Did they garner their name because they're inhabited by fairies who wear thimbles as hats?

Travel along Thimble Islands Road to Indian Point Road to arrive at Branford's seaside village of Stony Creek. This charming hamlet is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Stony Creek is known as something else, too—the gateway to the Thimble Islands. At the town dock, visitors are faced with decisions. First stroll through the idyllic village and discover its treasures, or take to Long Island Sound for a firsthand look at the islands? There's no wrong answer. History, culture, nature, adventure and stories await onshore and amongst the islands.

The Stony Creek town dock is where your on-the-water adventures begin.



### HOW MANY ISLANDS ARE THERE, REALLY?

Locals say there are 365 isles, one for every day of the year. That's being a bit generous, and includes ledges, reefs, sandbars and small rocks, many of which are only visible during low tide. Not counting these diminutive, ephemeral formations leaves one with a nice, round 100 islands. Twenty-five are inhabited by seasonal residents. (Winter is a tough time to be on the islands.)





# TO THE SEA

In 1614, Dutchman Adriaen Block became the first European to gaze upon the Thimbles, an archipelago of 100 or so islands (more on that total below). These striking outcroppings composed of pink granite were called “kuttomquosh,” or “the beautiful sea rocks,” by local Native peoples. This same pink granite has been used in iconic structures around the nation, from the base of the Statue of Liberty and Grant’s Tomb, to West Point’s Battle Monument (said to be the largest column of polished granite in the Western Hemisphere) and the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Careful steering is required through the waters around the Thimbles due to many rock formations, including glacially deposited rocks known as erratics, the smaller of which are hidden beneath the tide. Watch a longtime resident navigate the harbor, and it’s apparent they know the location of each unseen rock by heart.

Such captains can be found aboard the **Sea Mist** (203-488-8905, [thimbleislandcruise.com](http://thimbleislandcruise.com)), a 44-foot Carman boat with upper and lower decks for prime viewing, an onboard bar and a bathroom. Want to linger over the sunset with a cocktail? Catch their summertime Happy Hour tours.







## ISLAND INVENTORY

Seemingly every one of the Thimble Islands has a story. Here's the skinny on some of the largest.

- 1 **Horse Island**, the largest island at 17 acres, is owned by Yale University, whose Peabody Museum of Natural History maintains an ecological laboratory there. If you ever get an invite, watch out for poison ivy.
- 2 The 12-acre **Money Island** is home to a veritable village of 29 houses. It was once self-sufficient, featuring a grocery store, school, post office and church. Today, in contrast to its name, it's also where the most affordable Thimble homes are located. Its name comes from the legend that famed 17th-century pirate Captain Kidd buried treasure here. The booty has never been found — or, if it has, no one's talking.
- 3 **Governor Island** (10 acres) has 14 houses. Its moniker is another case of it's-not-named-after-what-you-think Thimble amusement. It's said that either a goat or a pig was installed many moons ago to guard an oyster company's base. The creature supposedly grew so large and authoritative that it earned the name "Governor."
- 4 At 7½ acres, **Rogers Island**, aka Yon Comis Island, boasts a 27-room Tudor mansion, plus tennis and basketball courts and a caretaker's residence.
- 5 The five-acre **Outer Island** is the sole publicly accessible island, reachable by a regular ferry service. One of 10 units of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge, it provides habitat for a variety of wildlife, most notably birds, and hosts ecological research.
- 6 Speaking of goats, **Bear Island** was once called Goat Island until the late 19th century, owing to its milk-producing goat herd that helped sustain Swedish immigrants who worked the island's pink granite quarry.
- 7 **Davis Island** was the "Summer White House" of 27th President William Howard Taft for two years in the early 1900s.
- 8 **High Island** once served as a hideout for Captain Kidd, or so the legend goes. Kidd Harbor on the island is a highlight of cruises.

Map via topoBuilder version 1.4, U.S. Geological Survey



The Thimble Island Ferry cruises past Money Island, the most populated of the Thimbles with 32 houses.

The 1960-founded outfitter recently expanded its fleet by introducing *Island Time*, a 40-foot outboard catamaran available for private charters. Or hop aboard this new vessel on Thursdays at 6 p.m. and Fridays at 4 and 6 p.m. for 90-minute tours of the Branford River departing from Stony Creek Brewery.

Tales of the Thimbles' storied past occur during *Sea Mist's* 45-minute narrated tour that departs from the town dock. Answered right off the bat—the Thimbles earned their name due to the red thimbleberries once found on the islands. Pointed out is Governor Island, named after an imperious goat (or pig; see facing page). There's some debate over Little Pumpkin Island's moniker, but all signs point to a pumpkin-growing contest in which the owner grew the smallest gourd. And the island that earned its name due to a honeymoon-crashing mother—Mother-in-Law Island. The site of President William Howard Taft's "Summer White House" is Davis Island. Then there's Money Island, where 32 of the Thimbles' 95 houses are located. As for the number of inhabited islands, that equals a scant 25. Six have electricity through underwater cables, while others run on generators. Residents live on the islands from April through

October, as utilities are not available year-round.

Highlighted on the *Sea Mist* tour is the islands' heyday: the Gilded Age. Then, Stony Creek and the Thimbles were popular tourist destinations, with hotels and other attractions, and remained so for many decades. One hotelier promoted the local legend that notorious pirate Captain Kidd, who was said to frequent the islands as he raided ships and dodged the British, stashed his treasure somewhere on the islands. On Sept. 21, 1938, the Great New England Hurricane struck. With no early-warning system, homes and lives were lost. After the hurricane, tourism declined, with many remaining hotels transitioning into private residences.

When the mystery location of Captain Kidd's treasure buried in 1699 is mentioned aboard the cruise, ears perk up. Could it be on High Island, where the pirate's hideout was supposedly located? Featuring high rocks, a sheltered cove between two sections of the island was the perfect perch for Kidd to clandestinely oversee the comings and goings through the straits.

The inevitable question arises: "Can the public visit the islands?" Yes, and no. Only one island has public access: Outer Island.

## WHERE DOES THE 'THIMBLE ISLANDS' NAME COME FROM?

If you think the islands are so named due to their resemblance to those cute metal cups worn on the ends of fingers while sewing, you'd be wrong. According to local lore, the islands once teemed with shrubs bearing thimbleberries, aka redcaps, similar in appearance and a relative of raspberries. Today, you'd be hard-pressed to find any, if they even still grow here. "Thimble Islands" first appeared in Branford town records in 1739, but they were noted as the "Hundred Islands" on earlier maps. (Long-ago cartographers apparently were sticklers when deciding what qualified as an island.) To native peoples, they were





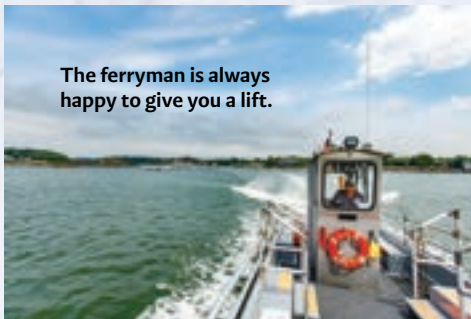


# THE OUTER LIMITS

There's no debate over this island's name. Sitting farthest offshore, **Outer Island** ([outerisland.org](http://outerisland.org)) was donated in 1995 by former owner Elizabeth Hird to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is run by the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge, along with the Connecticut State University system, which conducts education and research. It's open to visitors daily from May 30 to Sept. 25. A tip: peruse the visitor schedule on Outer Island's website for special events devoted to art, photography, family fun, seaweed or jellyfish.

There are two ways to access the island. Hop aboard the Thimble Islands Ferry (203-483-6659, [thimbleislandsferry.com](http://thimbleislandsferry.com)) for a \$17 round-trip ride. One of the benefits of riding the passenger ferry is the chance to run elbows with island residents (and their pets) as they make their way back and forth between the mainland and their island getaways. Schedules change, so consult the website. Another option is kayaking. Need a vessel? Check out Thimble Island Kayak

The ferryman is always happy to give you a lift.



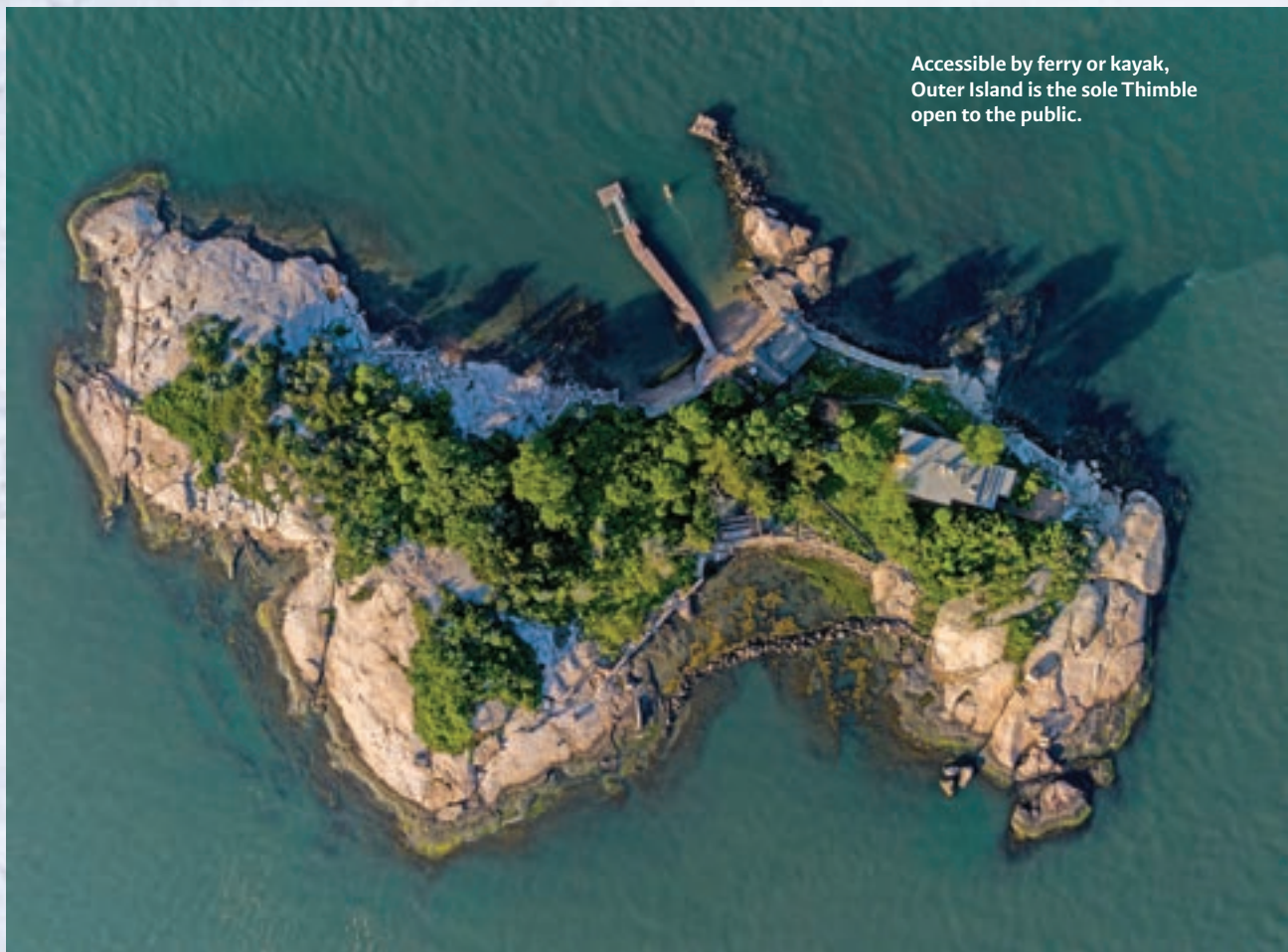
Rental (203-859-0546, [thimbleislandkayak.com](http://thimbleislandkayak.com)). Note to kayakers: land on the left side of Outer's dock.

No matter the mode of transport, pack a picnic for a jaunt to Outer Island. And don't let this serve as a deterrent, but ticks and

poison ivy (the resident birds love the berries) are found on Outer Island. Stick to the trails, boardwalk and the copious pink granite, and you should be in the clear.

Arrive unannounced on this five-acre island, and volunteer docents and Connecticut State University interns will lead impromptu tours of Outer Island with a glimpse into its history, flora and fauna. You can also peer through telescopes across the Sound (look for migrating seals sunning on the shoals). On my visit, the looking glass was trained east on the red-topped lighthouse on Falkner Island, also a part of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge but not one of the Thimble Islands. Sitting a few miles off the Guilford shore, the crescent-shaped Falkner Island is home to one

Accessible by ferry or kayak, Outer Island is the sole Thimble open to the public.





of the Northeast's largest nesting colonies of roseate terns, which are studied by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service interns. The protected bird habitat is closed to the public except for an annual open house in September, which is a great opportunity to get an up-close view of its lighthouse, Connecticut's second oldest and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Outer Island is also a bird-lover's paradise. Half of it is a bird preserve and closed to the public. Watch for American oystercatchers, terns, cormorants and white egrets swooping above their home. As for me, I was scouting for winged creatures of another sort—thimble-wearing fairies.

A boardwalk snakes through the other half of the island, showcasing terrains including forest, salt marsh, tide pools and flats, rocky beach and massive pink granite boulders. There are signs of voles burrowing beneath the earth, the largest mammals to call the island home. Asian shore crabs scurry across the sand. Pops of color and scent come via the invasive, yet utterly fragrant, beach roses, eastern prickly pear daffodils, day-lilies and foxglove.

The original inhabitants of Outer Island were the Mattabesic people. In 1889, Addison Emery Verrill built





the island's first house. A professor of zoology at Yale, Verill invited students there to conduct research. It's still possible to see research under-way at the designated Marine Lab. You can even do your own water testing along the shore.

Grace and Leonard Weil bought Outer Island in 1927. After the stock market crash, the family of six made the island's marine lab their residence. Goats, ducks and chickens allowed the family to live self-sustainably. Grace gained notoriety as

one of the area's first lobsterwomen.

There are other remnants of the Weil family's time on Outer, too. A retaining wall used to bridge across the saltwater marsh but has fallen into decay. Still existing is a garden with a stone bench facing a portal with a romantic ocean view. Word is, Grace built the garden to honor her son Danky, who perished in a boat fire. To this day, moon-blooming flowers planted by Weil flourish.

A bit of a surprise is an amphitheater where an orchestral quintet from Yale played when Hird and husband Basil Rauch owned the island. The amphitheater is being restored in the hopes of bringing music back to the island. For now, there's the lulling symphony of the Sound as its waves lap against the shore.



Among Outer Island's highlights are lush flora, the former stone home of the Weil family with its huge fireplace, and loads of pretty pink granite.







# ONSHORE OUTINGS

Gabled rooftops and cupolas of Victorian homes dot the skyline of Stony Creek. A bike/pedestrian trail runs beside the historic Stony Creek Fife & Drum Corps headquarters, past Madeira Park (home to public restrooms), skirts public Stony Creek Beach, and fronts various cultural attractions, restaurants, shops and accommodations. Here are some must-sees.

## CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS

There's much to learn about the history of Stony Creek and the Thimbles inside the former church that is now the **Stony Creek Museum** (84 Thimble Island Road, 203-488-4014, [stonycreekmuseum.org](http://stonycreekmuseum.org)). Not to miss in the tiny theater is a short documentary produced by Mary Lee Weber, *Born at the Water's Edge*, to gain true insight into the unique area. Creating quite the buzz is the museum's visiting exhibition of Macri-Weil Sicilian puppets. These commanding works of art were created in 1906 by Sebastiano Zapalla. Grace Weil (of Outer Island fame) originally brought the puppets to Stony Creek, where they performed at the Stony Creek Puppet Theatre, now the Legacy Theatre. Standing five feet tall and weighing up to 85 pounds, the puppets tell the story of King Charlemagne and his medieval knights. Not to be left out—the enchantress Falberina. Check the museum website for upcoming puppet shows.

What started as a chapel in 1866 has seen many lives. At various times in



Stony Creek Museum

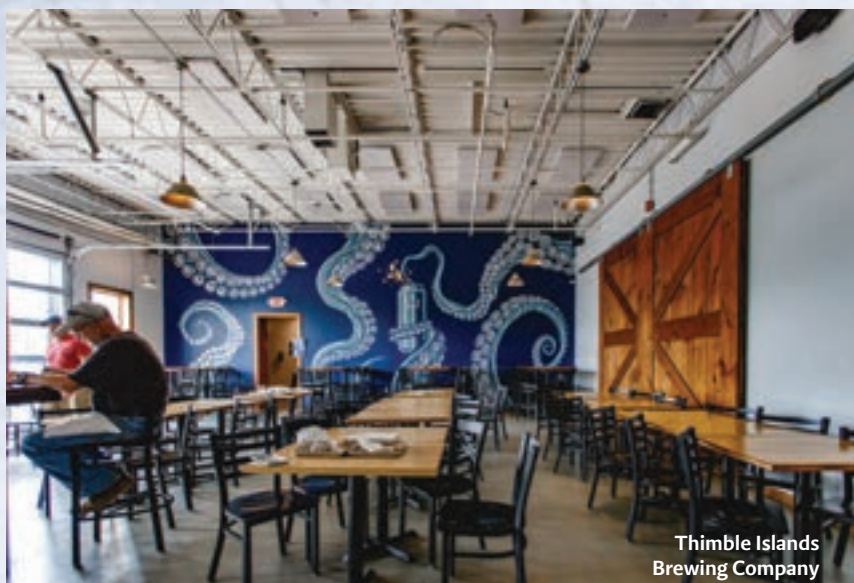
history, the **Legacy Theatre** (128 Thimble Island Road, 203-315-1901, [legacytheatre.org](http://legacytheatre.org)) was the Idle Hour Moving Pictures silent movie theater, a parachute factory, a ladies garment warehouse, home to the Parish Players, The Stony Creek Puppet House, and, now, a 127-seat repertory professional theater. Once a haunt of Orson Welles and Sinclair Lewis, the site has hosted several world premieres, including *Death Takes a Holiday*, *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Pygmalion*. Still to catch in the 2023 season: Disney's *Beauty and The Beast* (Aug. 10–27), *The Play That Goes Wrong* (Sept. 14–30, Oct. 1) and *A Christmas Carol* (Nov. 29 & 30, Dec. 1–10).

Art shows, sleepovers, author talks (writer Amy Bloom lives in town), films, improv ... there's a lot going on at **The Willoughby Wallace Memorial Library** (146 Thimble Island Road, 203-488-8702, [wwml.org](http://wwml.org)) and its Keyes Gallery. And when it comes to structures showing off the local pink granite, this one is spectacular.

Legacy Theatre







Thimble Islands  
Brewing Company



Stony Creek Market



The Thimbleberry

## SEASIDE EATS

Salt air is known for stirring appetites, and Stony Creek has victuals at the ready. At the dock is **The Thimbleberry** (2 Indian Point Road, 203-481-2836, [facebook.com/TheThimbleberry](https://facebook.com/TheThimbleberry)), open seasonally for breakfast and lunch. Dine inside or at a designated picnic area overlooking the water and marina. On the menu is everything from buttermilk pancakes and Western omelets to shrimp wraps, hot lobster rolls and burgers (don't forget the onion rings). Cap it off with an ice cream cone for a post-lunch stroll.

Down the street is cash-only **Stony Creek Market** (178 Thimble Island Road, 203-488-0145, [stonycreekmarket.com](https://stonycreekmarket.com)). Drop in for a breakfast sandwich or lox plate paired with Willoughby's coffee. There are Boar's Head deli sandwiches, soups and salads for lunch. Over the summer, the adjoining Stony Creek Pizza fires up its oven Thursdays through Sundays from 5 to 9 p.m. On the 2023 specials list is the Queso Grande, a white pizza that's all about the cheese. The spot for consuming this goodness is the outdoor deck, ideal for watching sandcastles under construction on the beach, or sailboats lazily skimming across the horizon.

Venues outside the main village will see diners into

evening hours, among them the **Thimble Islands Brewing Company** (16 Business Park Drive, 203-208-2827, [thimbleislandbrewery.com](https://thimbleislandbrewery.com)). Brewed in-house: ales and lagers, IPAs, stouts and porters, seltzers, sours and specialty beers. On the menu for pairing are salads (Asian Citrus with a Ghost Island Double IPA, please), appetizers (poutine fans will be thrilled), flatbreads, burgers, sandwiches and wraps. Visit the tasting room, or take a guided tour (no reservations necessary, Saturdays and Sundays, 1, 3 and 5 p.m.). A boozy float made with Foxon sodas is a great takeout option as you depart.

New on the scene is **Caius Farm Brewery** (101 N. Branford Road, 203-433-4660, [caiusfarmbrewery.com](https://caiusfarmbrewery.com)), set on the former historic farm and estate of David Baldwin. Meet founder and head brewer Caius Mergy to hear how his passion for Greek Classics spurred a farmhouse brewery. On tap—brews, food truck fare and live music. Also great for hearing music is **Stony Creek Brewery** (5 Indian Neck Ave., 203-433-4545, [stonycreekbeer.com](https://stonycreekbeer.com)). Ambiance comes by way of harbor views, slices from the Naples Pizza Truck and brews (ales, lagers, stouts, etc.). Prefer wine with a side of romance? Head to the 1644-settled **Rose Vineyards and**



Taken for Granite



The Trolley Trail



### Thimble Islands Bed & Breakfast

**Winery** (2 Valley Road, North Branford, 475-221-8636, [rosevineyards.com](http://rosevineyards.com)) for award-winning, small-batch wines with mezze plates and charcuterie.

## HITTING THE TRAILS

Just as cruising among the Thimble Islands is a unique experience, the area also has rare gems on land. Much of the state's coastline is developed and private, but in Stony Creek you can take in the beauty of a coastal forest. Just off Thimble Island Road is Buena Vista Road, which leads to the trailhead to the **Branford Trail**. From there, a short walk takes you toward the shore to the 20-acre **Washburn Preserve**, featuring salt marshes, a long-abandoned quarry and gorgeous views of the Sound and the Thimbles, including Bear and Cut-In-Two islands. Should you want to continue your land journey, the trails cross over Jarvis Creek on the eastern side, connecting to a preserve owned by the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.

To see a still-working quarry, drive a few minutes north to the 150-year-old **Stony Creek Quarry** (99 Quarry Road, 203-488-3904, [stonycreekquarry.com](http://stonycreekquarry.com)). Signs proclaim, "Slow Turtle Crossing." Indeed, it's not uncommon to spy *Testudines* traversing the drive, perhaps en route to Stony Creek Quarry Preserve Big Loop. Pink granite isn't the only thing encountered on the 4.3-mile trail. Wildflowers, meadows, streams and woods wait to dazzle. Want to get up close to the majestic cliffs of granite? Twice-yearly quarry tours are offered through Stony Creek Museum. One is upcoming on Oct. 14 at 10:15 am. (Tickets are available at the nearby Taken for Granite shop and Guilford's Page Hardware).

## SHOPPING ON THE SOUND

Bringing a memento or two to take home may be in order. (As much as you might want to pocket a piece of pink granite on Outer Island, looting rocks and other natural objects is bad form and, possibly, bad luck.) Reminiscent of the ocean setting are the hues, art and unique items for sale at **Taken for Granite** (409 Leetes Island Road, 203-488-0557, [facebook.com/TFG06405](https://facebook.com/TFG06405)). Once upon a time, the space was a gas station. Enter now into what feels like an artists' gallery (keep an eye out for sculptures everywhere, from the ceiling to the garden). Along Thimble Islands Road are three stores for browsing. Antiques and vintage finds abound at the eclectic **Stony Creek Depot** (116 Thimble Islands Road, 203-488-1233, [stonycreekdepot.com](http://stonycreekdepot.com)). See accommodations below for more info on this sweet little shop. Next door is House of Today, a newcomer showcasing



everything from locally made furniture to candles inspired by Stony Creek aromas. Just across from Stony Creek Beach is **Seaside Home and Gifts** (172 Thimble Island Road, 203-208-0521, [seasidehomeandgifts.com](http://seasidehomeandgifts.com)). Need a sunhat, beach read, or gift for the cat sitter? This is the place.

## OVERNIGHT ISLAND DREAMS

The area is perfect for a day trip, but if you're captivated by the land and seascape, an overnight stay is an order. There are several options, including some found on Airbnb and Vrbo.

A dreamy onshore getaway is the **Thimble Islands Bed & Breakfast** (28 West Point Road, 203-488-3693, [thimbleislandsbb.com](http://thimbleislandsbb.com)). Tucked at the end of West Point Road,

the property has one room and one suite, each with a private bathroom. The B&B's owners, Julie and Tony Broom, make folks feel right at home. Guests wax poetic over Long Island Sound views at every turn. Savor the vistas with a home-cooked breakfast and wine and cheese pre-twilight.

Couple shopping with an overnight stay at **Stony Creek Depot**. Claudio Riccitelli and Barbara Lucas Riccitelli's eclectic

shop features two pet-friendly suites, Ridgeview and Tree Fort, each with a kitchen, on the second and third stories. Across the street is the 1.2-mile Trolley Trail, where it's easy to get lost in the dreamy scenery. Keep an eye out for mama ospreys bringing food back to their nests and meandering deer. As for that tiny pair of wings I saw flitting about in the forest, some might say it was a hummingbird. To me, it was a fairy. ■

As a travel writer, Bekah Wright is drawn to magical destinations. A resident of the lower Connecticut River valley, her travel articles have appeared in publications and sites including the *Los Angeles Times*, *National Geographic Kids* and *Yahoo Travel*.



Stony Creek Quarry