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Outdoors and Away in New England

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friends may be skeptical when I tell them how peaceful it feels floating above treetops in a hot air balloon. But after the year we've just had, wouldn't it be great to rise on high, leaving worries far below?

Actually, wouldn't any kind of getaway feel good about now?

It's possible to plan an escape that combines outdoor adventures with the comforts of a fine old New England inn. Given how COVID-19 safety guidelines change, be sure to check with each destination's website before traveling.

Up in Rural Vermont

Ballooning can take you to a world apart. More tranquil. Slower paced. Seen from aloft, the landscape reveals patterns and textures less visible from the ground. It's a different perspective on

the familiar. Other than the occasional whoosh of heated air powering the flight, this world is blissfully quiet. Most recently, pre-pandemic, I went up with Balloons of Vermont, one of several tour companies around picturesque Quechee.

"A lot of people think it's going to be a thrill ride, like a rollercoaster, but it's perfectly still, like being adrift on a calm lake," said our pilot Darreck Daoust, the company's owner. After 21 years



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PHOTOS BY JANET MENDELSON

and well over 1,800 flights carrying almost 4,000 passengers, he still enjoys the look on first-timers' faces. His passengers have come from all walks of life and around the world—the Azores, Dubai, Japan, and across the U.S. “It’s a bucket list thing for lots of people so I get to share this once-in-a-lifetime experience with them.”

We helped Daoust spread out the nylon balloon in a field before launch and fold it after descent. Two-and-a-half-hour trips include about one hour in the sky, beginning just before sunrise or sunset. Call 802.369.0213 or visit www.balloonsofvermont.com.

Dining is always a treat at **THE MILL AT SIMON PEARCE** (www.simon-pearce.com) in the company’s flagship store in Quechee, overlooking the Ottauquechee River near a covered bridge. The restaurant menu features local ingredients and an award-winning wine list. Subject to

current COVID-19 guidelines, visitors to the store will again be able to observe the company’s artisans creating hand-thrown pottery and glassware made by glassblowers using centuries-old techniques.

From there it’s a short drive to the **WOODSTOCK INN & RESORT** (www.woodstockinn.com) where rustic ambiance accents luxury accommodations. In winter, the resort’s Nordic Center offers cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowboarding, and fat biking; alpine skiing is nearby at Suicide Six. In warm weather, choose from fly fishing, falconry, tennis, a pool, and 18 holes of championship golf. Or relax at The Spa. In 10,000 square feet of nature-inspired rooms, restorative treatments using organic products reflect the seasons. It’s all close to hundreds of acres of walking trails, photo ops with the dairy herd at **BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM**, or dining and browsing upscale shops in Woodstock.

Ocean Views in Rhode Island

Josette Rome of Wellesley relishes days at **COLT STATE PARK** on Route 114 in Bristol, along Narragansett Bay.

“It’s a short trip away from home—about an hour and 20 minutes from Wellesley—but I feel like I’m really away when I’m there,” she said. On a visit last summer, she and her husband, Peter, felt transported, despite pandemic limitations.

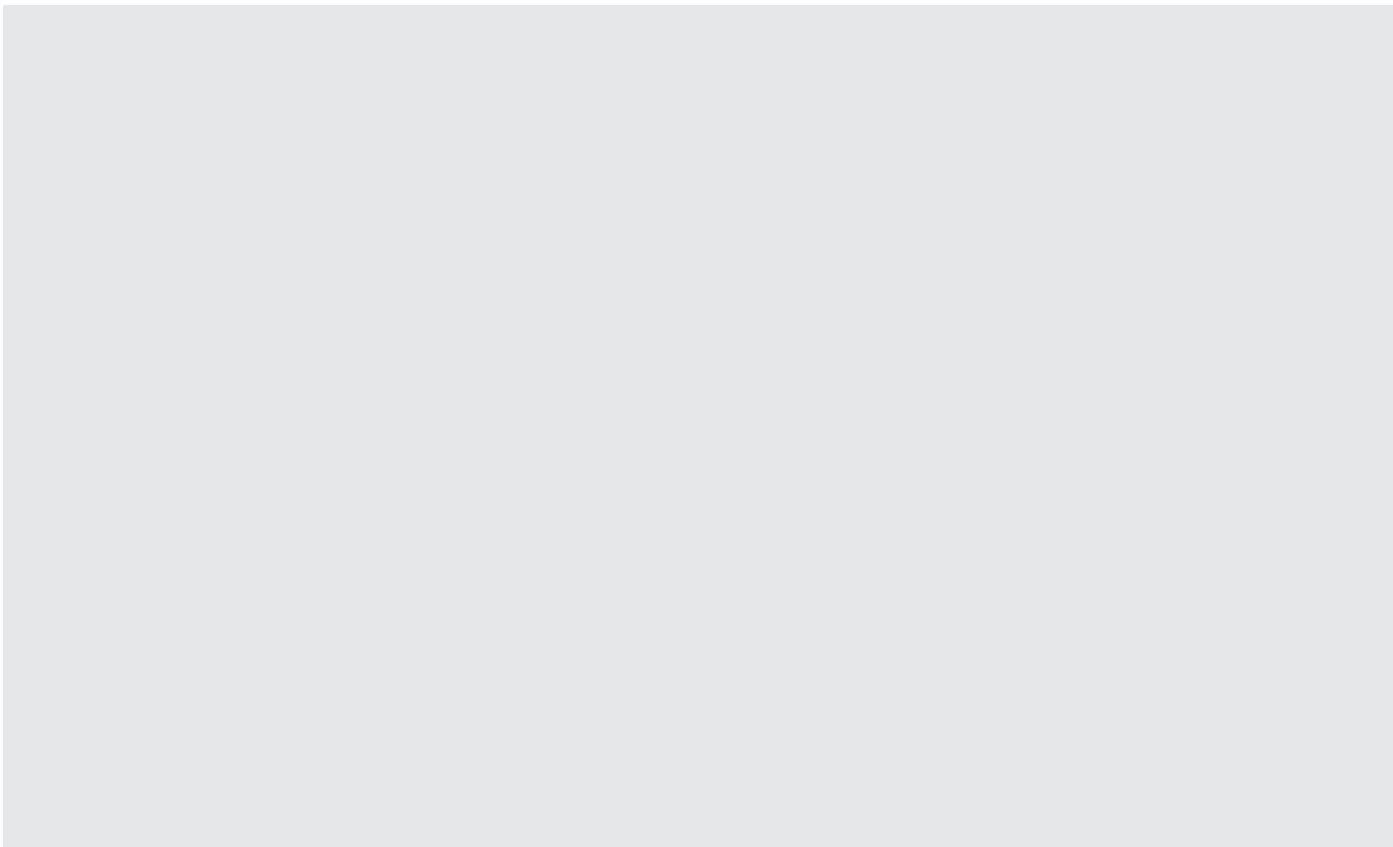
“The water sparkled under vivid blue skies. Families were picnicking in areas they can rent for the day,” she recalled. “It’s a special place to unwind and recharge. You feel safe while at the same time feel a connection with others. We all need that just now.” While there, they often see artists at their easels, photographers, birders, and walkers, of course.

The Romes sometimes bring their bicycles. They explore along paved trails in the 464-acre park, passing groomed fruit trees and flowering bushes, stone walls and sweeping lawns, admiring what some say

is Rhode Island’s most spectacular shoreline. Popular features include an open air Chapel-By-the-Sea, as well as playgrounds and 10 large playing fields. Visit www.riparks.com/Locations/LocationColt.html.

Adjacent to the park is the 48-acre **COGGESHALL FARM MUSEUM** (www.coggeshallfarm.org), which recreates the experience of tenant farmers in the 1790s. The family-friendly salt marsh farm raises heritage-breed animals and grows heirloom plants. Just one year ago, Coggeshall entered a new partnership with Old Sturbridge Village, which now manages its daily operations. Live demonstrations and conversations with interpreters give visitors insights into local life during the decade between the American Revolution and the Industrial Revolution.

Every April during Daffodil Days, **BLITHEWOLD ESTATE**, also in Bristol, becomes an ocean of yellow and gold as more than 50,000 blooms dance in the sea breeze. In May, flowering trees and a wider





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array of colorful bulbs take center stage. In the fall, the beauty of Narragansett Bay is surrounded by a magnificent array of autumn hues. And during the holiday season, the gardens are transformed into a magical winter wonderland. Tours of the 45-room mansion and accessible greenhouse reveal interiors and family heirlooms influenced by the arts and crafts movement that flourished a century ago. Extensive gardens are designed around themes—mysterious, poetic, whimsical, among them. Visit www.blithewold.org for horticultural tours, music programs, and seasonal events.

While you can certainly visit the Ocean State for the day, why not stay overnight? The **CASTLE HILL INN** (www.castlehillinn.com) in Newport was built in 1875 as a summer home for the noted Harvard marine biologist and naturalist Alexander Agassiz. It now is a Relais & Chateaux member hotel. Six elegant beach cottages, 33 luxury hotel rooms, and fine dining with panoramic views of the Atlantic can provide the perfect start, or finish, for a sail aboard a Hinckley yacht, arranged through the inn. You might feel you've stepped back in time to the Gilded Age,

with modern amenities. Consider reservations for a traditional New England Clambake, a time-honored tradition.

OCEAN HOUSE, in Watch Hill (www.oceanhouseri.com), has been voted one of the top ten hotels in the world by readers of *Travel + Leisure*, among other accolades it has received. Relax at the Oh! Spa, gym, and pool, or join a class at The Center for Wine & Culinary Arts. Both Ocean House and its sister property, **WEEKAPAUG INN** (www.weekapauginn.com) are Relais & Chateaux hotels with fine dining and accommodations that will make you feel truly pampered.

On Foot in Southern Maine

You don't have to go far into Maine to enjoy fall foliage, hikes or biking on forested mountain trails, walks on sandy beaches, and a town full of historic homes. All that and more awaits in The Yorks—York Village, York Harbor, Cape Neddick, and York Beach.

Plan a half-day hike on **MOUNT AGAMENTICUS** (www.agamenticus.org), centerpiece of a 10,000-acre conservation region. The forested wilder-

ness contains 40 miles of hiking, equestrian, ATV, and mountain bike trails. From Mount A’s 692-foot-high summit, on clear days you can see from New Hampshire’s White Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean. Trails are rated easy to moderate.

LONG SANDS BEACH (Route 1A) is a 1.5-mile sweep of shoreline with a split personality. At low tide, it’s a smooth expanse of coarse gray sand, pebbles and boulders, that’s perfect for long walks, sunbathing, and exploring tidal pools. Or go surfing. When the tide rolls in, the beach disappears.

From there it’s a short hop to Cape Neddick Light Station, known as “**NUBBLE LIGHT**,” among the most photographed beacons in Maine. And just up the road are more beachy shops and the old-world charm of the **UNION BLUFF HOTEL** (www.unionbluff.com) overlooking the smaller **SHORT SANDS BEACH**. As of this writing, the Union Bluff pub’s casual fare is offered for curbside take-out.

THE YORK HARBOR INN (www.yorkharborinn.com), dating back to

1637, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Six separate lodges with luxury guest rooms, two restaurants with ocean views, and a popular pub, make social distancing easy. New outdoor dining options in 2020, including tented patios with fire tables, were “an incredible hit and sold out nearly every night of the summer and fall,” said Innkeeper Garry Dominguez. Their opulent Sunday Brunch from 10:00 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. is a local favorite.

Across the park from the main inn is access to York Harbor’s one-mile Cliff Walk, which was closed last year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Alternatively, walk nearby trails in Steedman Woods, a 17-acre nature reserve connecting York Harbor to York Village by way of the aptly named Wiggly Bridge, one of the smallest suspension bridges in the U.S. The reserve is one of eight historic buildings, homes, and properties maintained by the **OLD YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY** (www.oldyork.org) as a museum. 