

# Sound Out Niantic

## A Connecticut Coast Secret

### How about this for a varied, fun-filled, vacation day...

Start with a stroll on the beach and an early-morning dip. You'll be ready then for just-out-of-the-oven bagels or muffins from the bakery. Browse through one of America's most famous used bookstores, have a sea-mud massage, followed by a spot of shopping for an unusual piece of jewelry, fashion outfit, Russian artwork, or a rare clock, before a sushi lunch. Creativity can then take over in a candle-making or pottery painting session. You might just have time to grab a matinee at the movies, before going for \$2 happy-hour beer, over which you can decide whether to grab fish and chips at the "shack," grab a burger at the bar, or opt for a spot of fine-dining, before finishing your day dancing to a swing or rock band.

This dizzy whirl sounds like entering a crazed, virtual cyber-world. You wouldn't even get that at a slick, got-it-all, resort complex. But unbelievably all this activity and opportunity is available within yards of each other in a Connecticut seaside village.

I love going somewhere well known – but discovering a secret! As we prepared for a recent trip to explore the Connecticut coastline, the advice came in droves. Mystic was the first place that dropped from all lips, swiftly followed by, "Are you going gambling?"

Nobody mentioned Niantic. And it gets short-shrift in the guide-books. But that's where we spent the first night. It was picked because we'd never heard of it, and it offered accommodation – right on Main Street – that fell between the region's mainstays of high-priced B&Bs and Interstate 95 chain motels.

When we drove in, we weren't

overexcited. Niantic is not the prettiest place in the world. The next day we'd hit the road and find somewhere else. But first impressions are sometimes not to be trusted. We stayed for all three nights of our trip. It took just a wander around Niantic – with people nodding and saying "hi" – to make us realize we'd hit a Connecticut bull's eye.

And that feeling was constantly reinforced. After driving short distances to play tourist in well-known places, not once did we wish we were staying. We were more than happy to be returning to Niantic.

Located two-thirds of the way up Connecticut's 120-mile coastline, it makes an ideal base. In Groton we crawled around the legendary USS Nautilus at the submarine museum; in Stonington we clambered up a picture postcard lighthouse; Essex was the starting point for a delightful three-hour steam-train and river-boat trip, which gave us glimpses of the extraordinary Gillette Castle and the famous Victorian Goodspeed Opera House.

We also discovered that in these parts, with its straggling estuaries and craggy inlets, it is hard to access the beach. But the beach and sea scene is so different in Niantic. It is the only community on the Connecticut coast where the main-street runs parallel to the Long Island Sound. Having said that, the instant picture is not as charming as it sounds, nor access as convenient as might be imagined. The Amtrak line – from DC to Boston – runs right where you'd think the promenade would be. But there are several hole-in-the-wall access points, leading onto a mile-long boardwalk, sweeping beach and park that sits high on a rocky bluff with panoramic views across the sound.

It takes no time to cross the bluff



The most handsome building in town, Morton's Hotel.





Crescent Beach is a short stroll from “downtown.”



# CAFE BERLIN

Fine German Cuisine

## THANKSGIVING DINNER

Cream of Pumpkin Soup  
Topped with Lemon Peppers Garnished  
with Chive Whipped Cream

Roasted Turkey  
With Forrest Mushroom Stuffing, Giblet Gravy  
& Cranberry Garni  
Served with Winter Squash Grain, Roasted Sweet  
Potatoes Tossed with Almonds and White Cheddar  
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onto Crescent Beach. It's an inviting sight, circled by wooden "cottages" and the clap-board Elms Hotel. To get that away-from-it-all feeling, continue along the beach, scrambling over rocks now and then, to circumnavigate Black Point. It's punctuated with old homes, so you'll get an insight into one of the state's most exclusive residential communities. But the main treat will be enjoying the salty air of the sound on one side and the wildlife to be spied among the wetlands on the other.

Every Niantic sea outlook also provides a clear view of the nuclear power plant! At first you think, "Oh, no – how ghastly." But it quickly dawns that it's a blessing in disguise. If it hadn't been built in 1970, there is no doubt that Niantic – which anchors Connecticut's biggest bay – would have been swooped on by the developers and "wrecked." It would have lost its tiny seaside resort profile to become big hotel, condo-dominated land.

Probably ended up like Mystic, which though delightful and crammed with history, now bears little resemblance to the down-home place it was 25 years ago. Instead Niantic has been left alone – with the exception of the careful introduction of unique shopping experiences, and the sort of facilities you really only associate with big-city life.

The cinema is the most startling example of this. Despite its smallness, it has five screens and shows new releases. A regular patron was Katharine Hepburn, who lived in nearby Old Saybrook. A few steps away is an Arthur Murray dance studio – the last thing you'd expect to see in this quaint village. But its nightly classes are packed. On the same block is Clocks, a shop devoted to selling, making and repairing timepieces. Bill Rice and Chuck Harrison, both retired submariners, have been tick-tocking away for seven years. The most expensive clock is a \$2,839 modern grandfather, in a Niantic crafted tiger maple cabinet; the least expensive, a \$16 Campbell's Soup kitchen clock. A lot of their time is spent applying TLC to old, beloved clocks that are sent for repair from all over the country.

Next door is Ardonn, a small boutique with a huge inventory of stylish but amazingly priced women's clothing that gets its name from its smart and feisty owners, Arlene Devlin and Donna Brennan. Their stock is complimented by nearby Fashion Imports, which has exciting accessories from around the world. A couple of hundred yards away is Russia on the Sound – a remarkable source of Russian arts and crafts, complete with a Russian Tea Room. It's the joy of Dylan Gaffney, who grew up in Upstate New York, traveled the world as a military wife, but chose Niantic to start a new life and indulge her love of all things Russian.

"This small town is full of pockets of people's personal passions," she says. "Many of us

have set up own little worlds that we invite others to step into."

And one of those "worlds" is the absorbing Book Barn. It caters to all book-lovers – from those searching for that rare tome to last year's best-seller. Its main outlet, housed in an old barn and ancillary buildings including a former out-house, is on the outskirts of Niantic. But the downtown store is an equally crazy maze of books. Browsers are welcomed with coffee and cookies. A fun diversion is the pink cage occupied by guinea pigs. Naturally, books about the favorite childhood pet – from bedtime stories to text books on the furry creature – are piled nearby.

Another significant attraction, among the "secrets" that low-key Niantic offers, is the fitness and day spa facility. Harmony is housed in a simple, single-story building next to the post office but explodes with beauty treatments, thermal body therapies and personal fitness programs. The sort of pampering services you'd only expect to find in a luxury resort hotel, or on a cruise ship.

Niantic does not boast block after block of historic buildings. But like the businesses, the appeal comes in one-offs, a couple of which are the aforementioned candle-making and pottery-painting studios. The most striking building is the Morton Hotel, built in 1868. Its heyday of being a posh hotel is long gone, but it is a true oddity, in a tremendous location. It only does weekly rents, and as many of the very affordable 42 efficiencies are taken by permanent guests, it's tough to get a room.

In contrast there are two top-rated bed and breakfasts. Right in town, housed in a quaint chapel, is 14 Lincoln Street. The other, Inn at Harbor Hill Marina, is about half a mile out, sitting high above the yachts and fishing boats with great views. A terrific option is the Niantic Inn, a modern, studio motel. It has no view – but great rates.

All of these accommodations put you on the doorstep of what makes Niantic such a unique place. But the Niantic Inn is literally steps from the beach, yards from various neighborhood watering-holes and a mere bread-roll throw from Grandpa's, a true-treat of a bakery. Jack Giuliano has been baking for 42 years. Now, along with son Joe, he produces 12 types of bread, bagels, donuts and various sweet rolls, in a tiny space that is '50s retro. Confirmation that their goodies are great comes not just from sampling the wares but knowing that they supply many upmarket hotels, bed and breakfasts and restaurants in the area.

We didn't go anywhere near the casinos, but floods of folks do. My only tip to them would be: take time out from the one-armed bandit and roulette table to spend time in nearby friendly Niantic. That way you're guaranteed to return home a winner! ■



This is the place to feast on the "catch-of-the-day".



Antiques and bric-a-brac galore - inside and outside - at Thames Import Company's maze of a shop.

## IF YOU GO:

### HOW TO GET THERE:

FLY: Hartford (50 miles from Niantic), from BWI on Southwest, from Reagan-National on US Airways.  
TRAIN: Amtrak, from DC to Old Saybrook (13 miles), Mystic (19 miles) or Meriden (50 miles); sadly, although the train roars through Niantic, it no longer has a station.  
DRIVE: 346 miles from DC.

### WHERE TO STAY:

14 LINCOLN STREET:  
Bed and breakfast;  
\$165-295; gourmet restaurant for guests only; 860-739-6327; [www.14lincolnstreet.com](http://www.14lincolnstreet.com).

INN AT HARBOR HILL MARINA:  
Bed and breakfast; \$135-245;  
6 Grand St. 860-739-0331, [www.innharborhill.com](http://www.innharborhill.com).

NIANTIC INN:  
24 units; studios with fridge, microwave, coffee-makers and efficiencies with kitchenettes; laundry room; daily rates \$89-139; weekly \$299-550; special off-season-rates of \$99 for two nights; 860-739-5451, [www.thenianticinn.com](http://www.thenianticinn.com).

ELMS HOTEL:  
nine en-suite rooms, 21 with shared bath; \$80-180; 27-37 Ocean Ave. 860-739-5545.

MORTON HOTEL:  
only weekly rentals, no reservations, first come, first served. 215

Main St. 860-739-1913.

VACATION RENTALS:  
Sonya Hoisington of Hoisington Realty in Niantic, 860-739-2999, [www.hoisingtonrealty.com](http://www.hoisingtonrealty.com).

### WHERE TO EAT:

CONSTANTINE'S:  
Friendly, neighborhood hangout with good food.

BURKE'S TAVERN:  
Same as above, with the addition of a dance floor, live music, frequently featuring a 16-piece swing-band.

YUMMY-YUMMY:  
All manner of Oriental cooking, plus sushi bar & happy-hour free buffet.

SKIPPER'S:  
A posh fish shack where you know you're by the sea, with fish 'n' chips, clams, scallops, piled high on paper plates.

LA BELLE AURORE:  
A chef-owned bistro with superb cooking.

ALSO:  
On the outskirts there are more interesting ways of parting with money: Casablanca sells nothing but wicker furniture; Thames Import Company is a chaotic Aladdin's cave cluttered of antiques and bric-a-brac; Silver Skate, an original Christmas shop.



### Wednesday's

\$10 Buckets of Heineken Light/Heineken  
7:30pm-9:30pm

### Friday's

Beat the Clock 4pm-9pm  
Select Drafts Start @ \$0.75 and go up \$0.25 every hour  
Live Bands

### Saturday's

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