



## A Guide to Coastal Kayaking in Southeastern Connecticut

Jerry Wylie

Historic homes hug a tiny cove, and the rocky coastline is dotted with over a hundred small islands, some no bigger than the houses perched upon them. It's early evening, the tangy scent of seaweed and old stone walls blend with the smells of cooking, and the sound of a classical guitar floats down from a balcony overhead. You float silently in your kayak and savor the magic of the moment.

A Mediterranean vacation? Nope, it's less than 2 hours from New York City on Connecticut's Mystic Coast, a 50-mile stretch between New Haven and Rhode Island with some of the most beautiful, diverse and user-friendly coastal waterways in the United States...or perhaps the world.

This vast system of tidal rivers, pristine salt marshes, coves, and scenic harbors is a rich smorgasbord of flat water kayaking. There's a surprising variety of paddling opportunities in a compact package, even some "wild" places to

escape crowds. The paddling menu has many local specials including sunny beaches, refreshing forests, quaint villages, lighthouses, historic tall ships, and more birds than you can shake a camera at.

There are also plenty of attractions waiting for you ashore: the world's first nuclear submarine, the largest gambling casino, the last wooden whaling ship...and of course convenient waterside dining. Whatever your tastes, Connecticut's Mystic Coast has what you're looking for.

### **Tom Thumb and the Tiny Thimbles**

Often described as "a piece of the Maine coast that drifted into Long Island Sound", the **Thimble Islands** are 200 or so charming islands a stone's throw from Branford, just east of New Haven. The local Indians called them "the beautiful sea rocks" and they range from whale-sized granite rocks, barely awash at high



tide, to 17 acres in size. There are about 95 homes on 25 islands, many constructed in the Victorian style. Some are multi-million dollar mansions complete with manicured gardens and tennis courts.

The quaint village where you put in is Stony Creek. Just look for the boat ramp next to the park. The first challenge is finding a parking spot, especially on a summer weekend, and the second is finding a public restroom. Advanced planning is a good idea.

Most of the islands are within 2 miles, so you can do a leisurely tour in about 3 hours. Be sure to swing by **Money Island**, where Captain Kidd's treasure is said to be buried, **Cut-in-Two Island** visited by Tom Thumb as he courted a local maiden. Spot the old phone booth on **Governor Island**? That's the residents' book exchange. The locals won't tell you which one, but one of the islands is home to Jane Pauley and "Doonsbury" cartoonist Garry Trudeau.

Stop for a rest break at **Outer Island**, part of the National Wildlife Refuge system. If it's closed for nesting birds, try neighboring **Horse Island**, owned by Yale University. Just stay below the high water mark on the south shore. Caution: Although anything below the mean high

water line is public (see sidebar), landing on inhabited islands irritates the locals.

On the way back, check out the beautiful historic homes along the mainland near Flying Point. And for a pizza-with-a-view, grab an outside table at the Stony Creek Market before you leave town.

### From Salt Marsh to Forest

An easy 2-hour paddle east from the Thimbles to Guilford takes you along an attractive coastline punctuated by low rocky headlands separated by pocket beaches and salt marshes with small meandering rivers. Hug the shoreline or take a detour out to see the old lighthouse and tern colony on **Falkner Island**, 4 miles offshore. Landing is not permitted but there's a nice gravel bar just to the north at low tide.

Between Guilford and Westbrook are three small tidal rivers that provide excellent half and full-day paddles. You can tour through bird-filled salt marshes and up into forests where they become freshwater streams.



Marking the boundary between the towns of Guilford and Madison, the **East River** is the longest. Starting at the river's mouth, paddle upstream for 4 miles, passing through vast marshes and

historic farms. Look carefully and you may see diamondback terrapin turtles watching you with their periscope-like necks.

If you don't have a full day, try the slightly shorter **Hammonasset River** just 5 miles east in Clinton. The shady, fresh water stream above the tidal zone is a perfect escape from the summer's heat. Although shallow in sections, it's worth the effort. Colorful butterflies dance through branches and filtered sunlight sparkles on the water—look deeper and you might see a sleepy snapping turtle.



The **Menunketesuck River** in Westbrook, is the shortest of the three but a favorite of many. Launch on Route 145 and be sure to go upstream to the old dam and mill before meandering the 2.5 miles downstream through the National Wildlife Refuge to the coast. Listen for the distinctive chitter of sassy kingfishers near rocky shorelines.

High tide is best for exploring these delightful waterways. You can get into more places and see over the top of the marsh grasses where squads of wading birds go about their business. Occasionally you'll encounter what looks a sleeping hippo. Actually they're semi-submerged boulders resting in the

riverbed, leftovers from the glaciers that formed Long Island Sound. Careful – go too fast and get too close and they'll tip your boat.



Hungry? Try a casual dinner and sunset in any of the waterside restaurants in the marinas or along Route 1. Although not on the water, the Cuckoo's Nest is a popular kayaker hangout in Old Saybrook. And if you're looking for an outdoor alternative to the local motels, camping is available at **Hammonasset Beach State Park** in Madison. It's an easy 5-mile paddle from the East River and immediately adjacent to the Hammonasset River.

### **One of the Last Great Places**

The lower Connecticut River estuary has been called the "crown jewel" of this 400-mile watershed because of its natural and cultural values. Among the most pristine tidal marsh systems in the United States, it has been identified as one of the "Last Great Places" in the hemisphere by The Nature Conservancy. If you paddle here from Clinton, it's a 4-hour trip (be sure to stop for lunch at Bill's Seafood Restaurant, just up the **Patchogue River** in Westbrook.) If you drive, launch at the Great Island boat ramp east of the river mouth.



Marsh near Lieutenant River

Dutch explorer Adriaen Block sailed up the river in 1614, followed by Puritans who settled at Old Saybrook in 1636. Fortunately (for us), the shifting sand bars retarded commercial development, making this one of the only major rivers in the country to not have a city at its mouth. During the Revolutionary War, local inventor David Bushnell tested his “Turtle” here, America’s first submarine. (There’s a replica at the **Connecticut River Museum** in nearby Essex.)

The lower Connecticut River captured the imagination of early *plein air* painters who were drawn to its unique blend of waterways, bucolic landscapes, and ethereal skies. The tidal rivers, vast marshes, freshwater streams, lakes, and panoramic beaches have changed very little since their discovery by American Impressionists in the late 1800s. So be sure to bring your camera and be out



Joshua Creek, Lyme

early or late for the softest light. Also stop at the **Florence Griswold Art Museum** to view works of the Old Lyme artist’s colony.

In addition to paddling the main river, extensive back channels through the marsh, and the sandy shoreline of the Sound, you can leisurely explore the **Black Hall River** or the **Lieutenant River** for 3 or 4 hours. More athletic paddlers will enjoy the maze of channels in **Lords Cove** upstream, a 10-mile round trip.



Great Island Marsh

For convenient room and board, try across the river at the Saybrook Point Inn. Or if you feel romantic, splurge a bit and go up the Lieutenant River to the Bee and Thistle Inn for fine dining and lodging. Both are accessible from the water with a little effort.

### **Selden Island and Sherlock Holmes**

For kayak camping, visit **Selden Neck State Park** ten miles upstream from the mouth, where campsites on the island can be reserved for small groups. To get



Hamburg Cove

there, most kayakers paddle five miles upstream from **Hamburg Cove** or 1.5 miles downstream from the **Chester Ferry**, both on the eastern shore. Quicker access is also possible from Deep River on the west shore (preferred by paddlers towing an extra kayak laden with food and cooking gear.)

**Selden Island** has primitive campsites with fire rings, rustic picnic tables, and simple outhouses, also deep woods filled with ferns and the remains of historic granite quarrying operations. Bring your own drinking water or find the cold springs hidden along the western shore.



Selden Island

The payoffs of camping here are the haunting whistle of the historic Essex steam train in the distance, sunsets that drench the river's surface with blazing color, and paddling quietly through early morning mists. For a quirky side trip,

take a guided tour of nearby **Gillette Castle State Park**, home of eccentric stage actor William Gillette, best known for portraying Sherlock Holmes in the early 1900s. Remnants of wooden trestles from his miniature railroad can be seen clinging to the cliffs along the river.

If you have more time, start upstream at the **Salmon River** boat ramp and tour 18 miles to the mouth, stopping halfway at Selden Neck. Plan your mini-adventure to take advantage of the tides and avoid the heavy weekend boat traffic. Paddle on weekdays or keep close to shore and poke around the many side channels and ponds. And for unique riverside dining, complete with Christmas lights and Caribbean pastels, don't miss the Blue Oar in Haddam (BYOB).



Connecticut River

### Birds, Birds and More Birds

Less than 6 miles east from the mouth of the Connecticut River is some of the most diverse kayaking on the coast. For an easy 6-mile paddle, launch at the Four Mile River boat ramp and head east past **Rocky Neck State Park** to the rocky islands and secluded beaches at the **Pattagansett River Marsh Wildlife Area**, accessible only by boat. Whatever the conditions, you can always find a protected beach or granite outcrop with a



Four Mile River

scenic view for a perfect lunch spot. If the wind and tide are just right, small swells can be surfed on the sand bar in the channel.

After lunch, take the scenic tour into the marsh and up the river to see the osprey, great blue herons and egrets that are common here. Look on the offshore rocks for the comical oystercatchers with their oversized orange beaks and squeeze-toy voices.



Rocks near Pattagansett River

You can relax here on a steamy August afternoon when everyone else is dying of the heat. The water is refreshingly cool and clear. Rocky Neck State Park has a beautiful beach and campsites, but no water access for kayaks. Inexpensive restaurants nearby include the Hideaway and Illiano's in Old Lyme and Constantine's in Niantic.

### A Lighthouse Lover's Feast

Although much more of a working river than the Connecticut, there's lots of

great urban paddling in **New London's Thames River**. Avoid the shipping lanes and the security-sensitive facilities at the submarine Base and shipyard in Groton.

Lighthouse gourmets get a triple serving here. There is a classic tall white tower on the east and a smaller stone tower on the west shore. However, the main course is a spectacular 3-story French Second Empire-style lighthouse, complete with a mansard roof, located right in the middle of the harbor entrance. With its bright red brick walls, 11 rooms, and many white-trimmed windows and dormers, it looks like it floated away from some fancy city neighborhood.

State boat ramps are located under the I-95 bridge on both sides of the river. But it's best to start 2 miles east at **Bluff Point State Park** and explore the solitude of the estuary and beach in this 778-acre coastal reserve. The pocket beaches and shady forest on **Brushy Point Island** provide an attractive stop for lunch or a rest break.

There is no camping at the state park, but you can stay at the Thames Inn and Marina in Groton, right next door to the excellent Paul's Pasta restaurant. This is also a great place to enjoy the spectacular fireworks during New London's "Sailfest" celebration the second week in July.



Bushy Point Island



Steamboat Sabino, Mystic Seaport

### Tall Ships and Tall Tales

The village of **Mystic** was settled in the mid-1700s and by the mid-1800s was a major ship-building center. During the Civil War, with a population of only 400, it built 36 steamships to support the Union effort. Today it celebrates its nautical roots by hosting thousands of visitors each year at the **Mystic Seaport** maritime museum with its reconstructed 19<sup>th</sup>-century village, historic tall ships and educational programs. (Workshops include traditional Greenland paddle and kayak construction.)



Joseph Conrad, Mystic Seaport

One of the main attractions is the wooden, three-masted *Charles W. Morgan*. Built in 1841, it was the most successful whaling ship in history, making 37 voyages from the South Seas to the Arctic. It recouped the entire cost of construction on its maiden voyage.

Another tall ship, the 1882 *Joseph Conrad*, sailed under Danish, English and American flags primarily as a training ship. Rammed by a British freighter, she sank in 1905 killing 22 young mariners. There is also the *L.A. Dunton*, a 1921 fishing schooner that made 20 trips a year for halibut with 10 dories and a crew of 20, and the perky little *Sabino* (1908) the last coal-fired passenger steamboat operating in America.

The best way to see these ships is to get up close and personal. Paddle up beside the massive *Charles W. Morgan* and reach out to touch the storm-battered hull of the ship that sailed farther, killed more whales, and made more money than any other. This view -- looking up into the rigging of this floating whale oil factory -- was the last thing thousands of those giants saw before they died. This should give you a chill even on a hot summer's day.

There are several places to launch. The state boat ramp is underneath the I-95 bridge, about a mile north. The tiny Isham Street ramp on the south of the

Seaport's shipyard is very convenient but has limited parking. For a slightly longer tour of both the village and Mystic Seaport, try Williams Beach behind the YMCA, about 1.5 miles southeast. In 3 hours you can see just about everything, including the revolving railroad bridge and the old-fashioned draw bridge on the village's main street.



Pequotsepos Brook, Mystic

Williams Beach is also a good place to start a 4-mile tour around **Mason Island**. If you have more time and energy, add a side trip to scenic **Ram Island** at the mouth of the river, or do a 2-mile crossing to **Fishers Island**, N.Y.. Just be sure to adjust for the strong tidal currents and be wary of boat traffic and fog.

To complete the day's nautical theme, surprise the tourists by climbing up the boat ladder for a superb outdoor seafood lunch at Abbott's in Noank. But if it's breakfast you want (served until 2 p.m. closing), try Kitchen Little in Mystic. For waterside lodging, paddle up to the Inn at Mystic near Williams Beach or the Harbour Inne and Cottage near the railroad bridge.

### The Best Beach

The last town before the Rhode Island border is the charming fishing village of **Stonington**. Put in at the Barn Island

boat ramp 2 miles east and spend some time relaxing on the sandy islands or clamming at the mouth of **Little Narragansatt Bay**. If it's crowded, paddle another mile or two to the more isolated beaches at **Napatree Point**. (Technically this is Rhode Island but Connecticut paddlers have adopted it as their own because of its beautiful sandy beach and sparkling clean water.) If conditions are right, you can play in the surf at the end of the point. Snorkeling is also popular around the rocks at the point.

Bring a picnic lunch, an umbrella, a big beach blanket and enjoy yourself. This is a great place to relax with a book or take a nap. Later you can practice surf launches and landing in the gentle shore break before heading back. And be sure to stop and toast the sunset with a glass of wine at Skippers Dock in historic Stonington Harbor, because life is sweet and coastal kayaking doesn't get much better.



Napatree Point

### Fall and Winter Paddling

Paddling doesn't end with the summer. Some of the best kayaking is after the tourists leave. Be sure not to miss the fall colors! There is something special about the golden oaks and blazing red maples reflected in the dark mirror of a mid-October river. The impact is



doubled and floating leaves add seasoning to this visual feast. It's also a good time to see migrating birds, such as hawks.

Air and water temperatures are often mild even into November and December. On a sunny winter day, put on a dry suit and venture out to see Bald eagles wintering along the lower Connecticut River or look for harbor seals hanging out on the rocks at low tide.

Whatever the season, when you visit the Mystic Coast and see local kayakers on the water or their cars parked outside a restaurant, you now know what you're missing. So stop by and join the fun. You won't be disappointed.



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**Jerry Wylie** is a certified kayak instructor trainer and the owner of Connecticut Coastal Kayaking, LLC. He lives near the mouth of the Connecticut River and can be reached at [paddle@CTcoastalkayaking.com](mailto:paddle@CTcoastalkayaking.com) or 860-391-3837.

### **Public Access to Connecticut's Shoreline**

The state of Connecticut owns all submerged lands and the shoreline waterward of the mean high water line which is defined as the line on the shore established by the average of all high tides. It is often identified by a prominent debris line or high water mark.

This means that private property generally ends at this level and that the state holds title below this for public use. In general, if an area is regularly wet by the tides, it is safe to assume it is legally open to public use.

The general public may freely use these public trust lands and waters for uses such as fishing, shellfishing, boating, sunbathing, or simply walking. However, this does not guarantee public access to these areas from the land.

## **Mystic Coast Trip Planner**

### ***Getting There***

The Mystic Coast is 2 hours by car from Boston or NYC and slightly more than 1 hour driving time from the Hartford-Bradley and Providence airports. AMTRAK provides train service to New Haven, Old Saybrook, New London, and Mystic.

### ***Public Launch Sites***

The Connecticut Coastal Access Guide (map) is available at:  
<http://www.lisrc.uconn.edu/coastal>  
(Paper copies are out of print but can still be found.)

### ***Charts and Water Trail Brochures***

A waterproof chart of the Connecticut River from Hartford to Old Saybrook is available through Embassy Marine Publishing, Resolution Mapping, Inc, Lexington, MA.

Laminated trail maps and interpretive guides for Old Saybrook, Great Island, and Deep River are available at some libraries.

### ***Kayak Classes and Guided Tours***

**Connecticut Coastal Kayaking** (Lyme)  
[www.ctcoastalkayaking.com](http://www.ctcoastalkayaking.com)  
860-391-3837

### ***Kayak Retailers and Outfitters***

**North Cove Outfitters** (Old Saybrook)  
860-388-6585

**Eastern Mountain Sports** (Waterford)  
860-447-8448

### ***Kayak Rentals***

**Indian River Marina** (Clinton)  
230-606-1902

**Black Hall Marina** (Old Lyme)  
860-434-9860

**Mystic River Kayak** (Mystic)  
860-536-8381

**King Cove Marina** (Stonington)  
860-599-4730

**Eastern Mountain Sports** (Waterford)  
860-447-8448

### ***Kayak Paddling Club***

**Connecticut Sea Kayakers**  
("Connyak")  
Tours, activities and good local information  
[www.connyak.org](http://www.connyak.org)

### ***Birding Information***

<http://pages.cthome.net/jbair/ctbirds.htm>

### ***Lighthouse Information***

[www.lighthousefriends.com/ct.html](http://www.lighthousefriends.com/ct.html)

### ***General Environmental Information***

**Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection**  
Natural resources, outdoor recreation, environmental and geographical information  
[www.dep.state.ct.us](http://www.dep.state.ct.us)

### ***Camping reservations at state parks***

Reservations through Reserve America  
877-668-CAMP  
Information through the Connecticut DEP at 860-424-3333

## **General References**

*Tidewaters of the Connecticut River: An Explorer's Guide to Hidden Coves and Marshes.* River's End Press, Essex, CT (2001).

*Sea Kayaking Along the New England Coast* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) by Tamsin Venn. Appalachian Mountain Club (2004).

## **Tourism Websites**

**Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism**

[www.tourism.state.ct.us](http://www.tourism.state.ct.us)

**Connecticut's Mystic Country**

[www.mysticmore.com](http://www.mysticmore.com)