

EXPLORER | CONNECTICUT

## How Many Thimble Islands? Depends on the Tide



George Ruhe for The New York Times

Lewis Island, one of hundreds in the Thimbles, holds a lone house just a few hundred yards from the town dock in Stony Creek, Conn.

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Published: June 24, 2007

IT'S easy to drive up the Connecticut coast and never discover the Thimble Islands. Those who do spot an unobtrusive brown sign for them below the large placard for Exit 56 on I-95 probably wonder about the name. Is it meant to imply that they are small and cute, the size of thimbles? Do they look like thimbles, domed and silvery?

## Connecticut Travel Guide

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### Multimedia



## Thimble Islands, Conn.

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George Ruhe for The New York Times

A kayaker heading to the Stony Creek dock passes a house on the mainland in Branford.



George Ruhe for The New York Times

The Sea Mist prepares to head out on a sightseeing cruise around the Thimble Islands.

The answer to each of these questions is no, but the traveler who follows the sign will find that the islands' name is not their only claim to charm.

The Thimbles are an archipelago of 100 to 365 islands, depending on whether you count small rocks, reefs, ledges and sandbars that surface at low tide, off Branford, east of [New Haven](#). The largest, Horse Island, owned by the Peabody Museum of Natural History at [Yale University](#), is 17 acres. They look like chunks of coastal [Maine](#) — with pink granite bases and lush covers of hardwoods, pines and thickets — that have somehow ended up in Long Island Sound.

Their name, most locals agree, derives from the thimbleberry, a type of black raspberry, that used to grow on them in abundance.

The Thimbles' obscurity is fine with the lucky few who own houses on them — Christine Svenningsen, for example, who married into the founding family of the party-supplies company Amscan and has collected eight Thimbles (all with houses), or the cartoonist Garry Trudeau and his wife, Jane Pauley, who own a house on 10-acre Governors Island.

But short of buying in — difficult because houses on them are rarely for sale— there are ways to see the Thimbles.

On a chilly overcast Saturday morning in June in Stony Creek, the nearest mainland village, boats bobbed at anchor in the small marina and the dock was mostly quiet. A few people were leaving the Creekers, a coffee shop that sits on the harbor along with a few small stores, a post office and a handful of weathered houses with porches draped in buoys. Out on the dock, a father and son unloaded crates of lobsters and silvery bait fish from a boat.

A couple of Thimble Islanders, already finished with their morning shopping, crammed boxes of potted flowers and bags of charcoal into a small motorboat and putt-putted away, towing a dinghy also brimming with supplies. They passed another islander, this one headed into the harbor, jauntily paddling a white canoe while dressed in crisply pressed chinos, a lilac Oxford shirt and a bow tie.

A few sightseers waited on the dock for a tour boat — the simplest way to get a look at the Thimbles.

“On a warm, sunny day, this place is slamming,” said Bob DeMaria, who runs a water taxi used by island residents. “There are lines stretching all the way down the dock, and you can’t find a parking space.”

But on this inhospitable day, the tour boat, the Sea Mist, left the dock for its 10:15 cruise with just 10 passengers.

The Thimbles begin just 200 yards offshore with Wheelers Island, less than an acre and dominated by a replica of its original house, a four-story Victorian with wraparound porches and a cupola. Similarly small islands farther from shore, like Grey Rock, Potato and Belden, each with a single century-old house, sit on the horizon and appear very fragile. If the world were flat, you’d think a wind would push them over the edge.

The Sea Mist’s captain, Michael Infantino, launched quickly into a narrative blending the historical and the hokey. As the boat approached High Island, where Captain Kidd is said to have evaded

the British Royal Navy in 1699 and buried treasure, Mr. Infantino pointed out the Jolly Roger flag on the Sea Mist's stern, and pirate [music](#) played over the loudspeaker.

The first building to go up on the Thimbles was a rambling three-story hotel on 10-acre Pot Island (or Pot Rock Island), built in 1846. It still stands but is now a private home. There are no hotels or commercial buildings of any kind on the Thimbles now, although sometimes owners rent out their cottages in the summer.

Later in the 19th century and into the 20th, wealthy families built substantial summer homes on the islands. The trophy house of the Thimbles is on Rogers Island: a 27-room Tudor-style mansion built in 1902, with a caretaker's cottage, tennis and basketball courts, a swimming pool, a [golf](#) course and elaborate formal [gardens](#). Mrs. Svenningsen bought the island in 2003 for \$23.5 million.

Most of the 90 or so homes scattered over the 25 inhabited Thimbles are far more modest. On Money Island, which long ago had a bowling alley, a dance floor and a hotel, a jumble of about 30 homes includes white clapboard cottages and summer shacks. Exton's Reef, a series of rocks that are submerged at high tide, has a bungalow on stilts.

Another boat, the Volsunga IV, offers a tour similar to the Sea Mist's, though the narration by its captain, Bob Milne, was a more unsweetened report. Either boat makes for a pleasant ride, but neither stops on any of the islands, which are all privately owned.

One way to see them more intimately is on a three-hour [kayak](#) expedition guided by Jerry Wylie, who owns Connecticut Coastal Kayaking. On a calm day when the paddling is easy, a leisurely kayak trip affords glimpses of island life — children diving off rocks or looking for crabs and snails in tidal pools, adults snoozing in hammocks or [fishing](#) and sailing.

Although some of the islands are insular, a sense of community prevails, with friendly islanders waving to kayakers and other boaters.

Flying overhead, stalking prey in the shallows or standing on rocks are plovers, egrets, and cormorants.

When it's windy and the sound is choppy, it may be difficult to kayak the two miles to five-acre Outer Island, the farthest off shore of the sizable islands. There, where the sound is at its widest (it's 18 miles across to Mattituck on Long Island's [North Fork](#)), the Thimbles' openness to the elements becomes apparent. In the great hurricane of 1938, seven people died on the Thimbles and scores of buildings were destroyed.

When conditions are favorable, Mr. Wylie stops for picnics on Outer Island, which is part of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge.

While Thimbles homeowners are naturally protective of their privacy, and stopping uninvited on an inhabited island would be very bad form, some island stops are not illegal — anything below the mean high water line is public property in Connecticut. A curious visitor making a low-tide stop on the edge of Horse Island, which is not inhabited, might clamber on the big shoreline rocks and peer in toward an overgrown forest rife with ticks and a beautiful paved, canopied path leading to a 1920 gambrel-roofed house, which Yale uses. Occasionally, the museum organizes botanical and [bird](#)-watching field trips on the island.

Visitors who can wangle an invitation from a Thimbles homeowner can reach their destination on a water taxi, the Charley More (\$8 a person from the Stony Creek dock), with Mr. DeMaria as the captain. But even without a stop, riding the ferry on its everyday circuit is a good way to get a sense of everyday island life.

Practicalities loom large on the Thimbles — six islands get electrical power through underwater cables from the mainland, but the others rely on generators, solar power, batteries, kerosene and propane. About half of the islands pipe fresh water from Stony Creek; the rest use wells or rainwater cisterns or haul water from shore.

On a recent run, the Charley More was packed to the gills with homeowners and their gear — everything from food and toilet paper to bilge pumps and coffee-table books. Passengers got on and off at islands along the way.

“I wish our kids were still young enough to act as Sherpas,” said Judy Fisher as she passed stuffed canvas boat bags from the boat up to her husband, who was standing on a dock at High Island, where they own two of the island’s seven houses.

High Island presents its own challenges. Boats can approach the island’s two docks only at high tide, and from there it’s a steep climb up a high cliff to the top of the island.

Is owning a home in the Thimble Islands worth all the trouble?

“Unquestionably,” said Peter Brown, whose family now lives year round on Pot Island, where he has spent summers since 1961. “We’re not escapists, we’re liveaboards. We really like the lifestyle and its focus on the water.”

At twilight on a balmy summer evening, the Charley More chugged back to Stony Creek’s dock, threading its way through the archipelago. The islands’ pink-tinged granite glimmered in the waning light, and above the high-tide line, people were sitting or standing on decks and porches. Snatches of conversation and the sound of ice clinking in glasses traveled over the water and could be heard above the hum of the boat’s engine. The passengers, day-trippers and returning houseguests, were briefly united by a nose-pressed-against-the-glass feeling.

Slightly out of step with the rest of the world, the Thimbles continue to maintain their perch in Long Island Sound.

## VISITOR INFORMATION

### GETTING THERE

To reach the Thimble Islands by car from [New York City](#), take Interstate 95 north to Exit 56. Turn right onto Leetes Island Road and continue about two miles under the railroad bridge and follow signs to the Stony Creek town dock. Parking is limited, so allow time to find a space.

### SEEING THE ISLANDS

Both the Sea Mist (203-488-8905, [www.thimbleislandcruise.com](http://www.thimbleislandcruise.com)) and the Volsunga IV (203-481-3345, [www.thimbleislands.com](http://www.thimbleislands.com)) run 45-minute narrated tours of the islands several times a day through October. The Sea Mist runs daily except Tuesday and costs \$10; \$5 for ages 12 and under. The Volsunga IV runs daily through August, then not on Monday. Rates are \$9; \$5 for children under 12.

[Connecticut Coastal Kayaking](#) (860-391-3837, [www.ctcoastalkayaking.com](http://www.ctcoastalkayaking.com)) designs Thimble Islands kayaking tours to match skill levels. A three-hour group tour, offered at least twice a month, is \$80 a person.

Horse Island Botany Trips (203-432-3775; [www.yale.edu/peabody/education/ed\\_botprog.html](http://www.yale.edu/peabody/education/ed_botprog.html)) are scheduled occasionally by the Peabody Museum at Yale, with the next likely to be in September. The trips are usually limited to 15. The fee is \$33 for members and \$38 for others.

### WHERE TO EAT

For lunch or dinner near the Thimbles, try [Guilford Mooring](#) (505 Whitfield Street, Guilford; 203-458-2921; [www.guilfordmooring.com](http://www.guilfordmooring.com)), a waterside seafood restaurant, or [U.S.S. Chowder Pot III](#) (560 East Main Street, Branford; 203-481-2356; [www.chowderpot.com](http://www.chowderpot.com)).