

Where,
and how,
to keep
romance's
flame
burning
brightly
through
the
coldest
nights
of winter.

A FINE ROMANCE

Connecticut is full of places that can be perfect for romance. Whether you're in the mood for a cozy hideaway in the hills, a risqué escape into unbridled luxury or a quiet water view, there's a destination out there with your name on it. With

Valentine's Day in view, we've taken a few test rides for you: raised a glass of wine, strolled along the beach, tried out a bed or two. We can say without hesitation that the spirit of romance is alive and well.

Homestead Inn, Greenwich

These days, when you decide to spring for a little getaway with your honey, it had better be a memorable occasion in every way. We're talking over-the-top romantic, which means, to my mind, a distinctive hotel or inn, a superb meal and a cozy place to lay your head. Key to the whole enterprise, of course: a simpatico companion with whom to share it all.

Throw in soft lighting, attentive service and a libation or two, and as my Magic 8-Ball used to say, the "outlook is good."

All of the above can be found under one roof at the Homestead Inn in Greenwich, long one of the brightest jewels in Connecticut's crown. Situated on three acres among mature specimen trees and alluring gardens in the stately Belle Haven neighborhood, the 19th century Victorian manor house has never looked lovelier. Inside, the inn is elegant but in no way forbidding, glowing with good health and bonhomie, and perfectly itself—that is, up to the exacting standards of husband-and-wife team Thomas and Theresa Henkelmann. He presides over the four-star French restaurant that bears his name; she reigns on the hotel side. Together, their efforts have paid off handsomely, with Relais & Châteaux membership, top ratings from Zagat and numerous other accolades, including four stars from *Connecticut Magazine* restaurant reviewer Elise Maclay, and Patricia Brooks' first Extraordinary rating in 30 years

It may seem difficult to leave your room at the Homestead Inn, right, but not when there's a four-star restaurant right downstairs.



PAUL JOHNSON

in *The New York Times*.

Theresa, who spent years as an interior designer, oversaw every aspect of the décor. Her penchant for rich fabrics, eccentric accent pieces and only the finest materials—Brunschwig & Fils, Donghia, Dana Robes bespoke cherry furniture—as well as her fearless use of color inform every common area and bedchamber. Every individually designed room has its own distinct ambience, with art and artifacts from around the globe woven into the mix. (Ours had citrine walls, a Thai hand-painted wooden horse, a grand hand-carved Indian mirror inlaid with over 100 smaller mirrors and an exotic reindeer-moss tree in one corner.) Add to these elements sumptuous linens, the plush towels and thoughtful touches like heated bathroom floors, and the scene is set for romance.

But now, it's back down a short flight of stairs to dinner, where a very special experience awaits. With half-timbered ceilings, arresting artwork and fireplace aglow, the Thomas Henkelmann restaurant is at once rustic and supremely elegant. Candles in colorful Murano glass holders flicker; tables gleam with Christofle silver and the finest china and stemware. But it is the chef's artistry that makes the meal unforgettable.

A native of the Black Forest in Germany, Thomas Henkelmann cooked at Michelin three-star restaurants in Munich and Alsace before coming to the States. His is French cuisine at its hautest, yet his creations—sautéed sweetbreads with French style peas and Perigord black truffle sauce, seared yellowfin tuna with mango-pineapple chutney, crisp sautéed Atlantic sea bass with artichoke purée and red wine sauce—is never precious or contrived. Desserts, such as warm Valrhona chocolate soufflé cake with liquid chocolate center and pistachio ice cream, and caramelized passion fruit custard with raspberries, are exquisite.

All in all, both inn and restaurant are pretty near perfect. And that will cost you. But you *will* get what you pay for here. So give yourself over to the Henkelmann magic—enter the front door, prepare to be coddled and cosseted, and let the Homestead Inn do the rest.

—Valerie Schroth

Homestead Inn, (203) 869-7500 or homesteadinn.com.



England theme) and in 2006 Winvian became a reality.

Fulfilling fantasies doesn't come cheap here, but the experience will probably bring a sparkle to your eye every time you think of it. For \$1,950 a night, you can pretend to be Tarzan and Jane in The Treehouse, a rustic two-story swaying playhouse suspended 10 meters up into the trees, outfitted with a state-of-the-art bath, two fireplaces and full bar. For \$1,700 a night, you can fly as pilot and co-pilot in the cockpit of a restored 1968 Sikorsky HH37 Sea King Pelican helicopter—the centerpiece of the Helicopter Cottage. Or play the hero beside the mighty oak that stands inside the Charter Oak Cottage in honor of Connecticut's state moniker.

In the cabins that have a more traditional style, you can create your own whimsy. Get lost in two-story-high stacks of books or just cozy up by a roaring fire in the Library Cottage, or enjoy a romp through a life-size terrarium filled with exotic plants in the Greenhouse Cottage. Outdoorsy types can let nature take its course indoors with a trickling stone waterfall and pebble-walled sauna-shower in the

Woodland Cottage, and then head outdoors for a romantic hike in the surrounding 4,000-acre White Memorial Foundation.

Room service is excellent and all meals may be taken in your bungalow, but a visit to the renovated house, now the main hotel, is a must. Challenge each other to a contest of billiards in the game room or sip cognac in the solarium. Then take a seat in the intimate dining room and enjoy a superb meal prepared by executive chef Chris Eddy, accompanied by a notable selection of wines. Once intoxicated by the chardonnay—and each other, of course—it's time to turn in. Enhance the afterglow from all of this with a private couple's massage in the 5,000-square-foot spa before departing, and you'll leave Winvian's court feeling like a noble knight and virtuous lady.

—Cathy Ross

Winvian, (860) 567-9600 or winvian.com.

Saybrook Point Inn & Spa, Old Saybrook

In any season, the point of land in Old Saybrook where the Connecticut River runs into Long Island Sound is one of the loveliest in the state—and one of the most romantic. Here there are water views aplenty, the calls of gulls on the wind, boaters and fishermen to observe, fine old cottages to stroll by and bracing salt air to breathe. Here also, as good fortune would have it, is the Saybrook Point Inn & Spa, where an overnight can really feel like a vacation.

We arrived on a chilly midafternoon and were immediately warmed up and won over by the inn's lobby, where comfort, good

The cottages at Winvian in Morris all follow different themes. Pictured, above and opposite, is the Greenhouse Cottage, where light streams through a glass ceiling and citrus plants perfume the interior.



MORE NIGHTS TO REMEMBER

The possibilities are endless, but here are a few more romantic destinations to consider.



A room fit for Valentine's Day at *The Copper Beech Inn* in Ivoryton.

The Copper Beech Inn, Ivoryton, (860) 767-0330 or copperbeechinn.com. The main dining room was voted "Most Romantic" by our readers, while the inn's less formal alternative, Brasserie Pip, possesses a chic all its own. The rooms are lovely, too.

The Boulders Inn, New Preston, (860) 868-0541 or bouldersinn.com. Stay in one of the cottages that overlooks Lake Waramaug, take in the sights of Litchfield County, then dine in the inn's outstanding restaurant.

The Delamar, Greenwich, (203) 661-9800 or thedelamar.com. True luxury the Greenwich way, with big, well-appointed rooms overlooking the harbor, an excellent spa and fine dining in L'Escale. An outing up and down Greenwich Avenue should also be in the cards.

Water's Edge Resort & Spa, Westbrook, (800) 222-5901 or watersedge-resort.com. Lots of great views of Long Island Sound here, along with a first-class spa and an award-winning Sunday brunch.

Simsbury 1820 House, Simsbury, (860) 658-7658 or simsbury-1820house.com. An overnight in Simsbury can hit the spot here, with

an in-room spa service and dinner at the nearby Metro Bis.

The Inn at Stonington, Stonington, (860) 535-2000 or innatstonington.com. This may be the most romantic setting of all, with water all around and the utterly charming Stonington Borough right out the front door. The rooms here are cozy and comfortable, with several good restaurants within walking distance.

Breadloaf Mountain Lodge and Cottages, Cornwall, (860) 672-6064 or breadloafmountainlodge.com. Here's a more adventurous option, especially in mid-winter: country-yet-comfortable cottages along the Housatonic River, with skiing and restaurants nearby.

Mohegan Sun, Uncasville, (888) 777-7922 or mohegansun.com. Stay in the casino's 34-story hotel tower and you're just an elevator ride away from live music, a wide array of interesting restaurants and bars, and lots of gambling options.

Elias Child House B&B, Woodstock, (860) 974-9836 or eliaschildhouse.com. Peace and quiet on 47 acres in Connecticut's Quiet Corner, with a big breakfast and hiking or antiquing as a couple of the blissfully few activities.

taste and a friendly welcome set the tone for our stay. Our room was better yet, with its so-much-better-than-what-we've-got-at-home bed, good reading chairs, gas-fueled fireplace and balcony overlooking the inn's marina, and the river and Sound beyond.

It would have been tempting to make camp immediately and vow never to leave our room, but a few diversions beckoned. We first went out for a bracing stroll along the waterfront. The marina had a forlorn, off-season (but somehow still romantic) aspect—only a river tugboat and the Plum Island commuter ferry remained at their moorings, and a couple of bundled-up anglers stood patiently over their lines, as still as ice fishermen without the ice.

If we'd been slightly more ambitious, we could have driven two minutes over a causeway to Fenwick Island, the old summer resort whose big, ramshackle cottages have long housed Connecticut's well-heeled, including, most famously, the Hepburns of Hartford. A couple of minutes in another direction would have taken us to Old Saybrook's walkable downtown, with its gift shops, jewelers, antiques shops and other stops for browsing or buying. As in any Connecticut shoreline town, it can be fun just to stop in front of a real estate office and discuss the pros and cons of the water-view homes on display in the front window.

But it was our mission to return to the inn to begin taking advantage of some of its excellent features. First on the schedule was a hot-stone treatment at Saybrook Point's spa. With its heated pools, 11 treatment rooms, Swiss shower and full menu of treatments, the spa is a highly recommended, almost mandatory, part of a romantic overnight. For the somewhat more proactive, there's also a fully equipped health club, with exercise equipment, steam room, sauna and whirlpool.

Once properly relaxed, it was time to think about dinner. Old Saybrook offers a number of notable dining options. Nearby, there are Jack's Saybrook Steak, Alforno Trattoria and Liv's Oyster Bar, just to name a diverse few. But we only had to go downstairs to sample perhaps the best of all, the inn's own warmly welcoming Terra Mar Grill & Bar. The kitchen's affiliation with the Connecticut Grown and Farm to Chef programs assures an emphasis on the freshest of local ingredients, which we appreciated and enjoyed in our clam chowder and Stonington scallop arancini, served with yuca chips and a tomato-olive oil purée. We kept the seafood theme going with the Saybrook Point Inn cioppino—shrimp, scallops, mussels and calamari in a lobster, tomato and saffron broth—and Atlantic salmon pan-seared with asparagus risotto, Niçoise olive tapenade, tomato coulis and basil oil.

We lingered over dessert and coffee, contentedly chatting and taking in the lights

on the water beyond our tableside window. How easily romance flows in just the right setting.

—Charles Monagan

Saybrook Point Inn & Spa, (800) 243-0212 or saybrook.com.

The Study at Yale, New Haven

Since a romantic overnight is an affair of the heart, what is more appropriate than staying in the heart of a city? And what better city than New Haven, bustling with romantic opportunities—fine dining and theater, scenic spots and shopping—on seemingly every street corner? Of course, for some of us a simple night away from the kids can be romantic on its own, but it's nice to have all the other activities to choose from too.

New Haven has a number of places to stay, but as the city is synonymous with Yale and all its bookish charms, The Study at Yale makes an ideal centerpiece for a visit. Formerly the uninspiring Colony Inn, the hotel has undergone a startling \$7 million transformation—including the addition of two floors, an upscale restaurant, a private penthouse and lots of expansive windows—all under the guiding hand of Paul McGowan, who has launched more than a dozen of the renowned W Hotels. Styled on the popular luxury boutique model, The Study incorporates a distinct Yale feel while also

being sleek and savvy with quality amenities (feather beds and leather reading chairs, WiFi and marble baths). Spectacular views of the historic inner campus to the north await through big windows, while Chapel Street and more of cosmopolitan New Haven lie to the south.

Heirloom is The Study's 80-seat restaurant, a chic open space with an emphasis on contemporary American cuisine. How about a bowl of New England oyster chowder to start—it is a romantic overnight, right? Roasted Amish chicken with root vegetables and herb gnocchi, shrimp ravioli, monkfish bouillabaisse accompanied by mushroom risotto, Berkshire pork chop with apple chutney and potato roesti . . . entrées are not lacking imagination or taste.

Between Heirloom, the luxe accommodations, extraordinary service and glorious privacy, you may not want to leave the hotel, especially when you can also get champagne and chocolate-dipped strawberries delivered to your room! But if you do venture out, you are right in the middle of everything you could want for a romantic evening.

One of the hallmarks of New Haven is its great variety of eateries. Indulge in fine French at the Union League Café, enjoy Latin flair at Ibiza, Barcelona Wine Bar or Pacifico, go American at Zinc or Hot Tomato's, experiment with Asian at Bentara or Kudeta or try

vegetarian hip at Claire's Corner Copia.

Entertainment possibilities for the evening also abound. From Feb. 6 to 28, Yale Repertory Theatre—across the street from The Study—presents Octavio Solis' dramatic tragedy *Lydia*. Across town at Long Wharf Theatre, Theresa Redbeck's *Bad Dates* runs from Feb. 18 to March 22—maybe a bit more apropos for a romantic night out. Yale Opera performs *Die Zauberflöte* at The Shubert from Feb. 13 to 15, while for the more booze-and-broads type of romantics, *The Rat Pack is Back* lounges the joint up from Feb. 27 through March 1.

Or you may just want to stroll along the picturesque green and busy streets, enjoying the shops, museums, classic architecture and the company of a special someone. It's your night. In the heart of New Haven, the romantic possibilities are many.

—Ray Bendici
The Study at Yale, (866) 930-1157 or study-hotels.com.

Rock Hall, Colebrook

As we entered the grand 13-foot-high living room, the tune wafting through the sound system was "Unforgettable," sung by the incomparable Nat King Cole. Whether planned by our host or serendipitous, that pretty much summed up our experience at the aptly named Rock Hall, whose first-floor exterior walls, five chimneys, entrance

A Fine Romance

gates and encircling walls are a showcase of Connecticut rock. Designed in 1911 by Addison Mizner, known for his eclectic blend of architectural styles in homes for the rich and famous of Boca Raton and Palm Beach, Fla., the 10,000-square-foot Mediterranean-Moorish manse is one of only two in New England attributed to the eccentric architect (popularized by Sondheim's *Road Show*). Fortunately for us, it has been lovingly restored by current owners Michael and Stella Somers, and opened as a luxury bed-and-breakfast just last fall.

Michael gave us a tour, then left us to make ourselves at home, which we did, eyeing the baronial dining room, library, game room, sun room and "servants' dining room" (there were 24 back when) before settling into one of several seating areas in the elegantly paneled living room to enjoy a complimentary drink in style (wine in Orrefors stemware, chocolate martinis in handmade martini glasses, Manhattans in Lalique tumblers) by the fire. And a roaring one it was, filling a massive fireplace that would have fit nicely in a European castle.

Then we had our choice—would it be billiards in the billiards room, Ping-Pong, foosball or pinball in the game room, a movie in the home theater (February's theme is, of course, love) or just retiring to Chamber No. 2? While all sounded enticing, having driven a distance to get to this mountaintop retreat in rural Colebrook (population 1,500), we opted for Chamber No. 2. Likewise grand in size (20-by-21, with 9-by-14 bath) and eclectic in appointments (four-poster Moorish bed with European linens, Empire night stands, antique crystal sconces), it too had a working fireplace, and we soon had a fire going there as well. Then there was nothing to do but curl up in the soft down bed with a good book from the hand-carved antique bookcase (*The Prize* seemed apropos, as we felt we'd won it, also *A Year in Provence*, as we felt worlds away from civilization), turn on the TV or just . . .

The next morning, we were treated to a gourmet Mediterranean breakfast prepared by our genial host (his own house-cured gravlax and delicious zucchini-Parmesan frittata, Stella's homemade blueberry preserves), then were invited to snowshoe through the 23-acre property or opt for a couple's massage from Star Soleil (on-site or in Winsted or Torrington). We opted instead to explore the area, starting with lunch at the West Street Grill in Litchfield—splendid burgers, *brandade de morue* (Provençal comfort food), homey bread-and-butter pudding—stopping to see the splendidly restored Warner Theatre in Torrington (*Long Day's Journey into Night*

runs Feb. 7-15, *Smokey Joe's Café* Feb. 21-28) and ending with a casual dinner (homemade potpie and great drinks) and movie at Gilson Theater in Winsted. After that, it was back for night No. 2 in Chamber No. 2. Ah, bliss.

With Norfolk just three miles up the road, we're already planning another unforgettable getaway during the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, June 20-Aug. 23, when the splendid Olmsted-landscaped grounds will be in full flower—day lilies, mountain laurel, rhododendrons—and we can swim in the 75-foot pool, play tennis on the synthetic-grass court, and picnic in the tennis gazebo, orchard or wildflower meadow.

—Dale B. Salm
Rock Hall, (860) 379-2230 or 19rockhall-road.com.

MGM Grand at Foxwoods, Mashantucket

It's that time of the year—the busy (and often stressful) holiday season is over and you're due for some serious relaxation and entertainment. Now's the perfect time to sneak away with your Valentine for a romantic getaway. Where to go? Somewhere away from home, but not too far, that offers everything you could ever want under one roof: the brand-new MGM Grand at Foxwoods.

Open since May 2008, the MGM Grand is, just as the name implies, a grand experience. You'll feel right at home in any of the splendid

rooms, from well-appointed Deluxe rooms to luxurious Producer and Director suites. We would spring for the Director—after all, how often do you get away, just the two of you? It's worth it. These spacious suites feature panoramic window walls, a bedroom complete with a king-size feather bed, an enormous walk-in closet, a private sitting area and a master bath featuring a five-fixture bath and Jacuzzi with a view of the forest.

Now that you're situated, head down to G-Spa, a 21,000-square-foot oasis of serenity featuring a full range of hair, nail, massage, facial and body treatments. Pamper yourselves with rejuvenating body treatments, soothing facials or, even better, the "Double Your Pleasure" couple's massage. The spa also allows access to the fitness center, sauna, steam room, hot tub and indoor lap pool. (There's also a 5,500-square-foot, fan-shaped outdoor pool, complete with eight cabanas with flat-screen TVs and minibars—that alone is worth a return trip next summer.)

If that wasn't enough, there are fine shops where you can pick out the perfect Valentine's Day gifts for each other. MacAppeal offers the latest Apple products and accessories, Bally carries the best in men's and women's shoes and leather goods and Dunhill boasts clothing, leather goods, jewelry and fine gifts.

We can't deny the obvious draw of the MGM Grand: gaming. With 1,400 slot ma-

chines and 60 tables, you two can try your luck at blackjack or roulette to your heart's content. When you're done, take your winnings and indulge in a great meal at one of the three on-site fine-dining restaurants: Alta Strada, which serves delicious Italian cuisine; celebrity chef Tom Colicchio's Craftsteak, where you can feast on the perfect cut of steak; or Shrine, offering small and large plates of modern Asian cuisine, as well as tempting sushi.

After dinner, stick around Shrine, which doubles as an after-hours hotspot featuring bottle-service, a DJ booth, stage and multiple bars, and often hosts celebrity guests. You can also find a commanding spot at Center Bar, located right in the heart of the casino action and featuring specialty drinks and signature cocktails.

If there's a show happening during your visit, so much the better. The impressive 4,000-seat MGM Grand Theater showcases comedians, concerts, sporting events and off-Broadway shows. This month, you might want to check out soulful singer John Legend on Feb. 6, comedian Frank Caliendo on Feb. 13, or rocker Kid Rock on Feb. 14 or 15.

At the MGM Grand, you're in for a relaxing day, an exciting night and a wonderful getaway spent with the one you love. —Lauren Brancato

MGM Grand, (866) 646-0050 or mgmgrand-atfoxwoods.com.

A Fine Romance

Whaler's Inn, Mystic

Mystic's aura of romance is enhanced by its famously informal nature. Indeed, it's not really a town on its own; it's a community cobbled together from picturesque chunks of Groton and Stonington. To our minds, Mystic's rakish charms differ from the elegant coherence of, say, Litchfield or Greenwich, or even certain other towns on the Connecticut shoreline.

Which is why, given a couple of days of freedom there's no place in Connecticut we'd

rather sail away to. We think it has something to do with the endearing details: downtown Mystic's historic bascule drawbridge, quaint stores like Whyevernot and Company of Craftsmen, the endless allure of the Mystic River and the overwhelming sense, no matter where you go, that you've just stepped into the pages of a Victorian novel.

No hostelry in "town" seems to better reflect the irresistible crazy quiltiness of its environs better than the 49-room Whaler's Inn, an establishment with a checkered past all its own. A mashup of five different structures that includes the 1865 House (formerly a private homestead) and what was once the Hotel Mystic—now the main inn building—its most

lore-rich piece is inarguably Hoxie House.

Originally built in 1819 and allegedly quite luxe for a "public house" of the era (complete with barn, stables, ice house and shops), Hoxie—then called the Mystic Bridge Hotel—burned down in 1858, only to be resurrected by local entrepreneur Benjamin Franklin Hoxie. Possessed by the drive to turn his inn into the centerpiece of a bustling summer resort community, he spent \$6,000 on furnishings alone. Little did he know that for the next half-decade the area would be more invested in the cause of the Union Army than tourism; even when peace returned, his brainchild never became the booming business he'd hoped. Still, it remained a downtown fixture till consumed by flame once more, in 1975.

The current proprietors of Whaler's Inn (who came aboard in 1991) rebuilt Hoxie House in 2002, and it currently houses the inn's eight luxury rooms, all appointed with whirlpool tubs, fireplaces and river views. But our preferred choice for an overnight stay for two is the Morgan Suite on the first floor of the 1865 House, the Whaler's largest accommodation and an homage to Mystic Seaport's whaling ship the *Charles W. Morgan*. Decorated in rich red Waverly florals, blessed with extra-high ceilings and overhead track lighting, it features a spacious living area as well as a queen-size bed and full bathroom, all unified with nautical artwork (including rope stenciling on the moldings and images of the *Titanic* and the seaport's steam-engined *Sabino*).

From here, you don't have to muster much energy to avail yourself of downtown's best dining: Acclaimed Italian/seafood restaurant Bravo Bravo is but a few steps away, in the inn's main building (we heartily recommend the superb champagne risotto with lobster and asparagus). This can be a boisterous environment, perhaps too much so for those seeking a cozy dinner for two—so to them, we also recommend the New England cuisine of the Daniel Packer Inne, built in 1756 and still graced with its original fireplaces and hardwood floors. Dinner at either is a feature of Whaler's one-night Special Occasion package, which also includes flowers and a bottle of wine. (Be sure to inquire, too, about February's "Sweetheart Special.")

You can keep yourself mightily entertained by simply strolling the downtown streets (or making the short drive to Mystic Seaport, Mystic Aquarium and Olde Mistick Village). Should the weather outside be frightful, don't despair. Treat yourself to an in-room massage, or a session at the inn's brand-new fitness center (just opened last October). Or just hang out in the lounge and watch the world waft by.

—Patricia Grandjean

Whaler's Inn, (800) 243-2588 or whalersinn-mystic.com.