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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Walk the scenes of 'The Gilded Age' in Newport's preserved mansions

See the cliffs, tour the grounds and survey the tennis courts of Rhode Island's opulent gems.

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Several scenes from HBO's "The Gilded Age" were filmed in Newport, Rhode Island, a summer getaway for the richest of late 19th-century society. (Karolina Wojtasik/HBO)

By Madeline Weinfield

Visiting Newport, Rhode Island, can feel like stepping onto a film set because many scenes from HBO's hit show "[The Gilded Age](#)" were filmed in the town's gigantic 19th-century mansions. Even beyond the shiny veneer of a TV, Newport is remarkably well preserved, a living monument to an era of extreme opulence and ambition.

The town swung into social significance in the late 19th century, when America's wealthiest industrial families built extravagant summer homes — which they dubbed “cottages” — by the sea. Families including the Vanderbilts and Astors transformed the town's landscape, commissioning architects such as Richard Morris Hunt and Stanford White to design sweeping, European-inspired estates replete with marble and crystal.

Though the Gilded Age was relatively brief, its legacy endures through architecture in the town of Newport.

Guided experiences, such as those from [Newport Jaguar Tours](#) (\$406 for two on a three-hour tour) and the Preservation Society of Newport County's “[Inside the Gilded Age Tour](#),” (\$250 per nonmember for a nearly four-hour tour; \$200 for members) allow fans to explore the show's filming locations, but visitors can also stroll the Cliff Walk and tour the mansions on their own. Here's where to go, what to see and where to stay when you want to go a little deeper into the intriguing and decidedly gilded world of the Russells and the Van Rhijns.



The Breakers often gets top billing among the stately manses of Newport. (Gavin Ashworth/Preservation Society of Newport County)



The Rosecliff was styled after the Grand Trianon of Versailles. (Corey Favino)

Tour the mansions

These enormous, extravagantly built and decorated homes are as large as they are impractical—and they're basically required viewing. Many of these mansions sit within walking distance (or a short drive) from one another on Bellevue Avenue and the surrounding streets, so you can wander down the water-facing street and stop at one wedding-cake-like estate after another. The majority of Newport's mansions are managed and maintained by the Preservation Society of Newport County and are \$25 per person to visit. Fans of "The Gilded Age" will recognize various rooms and vistas at [the Breakers](#), [the Elms](#), [Rosecliff](#), [Marble House](#) and [Chateau-sur-Mer](#), all of which were used in the show.

[The Breakers](#): Undoubtedly the grandest of the Newport mansions (and the town's most visited), the Breakers was built for Cornelius Vanderbilt II by Hunt. Styled after an Italian palazzo, the 70-room enormity was outfitted with electricity (still a novelty when the home was completed in 1895), 27 fireplaces, a hall with a 50-foot ceiling, mosaics hand-set by artisans brought over from Europe, and numerous Baccarat crystal pieces. The Breakers commands a higher ticket price at \$32 per person, or for a \$57 ticket that also allows access to two other mansions. Fans of the HBO show may recognize the mansion's space that stood in for George Russell's billiard room in New York.

[The Elms](#): Completed in 1901 for Edward Julius Berwind, a coal magnate, the Elms offers one of the most compelling tours in Newport, the belowstairs [Servant Life Tour](#). The guided tour (roughly 75 minutes, \$25) is a deep dive into the round-the-clock labor that kept these mansions and their occupants' busy social calendars functioning. The Elms's sprawling kitchens were used as the set of the Russells' kitchen in the HBO show.

[Rosecliff](#): Built in 1902 for Theresa Fair Oelrichs — a silver heiress and Gilded Age society hostess who threw legendary parties including with magician Harry Houdini as the guest of honor — the brick and white terra-cotta-tile-clad mansion was designed by White, one of the era's well-known architects. It was styled after the Grand Trianon of Versailles. The 1974 film version of "The Great Gatsby" was filmed here.

Other mansions: Don't limit yourself to just scene-touring. The [Isaac Bell House](#) is a relatively modest home compared to its marble neighbors. However, the 1883 home is one of the country's best surviving examples of shingle-style architecture. [Rough Point](#), built in 1892 for Frederick William Vanderbilt, is best known as one of the residences of Doris Duke and is preserved as if the tobacco heiress just stepped out for a swim in the ocean.

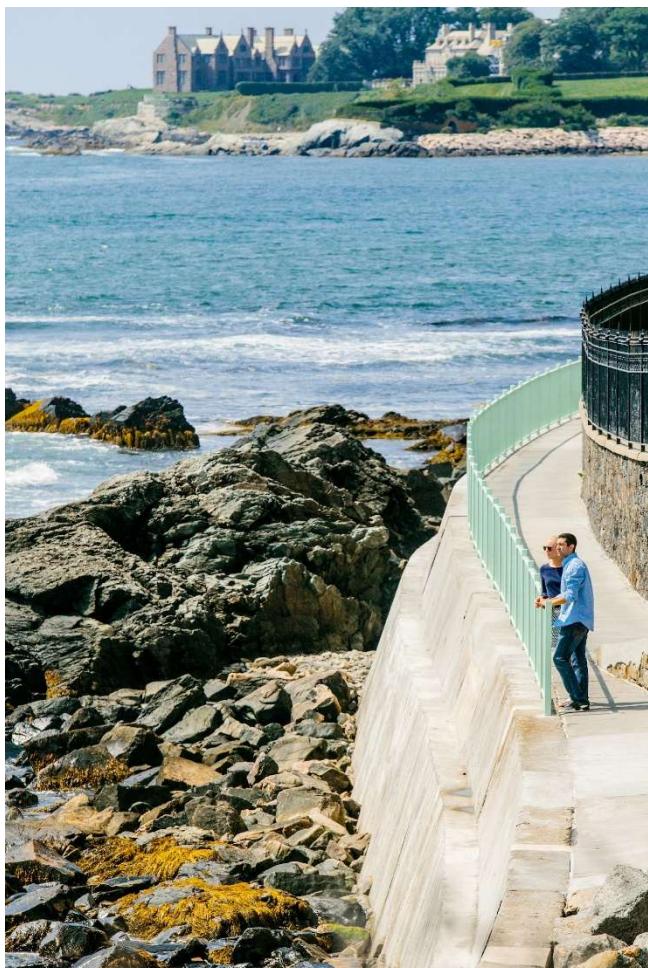


The formal dining room at the Elms. (Gavin Ashworth/Preservation Society of Newport County)

Take in the art

Founded in 1912, the Newport Art Museum holds a collection of over 3,000 works, with a hearty 19th-century collection. For the \$15 entry fee, you can check out a retrospective of the work of a Gilded Age painter and longtime Newport resident whose family's summer "cottage," the Ledges, is not far away. "[Howard Gardiner Cushing: A Harmony of Line and Color](#)," on display through the end of the year, features many of the artist's works that have not been exhibited in over 50 years or have been in private collections.

Cushing's legacy in Newport remains strong, and last year the artist's great-grandson Howard Cushing opened a new waterfront hotel in town, [Gardiner House](#). Constructed on what was a parking lot, Cushing's 21-room boutique hotel draws its inspiration from the Ledges, which remains in the family as a private home.



Walk the cliff

Newport's stunning Cliff Walk is a 3½ mile public path that winds its way between the Atlantic Ocean and the town's Gilded Age mansions. Fans of "The Gilded Age" will recognize the walk as the location of one of Peggy and Dr. Kirkland's tête-à-tête. A stone staircase leading from the cliffs down to the ocean, known as the 40 Steps, was a popular Gilded Age gathering spot for servants working in the oceanfront mansions.

Today the Cliff Walk is an entirely free way to experience Newport's dramatic coast and admire the architectural grandeur of the ocean-facing mansions.

About a mile away, at the [Newport International Tennis Hall of Fame](#), visitors can check out the grass courts from Season 2 of the HBO show.

Where to stay

A few of Newport's mansions have been turned into hotels, allowing guests the opportunity

to sleep within the town's gilded past. [Castle Hill Inn](#), the onetime home of Alexander Agassiz, who made a fortune in copper mining, is now one of Newport's most sought-after hotels. Located about a 20-minute drive from some Bellevue Avenue mansions, the inn is on a sweeping parcel of 40 acres overlooking the sea.



The sprawling lawn, dotted with Adirondack chairs, is something of an institution in the town, open for drinks to guests and non-guests alike. Overnight guests will find wood-paneled interiors and antiquities Agassiz collected on his scientific explorations in Asia. A short walk to Newport's downtown is [the Chanler at Cliff Walk](#). Built in 1873, the home was originally the summer estate of Rep. John Winthrop Chanler (D-New York) and was among the first of the summer cottages to be built atop Newport's cliffs. Today Chanler's home is a 20-room boutique hotel with a distinctly Gilded Age aesthetic.

