

Mystic Connecticut Historic Walking Tour

by: Nathan Jones

Introduction

Hi. Welcome to iziTRAVEL's Historic Mystic, Connecticut Walking Tour, presented by ListenUp Audio. We're so glad you'll be joining us today! I'm _____ and I'll be your guide. A few notes before we get started. This tour takes approximately an hour and a half to complete. You can stop at any time and start again at the same spot later. If you'd like, you can put your phone in your pocket and just listen from here. I'll be giving you clear directions and the audio will automatically start playing when you get close to the next point of interest. If a site is closed or your path is blocked, don't worry. Just go around it. The tour will pick up at the next location. And this is important: PLEASE make sure you stay aware of your surroundings at *all* times and obey *all* traffic signals.

(pause)

Welcome to Mystic, Connecticut! As one of New England's most charming enclaves, this coastal community has a rich history in the state, one that extends as far back as the early 17th century. Comprised of the twin towns of Stonington and Groton, it has grown considerably since then, deeply rooted in the maritime industry native to New England. On our tour through its winding streets, we'll visit some of its most historical landmarks, exploring the town's earliest history and local treasures.

Whenever you're ready to begin, please make your way to the corner of Steamboat Wharf and Water Street. Our tour begins at the front entrance to the Mystic Museum of Art.

Mystic Museum of Art

We begin our tour with a visit to the Mystic Museum of Art. Established in the early 1900s, the museum originally began under the leadership of one of America's most recognized impressionistic painters. Having come to Mystic with his colleagues to paint the breathtaking landscape, artist Charles Harold Davis had a vision for something greater. Gathering the support of community members, he set about establishing an artist colony within the city, nurturing the colony until it officially became Mystic's very own Art Association. Things took off quickly for the Mystic Art Association, and they soon established the city's first, permanent art gallery. Dubbed the Water Street Gallery, Mystic officially began its long, cultural history with a piece from Davis's own collection.

This cultural history extends well into today, and the museum has since evolved completely. Featuring an ever-growing collection of exhibits, the museum has quickly become Mystic's premiere destination for cultural appreciation. Its annual *Juried* exhibition celebrates works in all media, from painting, to photography, and even sculpture and graphic arts. Likewise, its *Schuster Gallery* consists of 250 pieces from local artists and artists from around the country, many of which belong to the Museum's Elected Artist organization. Adding to this, the museum has long hosted special events, the bulk of which allow its visitors and attendees to partake in their own creative explorations. Great food and fine art mix to create the perfect combination, with seasonal fundraisers helping to give back to the community. Celebrating over 100 years of artistic appreciation, the museum marks the perfect start to our tour of this beautiful city.

Make your way up Water St. to where it meets W Main St. Turn left and cross over W. Main St. The pizzeria located here is our next destination.

Mystic Pizza

Having mentioned great food earlier, it only makes sense to stop at one of Mystic's most recognizable restaurants. Featured in the 1988 movie of the same name, Mystic Pizza has a long history in the coastal city, one that began with the restaurant's opening in the early 1970s. Established by the Zelepos family, the pizzeria's reputation has grown exponentially since being featured in the film, offering all its patrons a "slice of heaven" with each and every visit. Prices are always affordable, and the menu often includes salads and deli sandwiches to go along with the classic cheese and pepperoni.

Likewise, it comes as no surprise that visitors often find themselves lining up to purchase restaurant memorabilia. T-shirts identical to the one worn by the movie's main actress often fly off the shelves, while the restaurant's signature pies seem to disappear just as quickly. Despite fame and fortune however, the Zepplos family has never forgotten that their success lies first and foremost in their dedication to good pizza. Always guarded of the "secret family recipe," the family continues to beckon new patrons to the pizzeria each year.

Leaving Mystic Pizza, continue down W. Main Street towards the river. You'll soon come to a large, mechanical drawbridge, marking our next destination.

Mystic River: Bascule Bridge

Leaving one of Mystic's most recognizable restaurants, we now find ourselves at its most recognizable bridge. Built in the early 1920s, Mystic's Bascule Bridge has become something of a beacon to the city, doing its part to transport visitors and residents for nearly 100 years. Designed by one of New York's leading consulting engineers, the bridge is truly an architectural marvel. It spans an impressive 223 feet across the water, with its bascule span reaching an even more impressive 85 feet.

Often described as Mystic's "most fun bridge to watch," the bridge is also somewhat of an oddity when it comes to other expanses like it. Whereas others usually conceal their inner workings, the large, mechanical parts of Mystic's bridge lay right out in the open. Watching it rise and fall above the river, visitors can plainly see the bridge's electric motors, each serving to drive the large "bull wheels" into action. These connect with linkage arms, which then connect to two plate girders, and the process serves to drive the bridge's lift. Counterbalanced by huge, concrete weights on each end of the overhead trusses, the bridge performs its daily tasks with relative ease. Though this process is certainly fascinating from a mechanical point of view, it's all the more fascinating in that the display makes the bridge look more "alive." As one of Mystic's oldest architectural wonders, the Bascule Bridge easily earns its spot amongst the city's favorite, historical attractions.

Leaving Bascule Bridge, turn right onto Cottrell St. Walk a little ways down, and the open park by the water marks our next destination.

Mystic River Park

Having crossed the Mystic River with relative ease, we take a moment to relax in nearby Mystic River Park. Quaint in scope and presentation, the park serves as a rest area of sorts, offering scenic views of the Mystic River and a great place to have a picnic. Likewise, those fond of fishing can easily make rake in a few hours at the park, as the nearby boardwalk provides ample room to sit and cast a line.

Just as well, nearby boutiques offer a healthy assortment of snacks and souvenir shopping. On a bright summer day, it's not too uncommon to find the streets around Mystic Park lined with tourists, and the water below is usually teeming with small vessels making their way down the Mystic. Like any good park however, rest and relaxation aren't the only things to be found at Mystic River Park. Its small grounds often play host to annual, summer concerts, and several events usually find their way onto the green as they pass down Cottrell Street. Though the park remains one of Mystic's smaller attractions, the list of things to do is always growing.

Leaving Mystic River Park, walk back up the right side of Cottrell St. Cross E Main Street to where Cottrell St. becomes Holmes St. Continue up Holmes St. towards Bay St. Turn left onto Bay St, and continue to the corner of Bay St. and Isham St. Cross Isham St., then continue past the shipyard and docks. Take the bend as it curves left. The building marked Thomas Oyster House is our next destination.

Thomas Oyster House

Making our way up the river pathway, we stop at another of Mystic's historical buildings. Named after its founder Thomas Thomas of New Haven, Connecticut, the Thomas Oyster House has a rich history throughout the state. As one of the few remaining buildings able to be classified as a small, northern oyster house, it was constructed during a time when New Haven served as the oyster capital of New England. Built in the early 1870s, it originally served as a culling shop, a place where oysters were first sorted by size and then shipped within their shells. These oysters were then distributed by the barrel to places like New York and as far away as California.

In the years following Thomas's death, the business was then converted by his son into a shucking house. Under this new direction, oysters were opened upon delivery to the house, then packed in ice and re-delivered to their predetermined destinations around the nation. Though Thomas's son retired in the 1950s and the business along with him, the Oyster house has found a new home here in Mystic. Transported by barge in the early 1970s, it remains a permanent exhibit as part of the Mystic Seaport Museum.

Leaving the Thomas Oyster House, continue along the riverside pathway. Take a left beyond the Mystic River Scale Model. Your next destination is here at the Mystic Seaport Museum.

Mystic Seaport

As the nation's largest maritime museum, the history surrounding Mystic Seaport is truly magnificent. Built in the late 1920s, it was originally constructed to "gather and preserve the artifacts of America's seafaring past." As these artifacts were undergoing rapid decline, community members around Mystic realized something had to be done. Under their direction, the museum has since grown to become a national research and education center of the American maritime experience. Covering 19 acres along the Mystic River, the museum plays hosts to a staggering 500 historic watercraft, a few of which include National Historic Landmark vessels.

Just as well, Mystic Seaport includes a wide variety of exhibits and restorations. Its historic village is a walk through time, transporting visitors back to the 18th century. Here they learn what it was like to earn a living from the sea, told in rich detail from the

village's many historians, musicians, craftsmen, and storytellers. Likewise, the museum's working shipyard allows visitors to watch shipbuilding in action. Shipwrights keep the skills and techniques alive through vivid demonstration, offering a front-row seat to the continued restoration of storied collection. Employing a diverse staff of historians, scholars, scientists, and more, Mystic Seaport is an experience like no other, one we'll explore in much greater detail as we move through our tour.

Within the compound of the Mystic Seaport Museum, look to your right for signs pointing towards the Plymouth Cordage Company Ropewalk. This is your next destination.

Plymouth Cordage Company Ropewalk

Adding to Mystic Seaport's historical collection, we come now to a 250-foot span of the Plymouth Cordage Company Ropewalk. Built in the early 1820s, the ropewalk was owned and operated for well over 100 years. As the years came and went, modernization was brought with them, leaving the ropewalk all but useless. Fate intervened however, and the ropewalk now remains as part of the Mystic Seaport Museum. Spanning the length of the building, it offers a detailed glimpse into America's ship-building industry, starting first and foremost with a look at the nation's leading rope and twine maker during the 19th century.

The ropewalk then takes visitors step by step through the rope-making process, detailing its three, main steps. Illustrated alongside the proper equipment, visitors watch as the rope's natural fibers are first spun into yarn. The yarns are then twisted to form a strand, and the final step shows three strands twisted together in the opposite direction to form a rope. Offering further history into the importance of rope and its relation to the shipbuilding industry, the ropewalk marks one of Mystic's more educational experiences.

Leaving the ropewalk, continue along the river pathway. The Burrows House just up the path is our next destination.

Burrows House

Offering a further glimpse into 19th century lifestyles, we arrive at the Burrows House. Though the exact date of its construction remains unknown, it sits nearly within Mystic Seaport's historical village, providing an interesting look at life during the early 1800s. Having originally been situated on the opposite side of the river, the house has a unique history all its own. Once set for demolition during the early 1950s, the property had originally been slated to be replaced by a bank. As luck would have it, the house was thankfully saved by the Mystic Seaport Museum, thereby transported to its current position along the riverbank.

Looking closer, it's easy to see why the museum took such great care to preserve the property. The house calls back to the days when Mystic was a quaint, coastal community, one where civic, church, and social activities comprised the community as a whole. Mr. and Mrs. Burrows' house is restored in loving detail, and if you listen closely enough, you can actually hear the faint rumble of horses and wagons along the small, coastal road.

Likewise, Mrs. Burrows' garden out back is easily one of the property's most beautiful amenities. Showcasing a history all its own, it acts as an extravagant representation of America's shifting gardening practices, one that saw large crop fields replaced by small vegetable and flower gardens. Among the flowers represented, Sweet Autumn Clematis and Evening Primrose top the lists of many floral enthusiasts, while Love-in-a-Mist makes for an equally beautiful display. As one of Mystic's most faithfully restored homes, the Burrows House continues to remain a local treasure.

Leaving the Burrows House, continue along the river pathway. You should see a large dock, and an even larger ship on your left. This large, whaling ship marks our next destination.

Charles W. Morgan Whaling Ship

Keeping with the spirit of the maritime museum, it only makes sense that we visit its crown jewel. Known as the last whaling ship of its kind still afloat, the Charles W. Morgan was built and launched in the early 1840s. Launched out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, she typically took the high seas with a crew of 35, the bulk of which were comprised of sailors from around the globe. Measuring 106 ft. long with 7,134 square feet of sail, the ship embarked on no less than 37 voyages, with a career spanning some 80 years. In truth, many of these voyages were extreme ordeals, often said to last as long as a few years at a time.

As formidable as she is beautiful, the Charles W. Morgan is also said to be a "lucky ship." Tales tell of the vessel crushing through Arctic ice, while further stories tell of her run-ins with hostile natives, countless storms, and even the Great New England Hurricane of 1938. Though the ship's whaling days have long since ended, officially ceasing in the early 1920s, it was designated a National Historic Landmark in the late 1960s. Comfortably resting in the waters of the Mystic River, she's attracted some 20 million visitors in the years since. Though her legacy began as a ship bound to hunt whales for profit, it continues now as one of the most important pieces of American maritime history. We'll look at another important piece in just a moment, located directly across the way at the Whaleboat Exhibit.

From the Charles W. Morgan, you should see signs pointing towards its adjacent Whaleboat Exhibit. This marks our next destination.

Whaleboat Exhibit

Sitting adjacent to the Charles W. Morgan, we take a moment to explore Mystic Seaport's Whaleboat Exhibit. Constructed in the early 1980s, the exhibit houses a fully equipped whaleboat, one very similar to those once employed by the Charles W. Morgan. Containing the gear likely carried by such vessels, it acts as a life-sized display of the business practices once used by 18th and 19th century whalers.

In truth, the exhibit also paints an ironic picture. Though these boats and their parent vessels are often considered beautiful, their original purposes were anything but. The whaling industry was a brutal one, and the large, iron harpoons attached to the oars certainly convey this image. As this boat was usually one of five or so other boats like it aboard a vessel, they were typically deployed in teams. Each boat usually consisted of an officer and five crewmen, and using the whale lines tied to the oars, the men would systematically work to harpoon, tire, and ultimately kill the whale before it could escape below depths. As this process is fully demonstrated at the exhibit, history, whaling, and boating enthusiasts are encouraged to sit in at their earliest convenience.

Leaving the Whaleboat exhibit, continue back across the pathway towards the Buckingham-Hall House.

Buckingham-Hall House

Nestled just across the way from the Whaleboat Exhibit, we come to another of Mystic's historic properties. Known as the Buckingham-Hall House, this coastal farmhouse also shares a rich legacy with the state of Connecticut. Once filled to the brim with hard work and business transactions, it was more famously the home of American businessman William Hall Sr. Having made his fortune as a New York import merchant, Hall had commissioned the home to be built in Saybrook, Connecticut. At the time, his business relied on the only ferry there, one that crossed at the mouth of the Connecticut River.

In the years to come, the area around the home saw countless examples of 19th century life. Farmers moved their products up and down the adjacent streets, and traders stopped by the home on their way down the river. Though access to the river made New York goods a possibility, a number of the items traded were home grown, freshly tended in the home's resident garden. Like the Burrows House before it, the Buckingham-Hall property shares a commonality with regards to the Mystic Seaport organization. It too had been scheduled for demolition, but fate intervened once again, and the home was saved by the maritime museum. With major renovations

having been completed in the mid-1990s, the home remains open to a variety of demonstrations and tours. Visitors can watch as foods are cooked live on the open hearth, or even take part in 19th century dress and quilt-making classes. As another of Mystic's more charming destinations, the Buckingham-Hall House is one not to be missed.

Leaving the Buckingham-Hall House, turn right back onto the riverside path. Take the first left onto Greenmanville Ave. Continue along Greenmanville Avenue. The large cemetery here on your left marks our next destination.

Elm Grove Cemetery

Moving away from the history surrounding Mystic Seaport, we explore the richer history of Mystic as a whole. Here at Elm Grove Cemetery, we're given a glimpse into the city's past, one that includes the who's who of Mystic society from the past 150+ years. Adding to the intrigue, history shows that cemeteries were once social hotspots, with many residents (including those of Mystic) spending hours of leisure time strolling through the trees and sepulchers. Looking around, it's not too difficult to imagine in a sense, as the cemetery and others like it are filled with Victorian influence. Egyptian, Greek, and Gothic architecture can be seen in all directions, and the cemetery's rolling hills, brooks, and rows of trees showcase ornate gravestones.

Indeed, the days of cemeteries being littered with skulls and crossbones have long since passed. In truth, the relative beauty of Elm Grove Cemetery highlights a much larger movement, one that saw the original "deathly" symbolism of cemeteries emblazoned with a sense of prosperity. The Victorian era was one of rebirth and romanticism, and Elm Grove provided a means by which to display these new ideals. Beginning with its establishment in the early 1850s, Mystic residents were soon able to showcase their Victorian interpretations of death with elaborate and expensive burial plots. Today, the cemetery features a host of ornate gravestones, mausoleums, and monuments on display. Visitors often comment on the prominent display of a Victorian woman in flowing robes, images of winged children can be seen throughout as well. As peaceful as it is unsettling, the cemetery remains a favorite destination for architectural and paranormal enthusiasts to this day.

Leaving Elm Grove Cemetery, continue up Greenmanville Ave. to the corner of Greenmanville and Coogan Blvd. Take a right onto Coogan Blvd. Take a left onto Queen's Chapel Rd. Cross Queen's Chapel Rd into Olde Mistick Village. This village marks your next destination.

Olde Mistick Village

Having dabbled a bit in the history of old Mystic, it only makes sense go back just a bit further. Exploring the streets and pathways of Olde Mistick Village, we're instantly given a sense of something more primitive, a land untouched by modernization and industry. In truth, the village itself was a pet project of Joyce and Jerry Olson, two siblings who fell in love with the coastal community. Spanning 40 years of construction, the village is a lot of things to many people. To some, it's a one-of-a-kind shopping experience. To others, it's a perpetual art festival, one that celebrates a more pagan past. To others still, the village is something far simpler: a recreation of 1720s Mystic.

Whatever the interpretation, one thing remains clear: the village was a *massive* undertaking. Built from the ground up from nothing more than a dusty patch of land, it was supplemented with buildings, foliage, and amenities native to 18th century New England. Its owners have long since held a deep appreciation for intricacy, and Mr. Olson has been quoted as saying that their vision was "intentional to the last detail." With more than 60 unique shops to choose from, along with a variety of musicians and artists frequenting the grounds each year, Olde Mistick Village often serves as the premiere New England stop for travelers on their way to and from Canada. Visible from the highway, it's not too uncommon for the village to see surprise guests. Free weddings are performed by the Village's resident minister, and local food festivals are never too far away. Just a hop, skip, and a jump from Mystic Aquarium and the Mystic Seaport Museum, it remains a local favorite year-round.

Leaving Olde Mistick Village, continue down Olde Mistick Rd towards the Mystic Aquarium. The aquarium marks our final destination.

Mystic Aquarium

Finalizing our tour of Mystic, Connecticut, we come to the Mystic Aquarium. Founded in 1973 as a "living laboratory and public exhibit," the aquarium continues to highlight some of the world's most intriguing, aquatic species. Various types of penguins, seals, and even Beluga whales inhabit the aquarium, and the facility plays host to some of the world's most interesting fish and invertebrates as well. Popular Exhibits include the aquarium's *FROGS* Exhibit, which provides insight into all the unique features of nature's leapers. Likewise, visitors often take time to explore the aquarium's 4D Theater. Here they can join Scrat the squirrel from the DreamWorks film *Ice Age*, laughing along as Scrat tries desperately to catch his beloved nut in a time-traveling adventure.

Even still, the aquarium offers a host of fun activities for children of all ages. Teacher and School groups often visit what the aquarium calls its “living classroom,” and many of the family programs range from children as young as 2, to those as old as 17. Likewise, Scout programs are held regularly at the aquarium. Scout troops can register for educational, overnight stays at the aquarium, each of which offers the chance to fall asleep next to the aquarium’s enormous fish tanks. If that weren’t enough, the aquarium’s Summer Camp programs offer an even greater experience. Hands-on activities and up-close animal encounters are offered with the proper registration, with special field trips never being too far away. As one of the largest educational facilities in all of Mystic, the Mystic Aquarium marks the perfect bookend to our tour.

This marks the end of our historic tour of Mystic, Connecticut. We hope you’ve enjoyed yourself, and should you wish to return to where we began, simply make your way back towards Greenmanville Avenue, turning left and continuing on towards Holmes St. Take a right onto Holmes St, then another right onto East Main St. You’ll find yourself back at the Bascule Bridge, where you can cross once again towards the Mystic Museum of Art.