



Marybeth Sydor, right, and Gina Parrinello, both of Madison, carry their sea kayaks from the water to the storage rack located at Garvin Point at The Surf Club in Madison.

Something for everyone

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The Day

In the summer, out-of-towners descend daily on Madison, most of them headed for Hammonasset Beach State Park, the biggest public beach in Connecticut.

But, as local merchants and others familiar with the town will tell you, Madison's worth visiting long after the beaches close and the leaves start to turn.

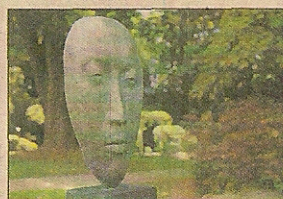
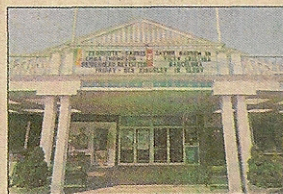
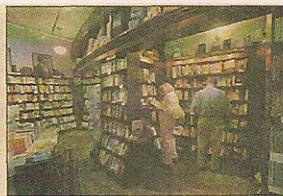
"Actually, I think September's the best time at the beach anyway," says Eileen Banisch, executive director of the Madison Chamber of Commerce. "We get quite a few (beachgoers) from out of town after Labor Day. ... The crowds aren't so big, and there's more parking."

Hammonasset, which offers 550 campsites and the Meigs Point Nature Center as well as two miles of sand, drew more than 466,000 visitors in June and July, down from the 599,500 who visited during the same period in 2007, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection. This year's crowds were limited by rain or the threat of rain on several weekends, which was not the case a year ago, Dennis Schain, a department spokesman, says.

If sun-worshippers circle Madison on their shoreline maps, so, too, do shoppers, bibliophiles, film buffs, wine drinkers and fans of sculpture, all of whom can pursue their passions on and near a downtown stretch of Boston Post Road, about a half-mile south of Exit 61 of Interstate 95.

"It's a unique downtown in that it's small shops and it's very walkable — you can park once and walk to everywhere you want to go," Banisch says. "It's old-fashioned in a way, but not staid."

Unlike the upscale downtowns in



Top, R.J. Julia Booksellers. Center, The Madison Art Center.

Above, A sculpture titled 'Visage' by Brian Wendler on Birnbaum Lane that is part of The Sculpture Mile.

Fairfield County, which Banisch says feature many of the national chains you'd find in similar towns and in malls, Madison's shops are "individually owned" by local businessmen and women.

Among the best known are R.J. Julia Booksellers, an independent bookstore that arranges a nonstop



Downtown area of Madison.



Tents and campers with a view of a marsh area at Hammonasset Beach State Park.

schedule of appearances by authors, including, in recent months, Barbara Walters, Carl Bernstein and Frank McCourt, to name a few; the Madison Art Center, a two-screen theater that shows the latest independent films; and the Madison Wine Shop, whose proprietor, Rick Lewis, strives to "demystify" wines and hosts free tastings

from noon to 8 p.m. every Saturday "and most other days, too."

The downtown's eclectic mix, Banisch says, also caters to those looking for women's apparel (Country Shop of Madison); gifts (Walker-Loden); jewelry (Silver Moon); antiques (Nosey Goose, on Wall Street,

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75 MILES (MORE OR LESS)



What: Madison

Where: A town of about 18,600 people and 36 square miles, Madison's on Long Island Sound about halfway between New Haven and the Connecticut River.

How far: About 30 miles one way from New London.

How to get there: Take Exit 62 from southbound Interstate 95 and turn left (south) to head to Hammonasset Beach State Park via the Hammonasset Connector. Turn left (south) off Exit 61 to head for Boston Post Road and the downtown via Route 79 (Durham Road). Madison's new train station, a stop on the Shoreline East commuter rail line, has ample parking and is within walking distance of downtown shops.

Sand: In addition to Hammonasset, the town boasts three town-owned beaches on Long Island Sound: the 45-acre Surf Club park and relatively tiny East Wharf and West Wharf. Per-vehicle fees are charged at all the beaches through Labor Day.

Sculpture: Docent-led tours of The Sculpture Mile at Madison, a free, outdoor exhibit of 40 major pieces, are offered Saturdays through December. Meet at 11 a.m. at the pavilion in Scranton Park near the Stop & Shop parking lot on Samson Rock Drive. Catalogues describing the pieces and their locations are available at downtown locations. For more information, contact the exhibit's sponsor, the Hollycroft Foundation, at 860-767-2624, or log on to www.hollycroft.org.

Shopping: For information about the town's amenities and merchants, contact the Madison Chamber of Commerce at 860-245-7394, or log on to www.madisonct.com.

Unique sculpture park sets town apart

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which runs perpendicular to Boston Post Road); offbeat clothing (Khaki & Black); lunch (Elizabeth's Café) and a fancy dinner (Café Allegre).

Diagonal, pull-in parking spaces are available on both sides of the downtown stretch, and a good-size municipal lot is located on Wall Street, behind the post office. More diagonal parking is available on Samson Rock Drive, which runs parallel to and south of Boston Post Road.

Two blocks west of downtown, the town green is surrounded by period colonials and the 300-year-old First Congregational Church of Madison, which owns it. Throughout the summer, the green is the scene of weekend concerts and antique shows, and a weekly farmers' market, which debuted in 2007. From 3 to 6 p.m. every Friday through Oct. 24, farmers and vendors will sell their Connecticut-grown produce and other items, including fresh seafood, baked goods and flowers.

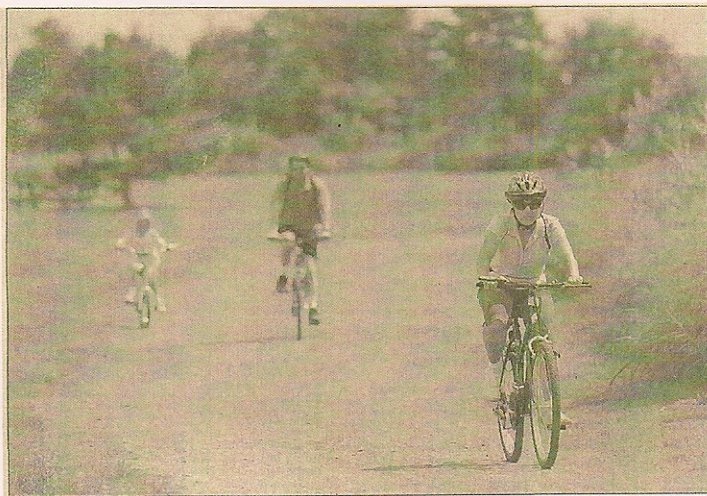
Any discussion of what sets the town apart as a destination must include mention of The Sculpture Mile at Madison, a free, outdoor exhibit featuring 40 pieces of major sculpture (total value: \$500,000) placed throughout the downtown. Sculptors loan the pieces for two years, and as much as half of the exhibit is annually "refreshed," says William C. Bendig, president of the Hollycroft Foundation, the Ivoryton-based nonprofit that oversees the project. Fourteen pieces are new this year.

"(Downtown) Madison was the ideal place to do this because it has so much open space," Bendig says. "If you put a sculpture exhibit in a sculpture park you're preaching to the choir. We wanted to put it out there in the public. That's our mission, to acquaint the everyday person with sculpture."

Toward that end, the foundation has placed pieces of all



Café Allegre restaurant.



Diane DiMauro, Dennis DiMauro and Danielle DiMauro, 8, of Ansonia, ride their bikes at Hammonasset Beach State Park.

shapes and sizes, traditional and abstract, on lawns and traffic medians, in courtyards, parks and parking lots.

Bendig directs special attention to Anthony Padovano's marble "Narcissus," one of several sculptures planted in and around the New Alliance Bank Courtyard. Padovano, winner of the Prix de

Rome, sculpting's highest honor, has two other pieces on display as well.

Old Lyme sculptor Gilbert Boro's "Tres Gatos," a red steel piece, is stationed in front of the Wachovia Bank branch at 600 Boston Post Road. "Piersterion: Column

6," a stainless steel work by Gabriel Warren, son of Robert Penn Warren, America's first poet laureate, stands at the other end of downtown, in front of the E.C. Scranton Memorial Library.

Docents lead tours of the sculptures every Saturday morning.