



Gatsby's Playground

By [Iyna Bort Caruso](#)

A drive through the area that inspired F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece shows that Long Island's Gold Coast is just as inspiring today.

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I feel them more than I hear them — the earth-pounding vibrations of eight ponies thundering across the field at forty miles an hour. It's polo season on Long Island. They say it takes hot blood and a cool head to play this sport. But sitting here at Bethpage State Park, inhaling a pungent blend of dirt and horse, I realize it takes even more. Polo demands the concentration of a golf pro, the fast hands of an NHL'er, and the steel nerves of a Formula One racer.

Sundays through October, polo matches are free to the public. I love coming here, not just for the sport of it but for its link to the Gold Coast Era, an opulent period between the wars when Long Island was America's polo capital. One of the most celebrated horsemen was a player by the name of Tommy Hitchcock, who was considered the Babe Ruth of polo, and is also widely thought to be the model for Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*. Today's family-friendly crowd is more Macy's than Tiffany, but the allure of the Gatsby Age remains.

The Gold Coast is a 20-mile long strip along the northern shore of Nassau County where the shore meets the Long Island Sound. Proximity to Manhattan, less than an hour's drive away, was what made it attractive as a summer retreat for the likes of the Vanderbilts, Woolworths and Guggenheims. F. Scott Fitzgerald was awed by the sheer concentration of wealth when he began his masterpiece, and the legacy of the era is in the impressive collection of estates that remain here. Some are in private hands; others have been commandeered for utilitarian purposes. The Chrysler Mansion, for instance, is now part of the United States Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point. But more than a half-dozen others are open to the public, allowing folks like me to wander gilded hallways and stroll spectacular gardens for a taste of the life once reserved for a privileged few.



Sagamore Hill NHS, home of Theodore Roosevelt.

The exclusive enclave of Sands Point is said to be the influence for West Egg in *The Great Gatsby*, and it's one of the wealthiest villages in all of New York. Among the mansions, two stunners are part of the county-run Sands Point Preserve (sandspointpreserve.org; 516.571.7900). One is Hempstead House, which is modeled after Kilkenny Castle in Ireland, and opened only for special events. The other is Falaise, available for guided tours May through October.

Falaise (sandspointpreserve.org/htm/falaise.htm; 516.571.7900) was built in 1924, but resembles a 13th Century Normandy manor with its protected cobblestone courtyard and dramatic stone columns, and the theme of centuries past carries through in its medieval and renaissance art. I connect with the home, despite its lavishness. Other Gold Coast residences feel more like museums, but Falaise was left exactly as it was when its owner, Captain Harry Guggenheim, lived here, right down to his personal photographs. One of them is of Charles Lindbergh. Guggenheim was a champion of aviation, and Lindbergh was a regular visitor. The ace holed up in the house in 1927 to document his triumphant transatlantic flight, and those recollections became the best-seller *We*. Lindbergh's Ford station wagon still sits in the courtyard.

Top: The pool at Falaise; Bottom: Falaise's Living Room.

It's a short drive from Sands Point to the historic village of Roslyn, a postcard-pretty town whose architecture dates back to colonial times. A Georgian Revival mansion here now houses the Nassau County Museum of Art (nassaumuseum.com; 516.484.9338). It's not easy to operate an art museum in the shadow of Manhattan, but this jewel makes up in intimacy what it lacks in scale. The museum is home to the big guns of 19th and 20th century art, and sits on a 145-acre outdoor sculpture garden, one of the largest plain-air art collections on the East Coast. Industrialist Henry Clay Frick, co-founder of U.S. Steel, purchased the mansion in 1919 as a wedding gift for his son, Childs. After Childs' death in the 1960s, Nassau County bought the estate and gifted it to the community.

The North Shore remains a well-heeled area. For proof, cruise down the main artery of Northern Boulevard, the same route George Washington took when he toured Long Island, to the Americana Manhasset Mall (americanamanhasset.com; 516.627.2277). The sun bounces off hood ornaments of the Bentleys, Jaguars and Mercedes that fill the parking lot. The Americana is the region's haute couture capital—an East Coast answer to Rodeo Drive. Still, 21st Century prosperity is no match for the tycoon lifestyles that reigned in places like Old Westbury Gardens before the burden of staggering taxes made it virtually impossible to carry on.



The first time I visited the mansion at Old Westbury Gardens (oldwestburygardens.org; 516.333.0048), it seemed oddly familiar, and it turned out it's been used in movies like *North by Northwest*, *Arthur*, and, more recently, *Hitch*. Old Westbury Gardens was the Stuart-style mansion of John S. Phipps, an heir to the Carnegie Steel fortune, and surrounding this showplace are 160 meticulously maintained acres that draw throngs of green-thumb enthusiasts for its exotic species and historic blooms.

Sagamore Hill (nps.gov/sahi; 516.922.4788), home of Theodore Roosevelt, isn't technically a Gold Coast estate, but it's a don't-miss stop on the route. Native Long Islanders like me usually got their first look at the place on school field trips. The Victorian home in Oyster Bay is operated under the auspices of the National Park Service, and escorted tours are given by park rangers.

Roosevelt settled on this land to escape urbanization, and spent most of his life here with his wife Edith and their kids, except for absences dictated by his public career — first as governor of New York, and then as the 26th President of the United States. The home is filled with “trophy” of Roosevelt's hunting expeditions, as mounted heads stare back at me from virtually every wall, and authentic bear skin rugs are everywhere. I never realized that you could turn a rhino's foot into an inkwell, or an elephant's foot into a trash can, but it's all here in this taxidermy-gone-wild menagerie. Paradoxically, TR was a great conservationist and preservationist. His famous refusal to kill a captured black cub

inspired the Teddy bear – one of which, of course, is available in the gift shop. It's worth noting that Roosevelt was the first American to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, an honor bestowed upon him for brokering an end to the Russo-Japanese War, and that those negotiations began within these very walls.

Just a few miles south is Chelsea (516.571.8551), one of the area's lesser known mansions. The 40-room whitewashed residence is a mix of French, English and Chinese influences with some period Art Deco touches, and was conceived on the honeymoon of Alexandra and Benjamin Moore. Moore bears no relation to the paint maven, but among his claims to fame was being the great-great-grandson of Clement Clark Moore, who wrote what's familiarly known as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Much of what is known about the home comes from Alexandra's diary. "You can feel the energy coming off her journal as she's traveling around the world on her honeymoon," says Chelsea Director Michael Butkewicz.

Alexandra wanted to instill her 1924 home with a sense of past. The pine paneling of the dining room was taken from the home of the Duke of Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. Carved teak doors were salvaged from the Summer Palace in Beijing. The Chinese stripped gold off the doors for fast cash, and threw them away. I can still see the scorch marks.

My favorite room of the house is the reception hall for its gorgeous 85-foot-long hand-painted panels based on a mythical Mediterranean village. The artist who created these oils over white gold was Jose Maria Sert, muralist for King Alfonso XIII of Spain. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "The world, as a rule, does not live on beaches and in country clubs." The Gold Coast was the exception to the rule. Before the stock market crash of 1929, more than 500 palaces dotted the shoreline. Over time, many fell victim to the wrecking ball. But the ones that remain can still bestow a sense of glamour and majesty upon us that is virtually unheard of in our everyday lives.

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WHERE TO STAY

Garden City Hotel

45 Seventh St., Garden City

516.747.3000; gardencityhotel.com

George Washington might not have slept here, but Charles Lindbergh, John F. Kennedy and Mick Jagger did. A 2002 renovation of this 280-room property made one of Long Island's finest historic hotels even better.

Glen Cove Mansion

200 Dosoris Lane, Glen Cove

516.617.6400; glencovemansion.com

This hotel and conference center on a sprawling 55 acres has 187 guest rooms and suites, a spa, tennis, indoor and outdoor pools, and even a bowling alley.

The Andrew Hotel

75 North Station Plaza, Great Neck 516.299.8879; andrewhotel.com

This 62-room boutique hotel is a short walk to the Long Island Railroad station, shopping, and restaurants. Well-appointed rooms feature flat-panel TVs, DVD and CD players, and complimentary wireless Internet access.

WHERE TO EAT**Panini Café at Diane's**

23 Bryant Ave., Roslyn

516.621.2522

This casual counter-service café serves tasty salads, pizza, and, of course, panini, but save room for its glorious desserts.

Mim's

235 Roslyn Road, Roslyn

516.625.7305; www.mimsny.com

A standout on the dining circuit, Mim's offers an eclectic American menu, from sandwiches to pizza to delicious land and sea specialties. Wines are available by the bottle or super-size glass.

Pomodoro

294 Main St., Port Washington

516.767.7164; www.pomodorohuntington This lively and always-crowded eatery is a local favorite for its reliable Italian fare, generous portions, and attentive service.