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NEWPORT, RI: Coastal Surprises

BY MATT TURNER

There's still time this summer for a quick escape to Newport, Rhode Island. Whether you're in search of some shopping, dining, sailing or exploring the many grand and historic mansions, there's plenty to do in the small New England city. It's accessed easiest by car, making it a popular destination for nearby drive markets, including Boston and New York, but Amtrak service to Providence and Kingston and the international airport just south of Providence make it an easy trip from anywhere in the U.S. Despite being New York residents, we, admittedly, had not been to Newport prior to our June visit since we were in high school

— and that was just to stop for lunch as we were driving through the state. Ahead of our trip, we expected Newport to be very chichi, old money-luxury akin to “The Great Gatsby,” filled with plenty of suits and sweaters tied around people’s necks. Not to our surprise, there is plenty of that. But much to our surprise, there is much, much more to experience. We stayed at the recently debuted *Gardiner House*. The new-build hotel, which soft-opened in September 2023, is located directly on the water and is not even one block from the main street. It also gives off the vibe of a private home: Upon entering, you are greeted by the works of American Impressionist Howard Gardner Cushing, the

great grandfather of Gardiner House’s co-owner, Howard Cushing. The hotel’s designers digitally copied one of Gardner Cushing’s murals (which you can see on display at The Ledges, his summer home and a fixture of Newport’s famous Cliff Walk) and created a wallpaper that encases the lobby and wraps around the spiral staircase leading to the restaurant and guestrooms. The lobby is topped off by a Murano chandelier. There are just 21 rooms across six categories at the hotel, with several of those being one-off room types. Rooms have a beachy vibe, and amenities include smart TVs, marble vanities, rainfall showerheads, ample closet space and large windows. Rooms range from 350 to 475 square feet. We stayed in Room No. 207, the IYRS (International Yacht Restoration School) Suite, the second largest at 470 square feet. The room, located on the second floor, has a king bed, an L-shaped couch and an ornate coffee table. It is also one of four on property (alongside Room Nos. 203; 209 and 210) to have a balcony. There are no connecting rooms, but No. 212, the Grand Suite, has two king beds — the only such room with multiple beds. So, while children are allowed, the hotel caters mostly towards adult couples and groups of friends, says Iulia Ionescu (iionescu@gardinerhouse.com), assistant general manager. For those traveling with children, Room



SAVOR THE SCENE: Guests can enjoy food at The Lawn Terrace at Castle Hill Inn while taking in views of Narragansett Bay and the Claiborne Pell Newport Bridge.



DELECTABLE: The menu at The Grill at Fort 19 North features grilled meats, seafood, a raw bar, and organic selections.



TEA AFICIONADOS TAKE NOTE: The Chinese Tea House, located on the back lawn at Marble House, is inspired by Song Dynasty temples, and is popular for its architecture, the views over the water and the afternoon tea.



A 19TH-CENTURY MARVEL: The Marble House, built by William Vanderbilt for his wife Alva in 1892, contains 500,000 cubic feet of marble, which cost Vanderbilt \$7 million at that time.

to visit; this came as a surprise to us. While most guests come from drive markets, many others come from across the U.S. and internationally. Book three to six months in advance regardless of the time of visit. Travel advisors may contact Kelly King (kking@gardinerhouse.com), sales manager.

From our perspective, there are two “musts” when in Newport: one, check out the Gilded Age mansions and, two, get out on the water.

The Cliff Walk is one of the most popular experiences in Newport and it’s absolutely worth the walk. Set between the rocky coastline and many of the mansions located on the waterfront, the paved path stretches over three miles. You don’t have to do it all in one go as there are several entry points, but the full walk could take a few hours depending on your speed. Top Tip: Get up early and head to the Cliff Walk. There will be fewer people there and its eastward-facing location also makes for incredible views of the sunrise.

You can also explore some of these mansions, which we found to be the best way to learn more about the lifestyles of those living in late-1800s Newport. Through Newport Mansions, you can purchase tickets to one, two, three or all properties. Since we

were short on time, we opted for Marble House, built by William Vanderbilt for his wife Alva. At the time of its completion in 1892, it contained more marble — 500,000 cubic feet of it — than any other building on Earth. Fun Fact: Vanderbilt spent \$7 million on marble in building the house; that’s equivalent to \$241.6 million today. Private, behind-the-scenes tours are available, but we were plenty content to use the audio app for a self-guided tour. In all, this took about an hour.

Tip: Many of the mansions will decorate for Christmas, making them an even more worthwhile stop during the festive season.

Marble House is located along the Cliff Walk, so you can easily combine these experiences. Or, you can head to the Chinese Tea House, located on the back lawn at Marble House. Commissioned by Alva in the early 1900s, the tea house was inspired by Song Dynasty temples. You can go for the architecture, the views over the water or the afternoon tea, but we can guarantee all three will have you going back.

We are not big tea people, but we do love any good foodie experience — and what we enjoyed at the Chinese Tea House at Marble House truly fit the bill. The afternoon tea is complete with a pot of tea (we chose a decaffeinated lemon and ginger), a glass of champagne, a three-tiered tower of finger sandwiches, fruit, pastries and more, and an entrée. Additionally, you can order kids meals, wines by the glass, cocktails and mocktails. Everything we had was exceptional and we will definitely be back the next time we are in Newport.

Good to know: Dream Yacht Charter has a new base just outside of Newport in Warwick, Rhode Island. The yacht charter company offers bareboat, skippered and fully crewed yacht rentals. Although the company typically only leases its vessels



NEW-BUILD IN NEWPORT: The Gardiner House has just 21 rooms across six categories.

for a minimum of several days (usually about five), we arranged a full-day tour of Newport Harbor to check out their offerings.

The 42-foot catamaran we sailed on has four bedrooms and bathrooms, as well as a kitchen with a gas stove, an oven, sink, a full refrigerator and air conditioning. To charter the vessels, you need a resume of driving boats of a similar size; otherwise, you can book a crew. Either way, it makes for a great addition to any stay in Newport.

Sails up, a drink in hand — this is the proper way to explore the destination. These charters and other tours can be customized. Alternatively, there are many other tour boats that will take visitors around the harbor.

Prior to getting on the catamaran, we visited The Sailing Museum & National Sailing Hall of Fame. This is a must when in Newport. Whether you’re a seasoned sailor or a total newbie (as we were), there is something for you here. The museum, which opened in 2022, is well laid-out and still sparkling. Upon entry, all guests receive a scannable wristband that lets them interact with several of the exhibits. With this, guests can design their own sailboat on large, touch-screen TVs, race them against computers and other guests, and much more. Through these interactive

exhibits, you will physically learn how to steer a sailboat, hoist sails and beyond. This was a blast. For the true enthusiasts, the museum also contains the National Sailing Hall of Fame, where you can find memorabilia from sailing crews, historical artifacts and more, not to mention information on all the Hall of Fame inductees over the years. Expect to spend about 90 minutes exploring the space.

Good to know: You can purchase a ticket that grants you access to Newport’s three sporting museums — The Sailing Museum & National Sailing Hall of Fame, Audrain Automobile Museum and International Tennis Hall of Fame. We didn’t get to the other two but would definitely check them out on our next visit.

As for dining, we learned that you really can’t go wrong anywhere. Some of our top picks include The Lawn Terrace at Castle Hill Inn for views of Narragansett Bay and the Claiborne Pell Newport Bridge; 22 Bowens Wine Bar & Grille and The Mooring Seafood Kitchen & Bar for their selections of steaks and seafoods and waterfront locations; and The Grill at Fort 19 North, where we enjoyed one of our favorite meals in all our travels.

Ahead of our visit, we expected the local dining scene to revolve nearly exclusively around seafood, and while you can get plenty of fresh fish and other sea-to-table dishes, we were surprised with the number of great steakhouses in town, too. That said, we were particularly fond of the Rhode Island-style calamari, which is prepared with cherry or banana peppers and a garlic aioli dipping sauce. As for The Grill at Fort 19 North, do yourself a favor and order the crispy whole dover sole with an herb salad, bacon and sweet chili gastrique. It’s, admittedly, a bit tricky to eat as the entire fish — head and bones included — are fried, so it takes some deft tableside flipping, but the flaky fish and insanely delicious bread, topped with that fresh salad, uncuous bacon and spicy-sweet sauce, make for one of our favorite bites anywhere.

Whichever restaurant you decide on, be sure to make a reservation for sunset, as the waterfront locations of each allow for impressive views while dining on some seriously good grub. Also be sure to spend some time walking up and down Thames Street to explore the galleries and boutiques. Here, we saw older couples, families with young children and even a fair share of bachelorette parties — as we said, Newport was more than we expected. ■

No. 109 has a pull-out sofa bed. Also on the first floor, Room No. 106 is the lone accessible accommodation. Room No. 209, the Signature Suite, is the only room to offer a soaking tub; it also has the largest balcony. We liked that throughout the hotel, all the art in the public spaces comes from the owner’s family photo albums. Helping to complete the feeling of staying at a home, guests receive keys to access their room rather than a card or mobile app. There are several public areas on the property, including a lobby bar designed in the style of a gentlemen’s lounge, a restaurant and rooftop bar facing the water on the second floor, and an events space complete with an adjacent sunroom. Out back is a lawn with chairs that we’re told soon offer drink service.

Off the lobby is the Studio Bar, where guests can enjoy specialty and classic cocktails, as well as some small bites. The walls and velvet cushioned seats are all green, while lights shine on works of art on the wall, creating the feeling of a museum gallery. It’s popular among guests and locals alike.

Conversely, the restaurant, Flora, has a much more “feminine” vibe, with pinks and florals incorporated in the design. Helming the venue is Chef Somoza, who has implemented a menu inspired by seafood from the Mediterranean. The Flora menu is made up of regional ingredients like sweet corn, seasonal vegetables and fruits, local seafood and small farm-sourced meats; it is anchored by a crudo bar. Guests can expect main courses to include Dover sole, bank scallops and pan-seared

halibut. There is also an outdoor rooftop bar, offering views over Newport Harbor.

Note: Flora was not yet open when we visited but all reviews online seem to be positive. That said, this afforded us the opportunity to dine across Newport to scope out the best of the best. More on that later.

Good to know: Gardiner House, like most other hotels in Newport, is open year-round. While summer season is busiest, Christmas and other major holidays are also a popular time



STEPPING INTO A CAPTAIN’S SHOES: At the Sailing Museum, visitors can physically learn how to steer a sailboat, hoist sails and beyond.