

# HAUTE LIVING

## Spotlight On: Newport, RI — For A Taste Of The Gilded Era In Modern Times

October 3, 2023 | by [Laura Schreffler](#)



Castle Hill Inn | Photo Credit: Alex Paul Photography

When I think of Newport, RI, a seaside city on Aquidneck Island in Rhode Island, I think of summer. I think of sunshine. And I think of home.

But most folks that aren't as familiar with the New England summer resort area will think of the things they see on TV: historical mansions, a rich sailing history, and, perhaps, presidents, given that, before Martha's Vineyard, Newport was where presidents **Dwight D. Eisenhower** and **John F. Kennedy** spent their summers.

Few may know, though, that Newport hosted the first U.S. Open tournaments in both tennis and golf, as well as every challenge to the America's Cup between 1930 and 1983.

But back to those mansions for a second. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, wealthy southern planters in search of a respite from the brutal air con-free heat came to Newport to escape, soon followed by wealthy northerners, who would go on to build "summer cottages" on Bellevue Avenue. By the turn of the 20th century, many of the nation's wealthiest families were summering in Newport, including the Vanderbilts, Astors, and the Widener family, who constructed the largest "cottages", such as The Breakers (1895). Many of the homes were designed by New York architect **Richard Morris Hunt**, who owned property in Newport himself.

There is a distinct pedigree here, highlighted by the rich and famous folks who called the city home. The novelist **Edith Wharton** (who also owned a home, Land's End, here) described the vibe in her novel *The Age of Innocence*. Hammersmith Farm is the mansion where John F. Kennedy and **Jackie Kennedy** held their wedding reception.

And today, that timeless sense of elegance remains, dotted throughout the cobblestoned footpaths of Thames Street, in the old-fashioned restaurants like The Mooring, in vintage, upscale hotels like The Vanderbilt, and in the yachts — both old and new — that dot the harbor like seagulls waiting to take flight.

So now that you know about its past, let's take a look at Newport's present, and where a modern-day visitor should stay, play, eat, and drink in the City by the Sea.

## STAY



Beach Cottage at Castle Hill Inn | Photo Credit: Castle Hill Inn

For a proper, Astor era blast from the past (but with ALL the modern amenities) head to the ethereal [Castle Hill Inn](#), which juts out of the sea like a beacon, welcoming guests to its manicured lawn, promising champagne, good times, and hedonism.

Built in 1874 as one of Newport's summer "cottages," Castle Hill was first home to renowned marine biologist and naturalist **Alexander Agassiz** of Harvard University, who later transformed the space into an Inn after World War II. Its enchanting coastal setting, relaxed elegance and authentic Newport spirit made Castle Hill Inn a summer playground for American industrialists and Hollywood royalty like **Grace Kelly**, for whom one of the on-property private beaches is named after she filmed the 1956 movie *High Society* here.

Speaking of beaches, it is the ONLY luxury inn in Newport with its own private beaches, as well as water views from every room and most of the 40 acres of grounds. It also, quite charmingly, features the Castle Hill Inn Lighthouse, built in 1890 as a beacon for ships navigating Narragansett Bay.

The Inn, which became a Relais & Châteaux property in 2008 (and was the first Rhode Island property to attain said distinction), features fresh cookies each evening, a welcome glass of sparkling upon arrival, and telescopes in each room, better to see a bit, fat, New England moon on the rise.

Guests that stay here are treated to a variety of offerings, as well: fabulous organic spa services inclusive of facials and massages in an airy, ornate space in The Retreat at Castle Hill by Farmaesthetics, a Rhode Island-based skincare company, complimentary valet parking and self-parking, daily gourmet breakfasts, complimentary afternoon tea (the entire kit and caboodle, scones and all), bicycles, board games, lawn games, and fishing equipment, and, in season, a private beach with towel service and food and beverage service, a Hinckley yacht for private excursion, launch service to Newport Harbor, complimentary yoga class on Saturdays mornings, Sunday evening bonfire and stargazing.



Turret Suite | Photo Credit: Castle Hill Inn

Unbelievably, for a 40 acre property, there are only seven guest rooms and suites in the original 19th century Agassiz Mansion, as well as 26 private waterfront accommodations in the Harbor House, Chalet, Beach Houses, and Beach Cottages, all just steps from Castle Hill Inn's private beach.

Everyone is going to have their own preference here, but mine is the Turret Suite in the Agassiz Mansion. It has two stories, including a majestic bathtub overlooking the water, with its own custom wood spiral staircase connecting the lower level to a romantic suite on the second floor. It is, quite simply magical. But each suite is different, and others might favor the Rose Room, which features a gas jet fireplace, hardwood floors, and paneling.

Then, there are the Beach House rooms, which overlook a private beach front and of which feature a panoramic view of the Atlantic Ocean, a gas jet fireplace, and beautiful French doors. Beach Cottage rooms are perched on the sand dunes of Castle Hill's private beach, while the Harbor House rooms overlook Grace Kelly Beach.. French doors that open to a semi-private porch with Adirondack chairs and a view of the Newport Bridge are prime real estate. And last but not least, the Chalet Suite offers a sitting room complete with its own wet bar.



Castle Hill Inn afternoon tea | Photo Credit: [Nicole Mandel, NRG Photographer](#)

The dining is pretty epic here, too. Dining at Castle Hill Inn is as much a tradition as it is an experience. Executive Chef Lou Rossi and his team use locally sourced ingredients, including seafood, seasonal produce and artisanal

cheeses to create the menu. Much of the cuisine is inspired by and built around what's available in the property's onsite culinary gardens, which produce vegetables, fruit, and herbs. Authentically farm-to-table, many of the ingredients that make up the fresh, seasonal dishes offered by Castle Hill Inn come from meters – not miles – away from the kitchen.

The grand dame is The Lawn at Castle Hill Inn, which epitomizes classic, New England nostalgia and tradition. For decades, locals and visitors alike have gathered at The Lawn and Terrace Bar from Memorial Day through Columbus Day to savor coastal favorites like Atlantic salmon, Maine lobster rolls and fresh oysters as well as champagne and old-timey cocktails while lounging the day away in white Adirondack chairs overlooking Narragansett Bay.

Then, there is the dining room. This elegant eatery offers a three-course prix fixe dinner menu that changes with the seasons to offer diverse, locally sourced American cuisine prepared with global techniques. A five-course Chef's Tasting menu is also available. When paired with a bottle from the award-winning cellars, which received a "Best of Award of Excellence" from *Wine Spectator* for its impressive 800+ selection, this is one heck of a date night spot.



Castle Hill Inn | Photo Credit: Castle Hill Inn

But as much as I love to see folks sipping and swirling while wearing their best Nantucket reds and before Labor Day whites, all of the seasons here have their own special brand of magic. For fall this year, the Inn is offering guests the opportunity to reserve a private space on the Lawn with its Private Adirondack Experience, which

provides a new and different way to experience this vintage classic. Guests can still enjoy said Adirondack chairs (which are first-come, first-serve and offer up a space to sit and enjoy the view and sip on cocktails while you take in the sights or wait for your table at either the Lawn restaurant or Dining Room), but now they can also reserve ahead to have a private section set aside for their group, which requires a minimum of six people and has a maximum of up to twelve people. This new Private Adirondack Experience also allows for guests to pre-order lite bites, snacks and have a dedicated waiter who is available to serve up beer, wine, and additional cocktails throughout the experience.

The Inn's fire pits will be lit on the outdoor terrace once again for the 2023 season, helping guests keep toasty while they share in some s'mores and holiday merriment. The popular activation is typically offered at \$275 and includes a private fire pit with traditional s'mores and a treats buffet for guests and their crew. Made-from-scratch hot chocolate, hot local apple cider, and one round of "spiked" drinks for up to six guests will be offered along with three fleece blankets to keep warm and take home afterwards.

*Castle Hill Inn is located at 590 Ocean Drive Newport, Rhode Island, 02840*

## PLAY



Newport Sight Sailing | Photo Credit: Sightsailing Newport

Many think of Newport as a summertime destination, and that's fair: warmer weather brings more opportunity to be outside. Come winter, most refuse to suffer the biting New England cold. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't!

That said, summer *is* the preferred time to take a boat out on the harbor. [Sightsailing of Newport](#) offers private excursions from two to six people aboard Starlight, an O'Day 34, one of the most popular boats in the U.S. with an extremely comfortable cockpit with many nice places to sit for those who aren't big on sailing. There is a well-equipped cabin in which to stow gear or get out of the weather, a cooler for drinks and snacks, a stereo, light jackets and blankets for cool weather, and all required safety gear.



The Breakers | Photo Credit: Hawk Visuals LLCTR

There are many of the aforementioned “summer cottages” or mansions that are available for tours, such as The Breakers, built by **Cornelius Vanderbilt II**, one of the richest men in America; Rosecliff, which was built for Nevada silver heiress **Theresa Fair Oelrichs**, who used it to host many fabulous Gilded Age entertainments and which architect **Stanford White** modeled after the Grand Trianon, the garden retreat of French kings at Versailles; and Marble House, which was built by **William Vanderbilt** as a 39th birthday present for his wife, **Alva**.



Tennis Hall of Fam | Photo Credit: International Tennis Hall of Fam

The International Tennis Hall of Fame, meanwhile, is a great outing for aficionado, honoring both players and contributors to the sport. It is where the United States Lawn Tennis Association held its first championships.



Cliff Walk

And last but not least, I recommend doing the Cliff Walk, a fine way to see those big summer cottages if you like the outdoors AND walking. This is a world-famous access, 3.5 mile walk that combines the natural beauty of the Newport shoreline with the architectural history of Newport's gilded age. What makes Cliff Walk unique is that it is a National Recreation Trail — the 65th in the nation and the first in New England.

## WINE & DINE



The Vanderbilt Dining Room | Photo Credit: Auberge Resorts Collection

Newport has some of the finest seafood in the nation, and mostly, you'll be spoiled for choice. Outside of the fabulous fare at Castle Hill Inn, I recommend the waterfront seafood spot, The Mooring, an iconic, ambient, upscale locals spot that offers 'top-of-the catch' seafood, including an award-winning wine list and bountiful raw bar



offerings. When coupled with panoramic sunsets and nautical views of Newport Harbor, it's the one to beat. Those who are looking for something completely upscale should make a reservation at The Dining Room at The Vanderbilt. Step inside this former mansion — once owned by businessman **Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt** — that has been reimagined as a glamorous social hub with a culinary secret to discover at every turn. Here in the Dining Room, expect a distinctly masculine atmosphere, highlighted by handsome navy blue-cloaked walls and dapper leather club chairs while enjoying dishes that feature the best of Rhode Island's bounty from land and sea. Its rooftop bar has less of an old-fashioned vibe, but impressive views of the harbor: think Snoop Dogg and '80s and '90s' pop, with some rap surprises, and you've got a dichotomy that truly captures the Newport of today.

