

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS
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ALISON COHEN ROSA

Marian Brook (Louisa Jacobson) in HBO's "The Gilded Age."

How to immerse yourself in 'THE GILDED AGE' of New York



ALISON COHEN ROSA

Carrie Coon as Bertha Russell in her "Gilded Age" mansion.



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

The Venetian Room in the Payne Whitney Mansion in New York. The mansion is now the home of Cultural Services of the French Embassy.

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER



Put on a comfortable pair of shoes and take a stroll down Millionaire's Row



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The Plaza New York, pictured shortly after the hotel opened on the Upper East Side.

NEW YORK — "Downton Abbey" creator Julian Fellowes made it exceedingly easy for devotees of his beloved British drama to explore the locations featured in the show.

True "Downton" aficionados know that they can travel to the English countryside to explore Highclere Castle, which serves as the stand-in for the palatial home of the Crawley clan. It's a very straightforward pilgrimage to get in touch with your inner Countess Dowager.

Don't expect the same easy time travel experience with Fellowes's latest offering, "The Gilded Age." It's challenging — if not impossible — for fans to fully immerse themselves in the over-the-top 19th century world of the soapy new HBO show. The sudsy drama is a billet-doux to Manhattan's era of unbridled wealth. It's like "Dynasty," but with bustles, **GILDED, Page N14**



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

The Harry F. Sinclair House in Manhattan. The mansion was built during New York's Gilded Age. It now houses the Ukrainian Institute of America.

... and Newport, playground of the Gilded Age elite

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright
 GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

Wealth that would wow a Kardashian. Technological advances that would impress Bezos and Branson. A glittering facade that masked greed and corruption. Such were the hallmarks of America's Gilded Age, post-Civil War and into the 1900s, when massive fortunes were made (and lost) and the old guard slugged it out with flashy newcomers for a spot atop the social heap.

Who better to capture the drama than Lord Julian Fellowes, the award-winning creator of "Downton Abbey"? When it came time to film his HBO series, "The Gilded Age," he headed to Newport, R.I. For six weeks last winter, Fellowes and his cast and crew went on location to this seaside city to shoot scenes in Newport's fabulous mansions, now preserved as museum houses, where the Gilded Age elite played

and partied. "The Gilded Age" premiered in January.

Although much of the story is set in New York City, the show owes its stunning look to Newport's meticulously preserved "summer cottages," The Breakers, Marble House, The Elms, Rosecliff, Chateau-sur-Mer, and Hunter House. Now TV viewers can get a peek inside these time capsules of the Gilded Age, where every piece of furniture is historically accurate. The copper pots are, too.

Those in-your-face Bellevue Avenue mansions, so familiar to New Englanders, were intriguing to Fellowes, says Trudy Coxe, CEO and executive director of the Preservation Society of Newport County. In Europe, large estates were surrounded by acres of land. Not so here, where the whole point was to build it bigger and fancier than your neighbors, and right next door so they couldn't miss it, with gold-leafed *everything*, Venetian paintings, and acres of marble. "It's a very American approach, and Fellowes found it fascinating," Coxe



GRETCHEN ERTL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

The Breakers, one of Newport's famed mansions.

adds. "He genuinely loves Newport."

The families featured in "The Gilded Age" are fictitious, but "These stories ring true," Coxe says. "These were people with big dreams and big personalities. I don't know if Bertha Russell is

[modeled after] Alva Vanderbilt, but it's fun to wonder," she notes. "These are amalgams of people who really did exist."

Watching the period drama is fun, **NEWPORT, Page N14**

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Seeing shadows of the Gilded Age in New York

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satin, and starched collars. I mean that as a compliment, of course.

The real-life Gilded Age, which took place from roughly 1870 to 1910, transformed the Upper East Side of Manhattan into a neighborhood brimming with lavish European-style mansions.

But unlike Highclere Castle and “Downton Abbey,” there are no real-life edifices to tour from “The Gilded Age.” If fans want to see George and Bertha Russell’s over-the-top limestone manse at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 61st Street, they’re going to need a lot of imagination, or maybe a large bag of hallucinogens. The Russell house doesn’t exist (and never did). The same is true of the humble brownstone owned by Agnes van Rhijn and her sister Ada Brook across the street. I’m sorry, folks. These exteriors were created through the magic of CGI and location shoots in Troy, N.Y.

Sir Julian Fellowes, you are a cruel tease.

But if you’re a rabid fan — and I know you’re out there because HBO picked up the show for a second season — all is not lost. There are ways to get a feel for the grandeur of the era by putting on a comfortable, yet stylish, pair of shoes and heading to the stretch once known as Millionaire’s Row. It begins on Fifth Avenue, roughly starting at 60th Street, and stretches up to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Finding the remaining Gilded Age mansions requires a bit of slowing down, looking up, and traversing side streets. Sadly, the majority of the grandest homes of the era were flattened in the name of progress.

“There was a change from building enormous mansions to building enormous luxury apartment buildings at the beginning of the early 1900s,” said Dr. Emma Guest-Consales, who leads Gilded Age architecture tours through the company Bowery Boys Walking History Tours. “The only thing guaranteed in New York City is that it’s always going to change, and that goes for these Gilded Age mansions as well. In the period right around World War I, and just after, it was no longer practical to sustain this kind of lifestyle and these kinds of houses. That’s when they started to disappear.”

Another gold-plated nail in the coffin of the Gilded Age came with the sinking of the Titanic in 1912.

“The Titanic was the beginning of the end,” said Gary Lawrence, an architect and author who created the Instagram account Mansions of the Gilded Age and the Facebook page of the same name. “The world of the very rich was shaken. With the Titanic, they realized that they faced the same dangers, hazards, and suffering of everyday life as



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

the poor. The Titanic was symbolic in the sense that everyone was equal. That begins to erode this idea that money can solve any problem.”

As an ardent fan of “The Gilded Age” (both the show and the era), I wanted a glimpse of these architectural beauties. I couldn’t enter the fictional Russell mansion, but I could see some of the buildings that inspired it. On a miserably cold and wet afternoon, I met with guide Michele Gouveia from Context Travel at the Plaza New York. The Plaza hotel was built in 1907 near the Cornelius Vanderbilt II House at the southern edge of Central Park, and it claimed to be the most luxurious hotel in the country when it opened with rates of \$2.75 a night.

“It was built in the French renaissance style,” Gouveia said as we walked through the Plaza’s Palm Court, where patrons were having afternoon tea. “One thing the rich loved to do during the Gilded Age was mimic French style. They tried to mimic the manners of the British upper class, but they loved French architecture, French art, French food, and French furniture.”

The Palm Court and the Plaza have been renovated multiple times since 1907, but they still have a very grand Gilded Age feel about them. Could I envision Bertha Russell sitting here looking fierce and wearing a hat the size of a wedding cake as she’s being ignored by old New York monied matrons? Very much so.

“Hotels like these were very impor-

The Palm Court in the Plaza New York. The 1907 hotel was built during New York’s Gilded Age.

tant because they gave women a place to go and it was acceptable,” Gouveia said. “They could come for lunch or tea. They could use the ballroom for their events.”

While you can see the very obvious influence of French architecture in the Plaza and the mansions that sprouted up along Millionaire’s Row, Horatio Joyce, an architectural historian and director of public programs at the Garden Conservancy, said these structures shouldn’t be dismissed as shallow imitations.

“There was a great originality to some of those designs,” Joyce said. “People like [architect] Stanford White had a tremendous eye and an ability to work within the conventions of the Rococo style or the Baroque style. But he also had a great ability to reimagine those styles for an American audience. There was actually something quite sinister about it. The people they were building for really did imagine themselves as the new aristocracy.”

Sadly, the Gilded Age aristocracy didn’t stick around as long as their British equivalents. While the 19th-century generation of American moguls were focused on making money, their 20th-century heirs were intent on spending it and flushing the accompanying lifestyle down the commode. That makes find-

ing the remaining mansions more challenging. But with an umbrella and a raincoat (I recommend you do this on a sunny day), I hit the sidewalks.

“If someone wanted to take a tour on their own of what’s left, they could easily do that by walking up Fifth Ave. and keeping an eye out on the side streets,” Consales said. “A lot of the buildings are now consulates, galleries, or very posh little restaurants. I think one of the best examples of what’s left of Gilded Age architecture is on what’s called the Cook Block. The Cook Block goes from Fifth Avenue to Madison Avenue, from 78th Street to 79th Street.”

The former Henry F. Sinclair House on 79th Street is now the Ukrainian Institute of America. The grand exterior is one of the most beautiful remnants of the Gilded Age. It’s also another building that you can enter to see art and enjoy cultural programs. You can also go into the building that houses the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, which is located in the Payne Whitney Mansion. The shining star here (emphasis on shining) is the Venetian Room. The lavish space, which is dripping in gold and crystals, was created in 1906 by architect Stanford White. White was the very real (and very troubled) architect who designed the fictitious mansion for the Russells.

In addition to the Ukrainian and French diplomatic buildings, you can see (sadly, only the exterior of) the spectacular 1899 Beaux-Arts Fabbri Mansion, which is now the residence of the

Japanese ambassador to the United Nations. It’s located at 11 East 62nd St., but it looks as if it was lifted out of Paris and wedged into Manhattan. The nearby American Irish Historical Society at 991 Fifth Ave. is another Gilded Age Beaux-Arts beauty. The Historical Society put the building on the market last year for \$52 million. It’s been reduced to \$44 million, so if you’re looking for a bargain on a Gilded Age mansion, get your checkbook ready.

Slightly more affordable than purchasing a mansion is admission to the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum. The museum is housed in what was Andrew Carnegie’s mansion at 91st Street. Carnegie was a Gilded Age pioneer. When he purchased his land in 1898, it was a mile north of where his wealthy contemporaries were building. Also, unlike his contemporaries, he eschewed French design, opting instead for Georgian Revival.

Another mansion-turned-museum is the Frick Collection, which was the home of industrialist Henry Clay Frick. The museum is currently under renovation and the building closed, but when it reopens you will be able to get a good look at the structure’s French-inspired design, along with its impressive Gilded Age-era collection of art.

After three hours of walking, exploring, and trudging through puddles, I ended my tour at the Neue Galerie. It currently houses the Museum for German and Austrian Art, along with the insanely popular Café Sabarsky. I was here for the architecture, but I wouldn’t have minded an order of spätzle with wild mushrooms. Like the Frick mansion, the gallery was designed by Carrère and Hastings, the same architects who designed the New York Public Library. It was commissioned by industrialist William Starr Miller, but is fondly remembered as the residence of Grace Vanderbilt.

This is a place where you can look at art, dine, and chat with companions. Essentially you can do all of the things here that the upper crust of late 19th-century New York society would have done during an evening out. Perhaps, for a moment, you’ll even feel as if you’ve entered the Gilded Age — minus the bustles, starched collars, and, thankfully, the vicious gossip.

Context Travel offers private Gilded Age tours. Check www.contexttravel.com or call 800-691-6036. Bowery Boys Walking History Tours is offering a Gilded Age tour April 2 at 11 a.m. Check www.boweryboyswalks.com or call 844-426-9379. The company is hosting a free virtual event called “The Gilded City: An Insider’s Look at New York City 1870-1900 March 8 at 7 p.m.”

Christopher Muther can be reached at christopher.muther@globe.com.

Ties to the Gilded Age and ‘The Gilded Age’

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but why not sample some of that Gilded Age gloss (minus the greed and backstabbing) yourself? Some of the mansions are open now, and you’ll have plenty of room to yourself, before the tourists arrive in May. On a recent visit, we decided to live like a Vanderbilt, just for a weekend. Here’s how to do it in style — even if you don’t have an industrialist’s income.

Where to stay: Hotel Viking

In Newport’s Historic Hill neighborhood, Hotel Viking has hosted presidents, suffragettes, tennis stars, and Bob Dylan. This circa 1926 property also housed house guests of the families who summered in the mansions. The 208-room hotel has been renovated, of course, but it retains elements of old, like an original letterbox. “We’ve put great effort into keeping the place historic,” says marketing manager Ellinor Walters. “It’s a great place to immerse yourself in Old Newport.” The mansions are within walking distance, and the hotel’s four specialty “mansion suites” offer old-school luxury. From \$160; www.hotelviking.com.

The Newport Mansions

Among the mansions shown in the TV series, some are open now, or will be soon. **The Elms**, which opens on April 1, was built in 1801 for the family of coal baron Edward Julius Berwind. Designed to emulate a Parisian chateau, this 60,000-square-foot house is the only mansion with a conservatory, and it holds the largest intact collection of Venetian paintings found outside Venice (a total of 10), according to Melanie Garcia, director of museum experience at The Preservation Society of Newport



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County. It’s amazing to think that, in 1962, this home was nearly demolished; a Berwind heir had auctioned the contents and sold it to a developer. The Newport Preservation Society purchased the house, and recovered some of the original furnishings. For the series, filming took place in Hermione Berwind’s bedroom and in the Elms kitchens, appearing as the kitchen at the Russells’ house. Much of the action with the servants takes place here, Garcia says. To get a sense of what their lives were like, sign up for the Elms Servant Life Tour. This “downstairs” tour includes the boiler room, laundry room, basement kitchens, coal cellar, and lots of stairs.

Open daily as of Feb. 19, **Marble House** is a stunner. There’s marble from Italy, South Africa, and elsewhere — some 500,000 cubic feet of the stone. In the TV series, Marble House interiors stand in for the Russell family’s Fifth Avenue palace. And palatial it is; the house was built in 1892 by William Kissam Vanderbilt to mimic the Palace of Versailles in Paris. This house, along with The Breakers, was designed by noted architect Richard Morris Hunt. Vanderbilt built Marble House as a birthday present for his wife, Alva. “Alva’s family had lost their money and it was her job to marry rich. That, she did,” Garcia says, and she made her

Marble House (left) and the Elms (right) in Newport, R.I.

mark, gilding the house to the hilt (don’t miss the Grand Salon, a.k.a. the Gold Room) and hosting lavish costume balls. Was Alva the inspiration for ruthless social climber Bertha Russell in “The Gilded Age”? Hard to say at this point in the series, but there are definite similarities. In the show, the bedroom of Consuelo Vanderbilt (William and Alva’s daughter) appears as the bedroom of George Russell.

Now open daily, **The Breakers** is the grandest of Newport’s summer cottages. Built for Cornelius II and Alice Vanderbilt in 1895, the 70-room, 138,000-square-foot home was modeled after Italian Renaissance palaces. The French Baroque-style music room, a fantasy of crystal, marble, and gold leaf, was used in the series as the ballroom at the Russell House. If you watch the show closely, you’ll recognize the Billiard Room, designed by Hunt and featuring a Roman bath-inspired look. The room is lined with marble and alabaster, inset with semi-precious stones in the shape of a billiard cue.

Note: If you visit in summer, when most people do, consider picnicking on the grounds of the mansions. You’ll need a ticket, and it’s BYO lunch and a



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

blanket, but what a lovely way to enjoy the splendid settings of the mansions. For current mansion schedules and ticket prices, visit www.newportmansions.org.

International Tennis Hall of Fame

How does this sporty site, complete with a talking hologram of Roger Federer, play into the Gilded Age theme? It is set in the Newport Casino, established in 1880 as a place for socializing and recreation for Newport’s elite. The ultra-rich mansion dwellers didn’t build their own tennis courts, so they played here, in a fireplace-bedecked space designed by renowned architects McKim, Mead and White. “Socialite James Gordon Bennett wanted to build a social club that was open to the public to host concerts, events, and, of course, court tennis,” a combination of squash, racquetball, and tennis, says senior vice president of content & partnerships Julianna Barbieri. In 1881, the very first US National Lawn Tennis Championships was hosted here; the event remained in Newport through 1914, when it moved to New York and became the US Open. If you want to get a sense of what it was like to watch tennis during the Gilded Age, come to the Hall of Fame Open in July, the only grass court tournament outside of Europe, Barbieri suggests. Meanwhile, look for the New-

port Casino building as a backdrop in the TV series. \$18; www.tennis-fame.com.

Ocean Avenue

Want to see how current rich people live, with gorgeous ocean views? Take a drive along 10-mile Ocean Avenue. Begin at the intersection of Ocean and Coggeshall avenues, at the very end of Bellevue Avenue. Sites include Hammersmith Farm, Fort Adams State Park, and Gooseberry Beach.

Where to eat: White Horse Tavern

America’s oldest tavern opened its doors to guests in 1673, way before the Gilded Age, and was operating as a rooming house in 1895. It was acquired by the Preservation Society of Newport County and began operating as a restaurant in 1957. But it fits with the “old Newport” theme, and the menu is definitely rich; beef Wellington is a signature entree, made the traditional way with foie gras mousse and puff pastry. There’s also lobster bisque, escargot, and even caviar service. Just another Tuesday dinner at the Vanderbilts’ back in the day. whitehorsenewport.com.

For more information: www.discovernewport.org.

Diane Bair and Pamela Wright can be reached at bairwright@gmail.com.