

VERANDA

A Lavish Seafaring Journey Leads to the Rediscovery of New England's Most Magnificent Coastal Inns

Inspired by the 1950s-born *La Route du Bonheur*, this epic sail features three historic stays, from Watch Hill, Rhode Island, to Nantucket.



TRACEY MINKIN APR 28, 2020



To arrive by boat is to *arrive*.

And this is precisely how I feel, perched on the bright-white bow of a Hinckley, accepting a top off of Veuve Clicquot and feeling a sun-warmed, land-borne breeze mix with the salty cool of the Atlantic.

The tidy harbor's Victorian shop fronts grow larger. My captain draws down our engine to a purr as we cinch gently to dock. There, a small coterie lends hands for steady hopping from ship to shore. My luggage is nimbly hoisted and spirited away, and I'm welcomed like a queen of the seas. Because I too am arriving by boat, having gained passage on a rare maritime journey.

The man behind the helm is Doug Gray, cofounder of [Barton & Gray Mariners Club](#) and a seaman long inspired by the land-based bit of genius known as *La Route du Bonheur*. "The route of happiness" was invented in 1954 as a road trip that linked eight French inns on back roads from Paris to Nice. This evolved into Relais & Châteaux, the now-worldwide network of more than 580 luxury hotels and restaurants, a handful of which dot the New England coast.



Ocean House's grand Shingle Style entrance in Watch Hill, Rhode Island

CHIP RIEGEL



A gentle directive to the shore at Ocean House in Watch Hill, Rhode Island

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Why not, wondered Gray, adapt the route into a journey undertaken via one of his club's staffed Hinckleys, creating a daisy chain of peak luxury travel that captures the seaside romance of these destinations without the quotidian nuisance of automobiles? He wryly dubbed it Boat du Bonheur, picking three Relais & Châteaux properties as his ports of call.

We begin in Watch Hill, the Rhode Island enclave that has served for a century and a half as a breezy summer escape for overheated Northeastern millionaires and socialites. And we aim for the grandest of grande dame hotels.

Built in 1868, [Ocean House](#) perches bluff-top and is a broad-shouldered, canary yellow marvel. We nestle in front of its massive, original beach-stone fireplace, gape at the vast collection of Ludwig Bemelmans drawings dotting the hallways, and take to our lofty sea-facing rooms like ship captains returning from distant lands. But not before we revel in a five-course seasonal tasting menu that includes caviar, foie gras, and local scallops. It is an appropriately rich beginning.

The next morning, we vote to cruise into Narragansett Bay, a broad assertion of the Atlantic wedging into Rhode Island's coast, for oysters both raw and Rockefeller at one of Gray's favorite bivalve hideaways—[Matunuck Oyster Bar](#)—then shove off to meander past lighthouses and fortresses, skirt beneath bridges, and chase a sailing regatta, before carrying on to Rhode Island's famed city of Newport. The sun shines. The sea, sky, and our Hinckley's hull compete for the most perfect shade of blue.



Alexander Agassiz's Victorian mansion from the water at Newport's Castle Hill Inn

COURTESY OF CASTLE HILL INN



A Hinckley ticked away in Castle Hill Inn's hidden harbor

TRACEY MINKIN

Perfection, it turns out, comes in waves. Set at the mouth of Narragansett Bay, the main mansion at Newport's [Castle Hill Inn](#) is a Shingle Style confection of turrets and bays, gables and domes, built for marine biologist and naturalist Alexander Agassiz in 1874. And even more delightful than viewing Castle Hill from the water is to swing into her narrow, granite-lined natural harbor. It's like a secret entry: a thrill that wraps a bootlegger's bolt-hole with Gilded Age mystique.

The staff scoots us via golf carts from the dock to the briny, steaming reveal of our own private clambake. Here, we learn over cocktails, the playwright and novelist Thornton Wilder often hid away while writing, and the incandescent Grace Kelly retreated while filming *High Society* in 1956. It's like we are joining that enviable legacy, saluting the lowering sun as it illuminates the sails of boats tacking toward home ports.



An afternoon picnic at sea aboard a Barton & Gray Mariners Club excursion

DOUGLAS GRAY