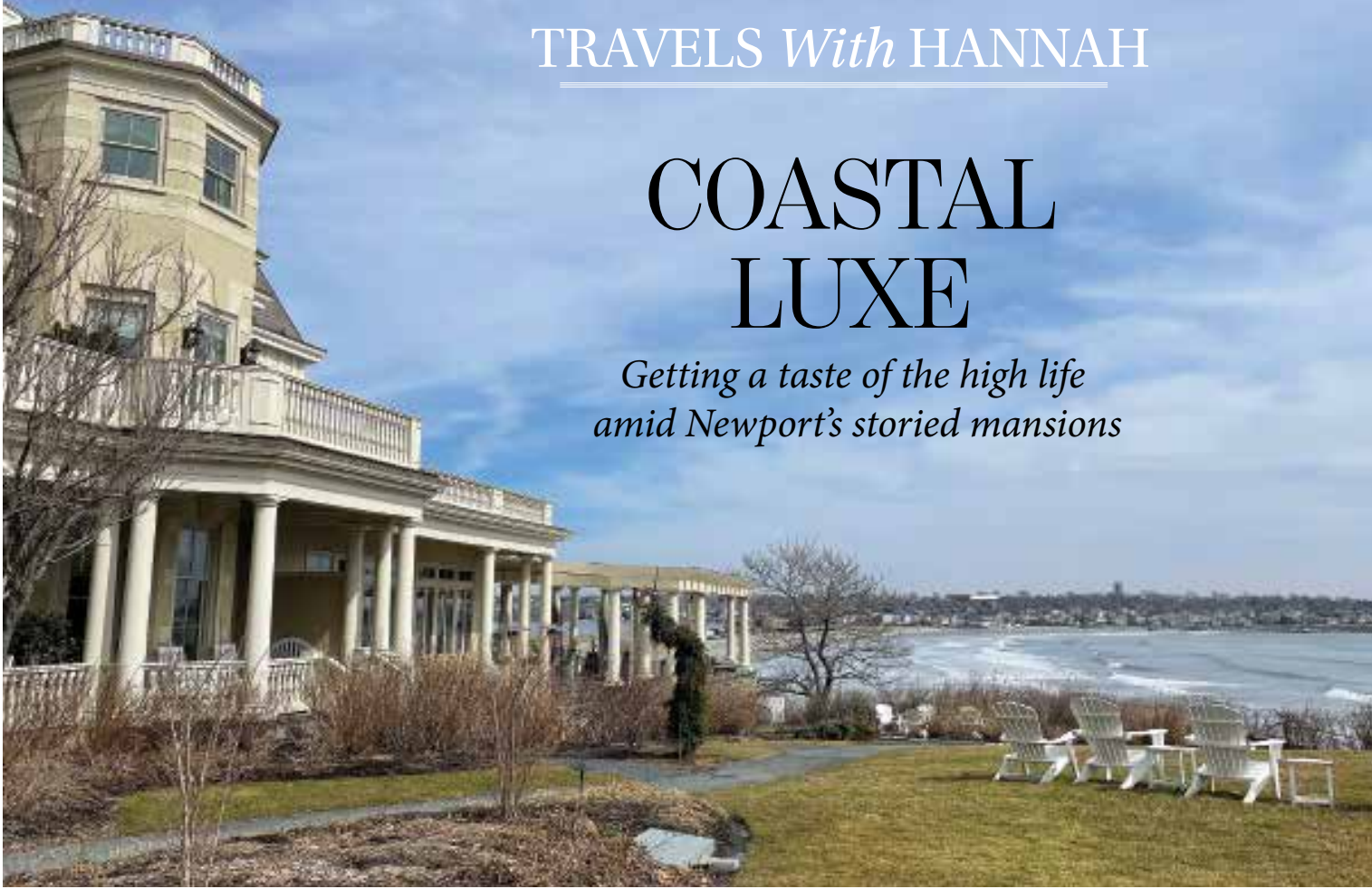


# COASTAL LUXE

*Getting a taste of the high life  
amid Newport's storied mansions*



BY HANNAH SELINGER

According to National Geographic, everyone in the state of Rhode Island — nicknamed the Ocean State for this very reason, I suspect — lives within a half hour of the sea. There are 400 miles of coastline within this smallest of states, and that's easy to forget if you come from a coastal state, like I do.

In nearly 40 years, I have only lived in two states: Massachusetts, to Rhode Island's north, and New York, to its south, both with their own magnificent coastlines.

Maybe it's easy to forget about Rhode Island. In summer camp, which I spent in Maine for three summers, we sang what became a camp ballad: "I was Rhode Island born, and Rhode Island bred, and when I die, I'll be Rhode Island dead, so Rho-rho, Rhode Island, Island, Rho-rho, Rhode Island, Island, Rho-rho, Rhode Island, URI."

It's the collegiate cry of the University of Rhode Island, which had somehow made its way into my all-girls Jewish summer camp, transported, I assume, in the wayward duffel of a counselor with Ocean State aspirations, Rhode Island pride. But when we sang it, we didn't think much of actual Rhode Island, of its cliff-hugging mansions, winter surfers waiting



*A view of the Chanler at Newport's Cliff Walk, top, which overlooks Easton Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Above, a painted ceiling at Ava Belmont's Marble House, one of several mansions open to the public.*

HANNAH SELINGER PHOTOS

out the waves at Newport's Easton's Beach.

There is, of course, a New England allegiance among those of us who come from the six states that make up the region, a spirit shared. On a wintry-mix March afternoon, I boarded a series of boats en route to Newport, the tony old-money town not unlike the Hamptons: In the offseason, it's a little sleepy, in a good way, an ideal place to wander and look through thinned plantings at mansions that stand crisp over the growling Atlantic. Jacqueline Bouvier and Jack Kennedy married in Newport at St. Mary's Church in 1953 and held their reception at Jackie's childhood home, Hammersmith Farm, also in Newport.

My guest was running late, caught in Bostonian traffic. But I had come from the East End and had an easy time reaching my hotel, the Chanler at Cliff Walk, navigating little more than bobbing boats.

Marking the start of Newport's famed Cliff Walk, which traces the sea and affords a view of some of the city's most impressive real estate, is the Chanler, a 20-room property with multiple dining venues and ceaseless historic charm. Once the so-called cottage of New York Congressman John Winthrop Chanler and his wife, Margaret Astor Ward, the 1870-era hotel enjoys 180-degree views of the water from the bar and



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dining areas.

In the English Tudor room, with its equestrian bent and canopy bed, I sat by a crackling fire as a snowy half-storm collected outside. The room's most impressive feature, a 6-foot Jacuzzi tub within its own oak cabinetry, nearly convinced me to abandon my evening plan for dinner in town — though not quite.

Each room at the Chanler is an individual experience (a reason to come back: standing in the hallway, I stole a look into the powder blue Renaissance room, with its four-poster bed and view of the sea, and made a mental note to stay there upon next visit), and the property feels like a microcosm of Newport itself, an otherworldly step back into old-money, blue-blooded New England.

It's not hard to imagine yourself, in this setting, reclining on a divan somewhere — or, more realistically, sunken into the hotel's exquisitely comfortably leather sofa at the bar, French pear martini in hand.

Still, I found a way to pry myself from the hotel's stopped-time appeal. Despite its reputation as a summer-specific spot, Newport was hopping on a Wednesday night at Bar 'Cino, the informal Italian spot where my traffic-beleaguered guest and I found ourselves a little while later. The influence of Al Forno's famous grilled pizza — developed in nearby Providence — has infiltrated the Rhode Island soul, adopted at Bar 'Cino, too, where massive pies are grate-grilled and served on plate-tipping platters.

Buzzy, inexpensive food flew around the full dining room (for us: mushroom risotto, spaghetti carbonara, bruschetta with tomato confit and mozzarella, and a light lemon-mascarpone cake so delightful that we forgave the server the impasse of being out of the tiramisu).

Unlike in the Hamptons, where sky-high privet protects prying eyes from seeing the priciest of real estate, Newport's homes are made for gawking. After a night sleeping in English refinement, we walked along the Cliff Walk until we hit the detour. Recently, a 20-foot section of the walk suffered a collapse, forcing pedestrians to circle back along side streets — but this is actually a happy detour, weaving walkers through Salve Regina University, a spectacular private college founded in 1934 that is surrounded by some of the area's most astonishing homes.

Which brought us to our first mansion of the day: the Breakers, a Gilded Age mansion constructed between 1893 and 1895 and used as the summer residence for Cornelius Vanderbilt II and his extended family. You can't touch anything inside, though it's hard: You want to run your fingers against the gold leaf interior



From top, meals at the Chanler's yurt dinner are served family-style; an opulently outfitted music room at the Breakers; one of three fully outfitted yurts, which can be booked as private dining rooms at the Chanler. HANNAH SELINGER PHOTOS

of the library, the alabaster columns that run throughout the Italian Renaissance villa, the Tiffany-issued sconces that have accrued the necessary patina of time.

Later, we meandered farther down stately Bellevue Avenue, the historic district home to some of the area's most impressive homes, which stand, statuesque, awaiting their visitors. At the Marble House, built between 1888 and 1892 and once the home of William K. Vanderbilt and suffragette Ava Belmont, we walked along the peach-colored Italian marble floors (it lines the walls, too). In the home's rear, a pagoda, overlooking the sea, was once the site of many a women's rights meeting.

Back at the Chanler, we had our own mansion for the evening, one of the property's three yurts, which must be reserved in advance. The heated yurts can accommodate from two to five guests and include a veritable feast, served family style. Inside, fur-covered chairs, pillows, and blankets recalled a Nordic north.

We were offered a speaker to play our own favorite tunes, and then a rolling buffet of food

arrived: freshly baked breads, including warm pretzel bread with melted butter; charred Brussels sprouts with pickled enoki mushrooms; cured salmon brightened by shaved radish and kumquats; a whole head of cauliflower, topped with a sauce made from capers; spaetzle cooked in bacon fat; slow-braised pork belly with a candy-sweet and crisp layer of top fat; German potato salad tossed in homemade mustard; roasted local root vegetables; and, for dessert, three thick and gleaming triangles of chocolate cake, served with shiny quenelles of coffee ice cream.

The next morning, we bid adieu to the Chanler and, eventually, to Newport in the way that a visitor must: with a spin down Ocean Drive to peep at the moss-covered homes that stare out onto the rocky coast. If the road begs you to drive fast, the homes do the opposite, asking you to slow down, to gawk at their sheer majesty.

Is this really a place, we wondered? With no privet to hide it, we could see every last detail, every staggering home, tipping toward the sea — in this smallest of states, which feels quite large when you're in it.