

TRAVEL + LEISURE

An aerial photograph of a rocky beach with clear turquoise water. People are swimming in the water and sunbathing on the pebbly shore. Many colorful umbrellas and towels are scattered across the beach. The background shows a rocky cliffside.

S U M M E R

E S C A P E S



CHARMED, I'M SURE

Tucked away on a discreet corner of the Rhode Island coast, two hotels with roots in the 19th century—one opulent and grand, the other rustic and homey—are winning over a new generation of fans.

BY JAMES HANNAHAM

◀ The rebuilt *Ocean House*, in Watch Hill, Rhode Island, was modeled after the Victorian-era original.

LAST MARCH, AS New York City became the global epicenter of the pandemic, my husband, Brendan, and I decided to spend the weekend away, at a family retreat in southern Rhode Island. Our weekend away lasted seven months. By my birthday in August, most believers in science had figured out that masks helped to prevent outbreaks and hotels weren't hot spots. Brendan and I had grown stir-crazy enough to risk playing tourist for a few days, so we decided to celebrate by experiencing a couple of well-known local resorts.

Our first destination was the magnificent **Ocean House** (oceanhouseri.com; doubles from \$860) in the village of Watch Hill, a place that had always seemed to us like a hotel that broke off from Newport and floated down the coast. Originally opened in 1868, it fell into disrepair in the late 20th century and was demolished in 2005. An almost exact replica opened on the same site in 2010. The elegant finish of the reborn version evokes the building's Gilded Age origins—hexagonal bathroom tiles, dark-wood lounges, and beadboard ceilings abound.

▼ *Napatree Point*, an 86-acre preserve in the village of Watch Hill.



I've never felt that a hotel had a crush on me before, but I'm pretty sure Ocean House was trying to tell me something. While its defining features include a commanding position facing Block Island Sound; a private beach; Coast, a luxe restaurant; and, from the veranda, views of three states (not to mention Taylor Swift's mansion down the street), the service is supernaturally attentive. After the evening turndown, we discovered that, in addition to chocolate-coconut patties, we'd received tiny gifts: a Velcro ribbon to tie up my power cords and a cloth for Brendan to clean his computer screen. I've spent whole relationships waiting in vain for that kind of thoughtfulness. A real orchid by the extra-deep bathtub? Ocean House, you shouldn't have!

I tend to get uncomfortable with the way some Americans intertwine visions of wealth and nostalgia with whiteness, heterosexuality, and the erasure of people of color, so I gave the side-eye to the game of croquet on the lawn, as well as the Euro-swank drawings by Ludwig Bemelmans (of *Madeline* fame) in the hallways. I had one encounter where someone seemed to question my right to be in such a fancy hotel, but it occurred in the blurry "Can I help you?" zone where what could merely be attentive customer service can inspire Black paranoia. Some of the swag proved too extravagant to ignore—I am American, after all. We were given free use of our choice of Mercedes-Benzes, and couldn't resist a brief spin in a convertible. I pretended I was 2 Chainz on *Most Expensivest*.

Bathtub orchids and over-the-top transportation are great, but the only way to justify such excess during a pandemic was to remind ourselves that we were helping the tourism industry—and, more importantly, its people—rebound. I talked to many Ocean House employees, workers from South Africa, Jamaica, and Iran on H-1B visas who couldn't go home. Their ability to speak openly about their employment and immigration status seemed to prove that Ocean House management treats them well. Two glasses of Gewürztraminer and a Wagyu short rib later, I had to admit it—I was starting to fall in love with the hotel right back.

We spent a few more days at the **Weekapaug Inn** (weekapauginn.com; doubles from \$550), which flies low even on the local radar. Seven miles away from Ocean House, it's nestled on a peninsula in a residential area exclusive enough to seem fictitious.

The Weekapaug's history is similar to that of Ocean House. Built as an inn on Quonochontaug

Ocean House's Tower Suite.

A summery spread at the Pondhouse, on the grounds of the Weekapaug Inn.



Beach in 1899, the place was nearly destroyed in a hurricane in 1938, and the remains were relocated to the peninsula, where it was rebuilt. The hotel has the atmosphere of a hunting lodge from 100 years ago. In contrast to Ocean House's jaunty yellow exterior, the Weekapaug blends in to its surroundings, its weathered wooden siding accented by red shutters and multiple brick chimneys. You approach the entrance over a moat. The rooms are intentionally somewhat small (though the bathrooms are not), to inspire guests to spend more time outside.

While waiting for dinner in the open-air Pondhouse, a kind of lean-to that felt both

socially distanced and privately posh, we found a path leading to a tiny stretch of shoreline with two chairs, where we watched an egret commune with a great blue heron. But what about the bugs? In keeping with the log-cabin vibe, the Weekapaug has a number of eco-friendly policies. They've installed special birdhouses to attract purple martins, which keep the mosquito population down.

If the Weekapaug seems like a Wes Anderson fantasy, it helps to remember that it is—the director's 2012 *Moonrise Kingdom* was filmed in Rhode Island. Despite its small size, the state is 56 percent forest, and has nearly 400 miles of coast. Over the course of our months-long hiatus, we spent so many afternoons getting lost in piney nature preserves, traipsing across empty beaches, and slurping down oysters that we soon understood why retired Rhode Islanders stay put. When we thought of going back home to New York City, it started to seem, as the locals say, "Too fah." ●