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Rhode Island's Ocean House: The grandest hotel in America's smallest state



Rhode Island's Ocean House



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By Claire Wrathall

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From the widow's walk at the top of the heavenly Ocean Suite, the owner's apartment at the Ocean House hotel, you can look out over three states. Gaze out to sea and there in the distance is Montauk on the tip of Long Island, New York. Turn to your right, and over the Pawcatuck River lies Connecticut. While the state you're in, so to speak, is Rhode Island, specifically Watch Hill, the smart enclave that Taylor Swift, among others, calls home.

In terms of landmass Rhode Island may be the smallest state in the union, but it is rich in historic architecture and enchanting little New England towns such as Mystic, and in the Ocean House it has a splendid and venerable hotel. Established in 1868, this great, yellow chateau-style edifice stands on a bluff above 300 yards of immaculate sandy beach.



Sea views from an Ocean House cabana

The building itself is not original. A revision of local fire codes following a terrible nightclub fire in the state in 2003 meant the existing building had to be demolished as it could not be brought up to the standards of the state's new exacting fire code. But more than 5,000 artifacts from fireplaces to columns to the original elevator car were salvaged, and the hotel was reconstructed at a cost of more than \$140 million as a more-or-less exact replica of the first Ocean House, but



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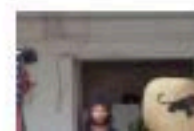
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with 21st-century bathrooms, facilities and fewer, more generous rooms. Where once there had been 159, now there are 57 including 18 signature suites.

Even if the structure is new, the building is sufficiently full of interest to justify a daily tour. Indeed without someone to point them out, I might have missed some of the substantial number of works by Ludwig Bemelmans, creator of the *Madeline* books. New York's Carlyle may have the murals in the bar that takes his name, but here they have five murals from La Colombe, a bistro once owned by the artist, as well as a series of works he created for the playroom on Aristotle Onassis's yacht Christina. Further exploration of the hotel will reveal 21 original Bemelmans illustrations commissioned by Town & Country magazine to commemorate the demolition of the original Ritz Carlton in New York in 1951.



The hotel's Club Room bar



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The Ocean House is an enchanting place for a couple of days' r'n'r. One could do worse that stay put enjoying the spa and gym (the first I've seen that has not personal trainers, but a virtual one that appears on a screen at the touch of a button to lead a fitness class), the saltwater lap pool and the two daily film screenings in the in-house cinema. If you want to venture further afield, three are five Mercedes – an SUV and cabriolet and roadster convertibles among them – that guests can borrow on a complimentary basis (the idea is that you'll be tempted to buy one) to explore the local coastline or nearby "Connecticut River Loop".



Suite accommodation at the hotel

I never got to dine at Seasons, the Forbes five-star-rated fine-dining restaurant, though I enjoyed the New England clam chowder and lobster rolls in the less expensive Bistro. But what impressed me most was the kindness of the staff. I was flying out of Boston late that night and had asked for a late check-out. Half an hour before I was due to leave, there was a knock at the door. They knew I'd be travelling so they'd brought me some snacks to take with me: nothing fancy, just some cheeses, cold meats, crackers, almonds, raisins and a bag of salted caramels.

It wasn't so much the provisions – though they constituted a more than welcome supper – as the thought. And the fact that it was not done in expectation of a tip, for this is the first US hotel I've stayed in where on checking in, you are given card that states that except in the restaurants and bar, all gratuities are included in the rate.

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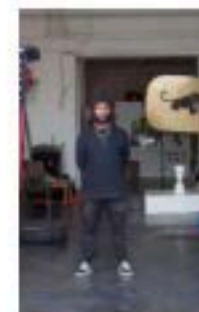
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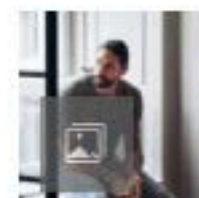
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