

ANDREW HARPER'S Hideaway Report[®]

MARCH 2022

SINCE 1979

Traveling the world in search of truly enchanting places



BAR MARILOU: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON

New Orleans: Four New Luxury Hotels

Dramatic décor, sumptuous cuisine, glamorous bars, exceptional service

Just as New Orleans weathered the assault of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the pandemic hasn't put a damper on the city's indomitable spirit. On our recent trip, we found that the famous restaurant and live music scenes remain vibrant. And as always seems to happen in the Big Easy, we ate too much and stayed up too late and absolutely loved it.

Travelers also come to New Orleans to absorb its atmosphere of decaying grandeur. The French Quarter, a unique amalgam of old European and Caribbean architecture, still feels transported from centuries past. Gas lamps flicker alongside many doorways, making a nighttime walk in the quieter corners feel like time travel. The historic center boasts a high concentration of classic

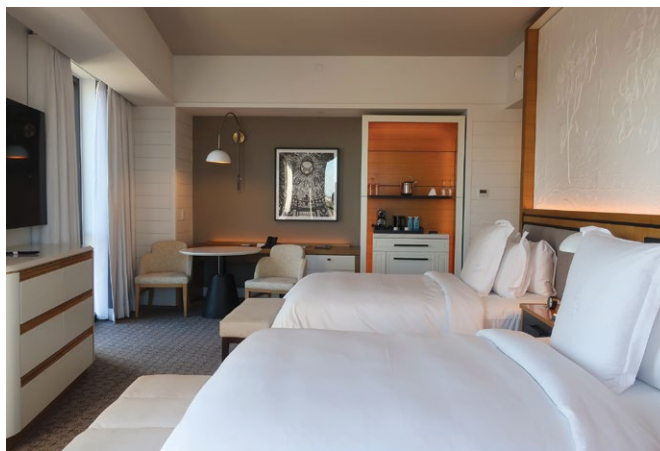
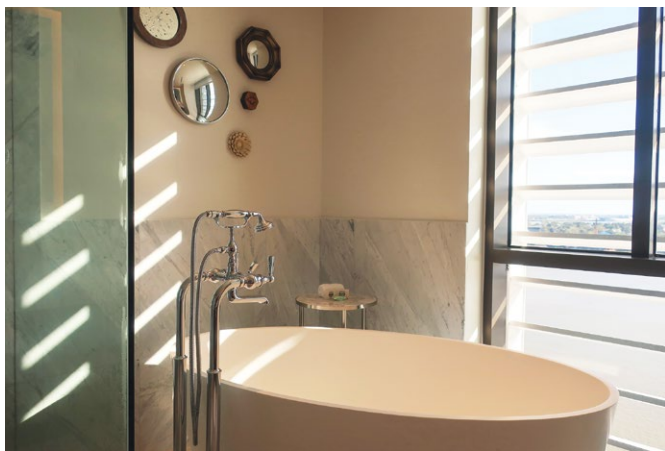
dining and jazz venues — in addition to the bars of notoriously raucous Bourbon Street — but many of the most notable new openings are elsewhere. On this trip, we spent much of our time in surrounding neighborhoods such as the Warehouse and Garden districts.

Dining and nightlife aside, the main reason for my return to New Orleans

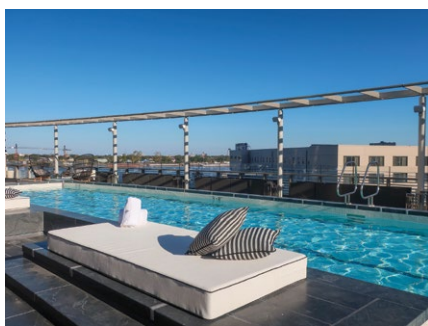
Andrew Harper editors travel anonymously and pay full rate for all lodging, meals and related expenses.

Since the launch of the *Hideaway Report* in 1979, featured hotels and restaurants have been selected on a completely independent basis.

For comments and inquiries, please email memberservices@andrewharper.com.



Bath and bedroom of our Premier River View Room, Four Seasons Hotel New Orleans



Lap pool, Four Seasons Hotel New Orleans

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Our corner Premier River View Room offered everything we needed ... except a sense of place and a good night's sleep.

was to evaluate four new luxury hotels. The splashiest opening was that of the 341-room **Four Seasons Hotel New Orleans**, occupying the 33-story former World Trade Center building. The white riverfront tower, dating from 1968, does not rank among the city's architectural jewels, which is all the more reason to commend Four Seasons for its renovation: The public spaces feel fresh and luxe.

Strings of crystals arranged to look like a giant chandelier dangle from the double-height ceiling of the ground floor, centerpiecing a stylish bar-lounge clad in black and white marble. A jazz combo accompanied the cocktails we sipped there, including a pleasingly tart traditional Hurricane. I recommend

stopping here for a drink before or after dinner in one of the hotel's two notable restaurants.

We had a superb meal at Miss River, a brasserie-like space helmed by highly regarded chef Alon Shaya. His “elevated take on New Orleans favorites” included a subtle salad of local amaranth greens and mâche with crunchy chunks of mirliton (chayote squash), shaved black truffle and thick green goddess dressing. But my main course was the real star: redfish with oysters, crab and shrimp stewed in a thickened court-bouillon reminiscent of sauce Nantua. Service was both friendly and professional.

Another acclaimed local chef, Donald Link, will run the Four Seasons' second restaurant, the river-view Chemin à la Mer. It hadn't yet opened as of our visit, which meant that the adjacent pool terrace lacked food and beverage service. Nevertheless, when we arrived at the pool, a staff member hastened to set up umbrella-shaded loungers for us and brought over bottles of water. The long pool is less than four feet deep, but it works well for laps.

Our corner Premier River View Room offered everything we needed, including comfortable beds, a chaise longue and a spacious marble bath with a freestanding oval tub by a river-facing window. It offered everything, that is, except a sense of place and a good night's sleep. The room lacked color and character and could have been anywhere.

Only the uninspiring view of the river, the Crescent City Connection bridge and a distant oil refinery offered clues as to our location. Worse, train tracks following the river run directly beneath the hotel. The complimentary earplugs did not block out the train horns that blasted at 12:54, 1:34 and 5:15 a.m. on our first night.

The Four Seasons New Orleans has many merits, but they are irrelevant when it's hard to sleep. The traditional and long-recommended Windsor Court Hotel, the Four Seasons' nearest competitor, offers both character and quiet, making it the preferable property.

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On the other end of the spectrum, the new **Hotel Saint Vincent** bursts with color. The 75-room hotel occupies a former orphanage in the Lower Garden District. The imposing main brick building dates from 1861, and it retains period details including wood floors, moldings and an impressive original staircase. Well-regarded Austin-based hotelier Liz Lambert and her business partner Larry McGuire have otherwise transformed the interior, using eclectic vintage furnishings, dramatic lighting and saturated paints to foster an atmosphere of quirky, louche luxury. The guests-only bar, for example, has a chaste name, the Chapel Club, but the red neon light surrounding its black doors makes its entrance look like that

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The walls around the dimly lit sink were covered in green and fuchsia marbled wallpaper, and the walk-in shower assaulted the eye with glaring pinkish-orange tile.

of a disreputable Montmartre nightclub. It was closed during our stay, alas.

We were able to enjoy creative cocktails in the bright tropical-themed Paradise Lounge, which is open to the public. At the next table, two young Austinites were planning — what else? — a music festival. But the Hotel Saint Vincent is best known among locals for its fine Italian restaurant, San Lorenzo (book well in advance). In addition to a long veranda facing an attractive courtyard, it has a busy but romantic candlelit dining room. I relished the squid-ink chitarra (like thick spaghetti) packed with fresh crabmeat and sea urchin, as well as the red snapper à la Francese, which came lightly breaded and coated in a silky lemon-butter sauce. I was less enamored of the affected sommelier. He recommended a glass of the most expensive white wine, a Burgundy, to pair with the fish. When I requested a white Italian alternative, of which there were five, he replied, “Well... I don’t think the Carricante would really go. It’s... whimsical.”

Matters deteriorated further in our wood-floored Veranda Suite, which, true to its name, had a broad veranda overlooking the lounge-lined pool in the main courtyard. Inside, the walls of the living room and bedroom were battleship gray. The latter was always dark despite its tall window, and there was barely enough room to maneuver around the bed. The 409-square-foot space would have been more comfortable had it been open-plan. Likewise the bath. It, too, was chopped into small pieces, but gray it was not. The walls around the dimly lit sink were covered in green and fuchsia marbled wallpaper, and the walk-in shower assaulted the eye with glaring pinkish-orange tile.

Inconsistent service was also an issue. We lacked luggage racks, hand cream and slippers, for example. A housekeeper provided the former but not the slippers. They “may or may not be placed in guest rooms,” according to the front desk. “It depends.” There was no valet in evidence. And although the Hotel Saint Vincent has a restaurant, it doesn’t offer breakfast. Excellent baked goods are available via room service from the neighboring Elizabeth Street Café.

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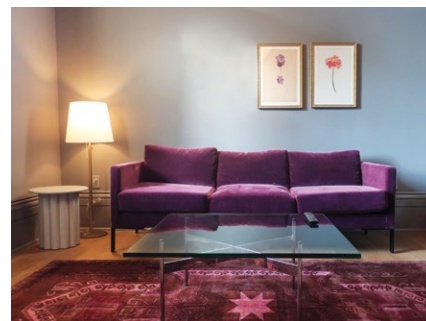
Eager to flee the visual attack from our suite, we moved on to another recently opened hotel, the 67-room **Maison de la Luz**. It was here, in a

former annex to the city hall within walking distance of the French Quarter and the Warehouse District, that I discovered what I was looking for: a combination of local character, contemporary comfort and attentive service.

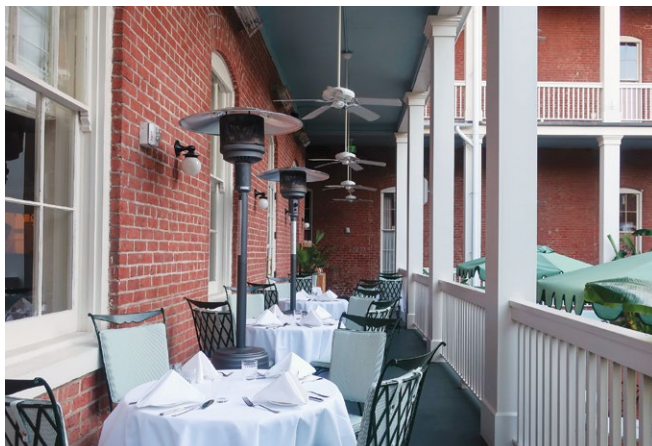
Since our room wasn’t ready, we followed the front desk’s suggestion and had a snack from the well-presented breakfast buffet in the lobby-lounge. Decorated with African masks and paintings emblazoned with hieroglyphics, the lounge resembled the salon of a wealthy world traveler.

When we returned to the hotel after visiting the nearby Ogden Museum of Southern Art, a man approached us as we eyed the lounge’s honor bar. “Shall we see if your room is ready?” he asked, remembering us from before. His name was Byron, and he always seemed to be everywhere in the hotel at once. Our room still wasn’t available, but Byron was undaunted. After consulting with the front desk, he offered to upgrade us from a Deluxe Studio Suite to a Grand Studio Suite on the second floor (the level with the highest ceilings).

Detail of our Veranda Suite, Hotel Saint Vincent



Terrace seating at San Lorenzo restaurant and pool, Hotel Saint Vincent



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We emerged from a trick bookcase into a scarlet space resembling a cross between a speakeasy and a library.

I immediately fell in love with our room, a soaring and light-filled open-plan space with towering windows on two sides. Splashes of color — the navy headboard, rusty-orange area rug and army-green sofa spotted with turquoise flowers — contrasted with the bleached-wood floors and pearl-gray walls. The combination felt both chic and inviting. The sunny bath was just as striking, with a mosaic floor of multicolored stone, a freestanding porcelain tub and a large walk-in shower.

Byron quickly brought our luggage to our suite and, later, served us a light room-service lunch of potpie filled with chicken, andouille, spinach and root vegetables. He also arranged for a carafe of coffee to be waiting outside our room each morning. Whenever he saw us in the hotel, he greeted us by name. Other staff members provided similarly

warm service. In the breakfast room, for example, the delightful waitress welcomed us as old friends after our first meal there.

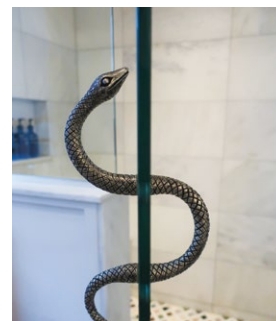
Aside from the breakfast room and adjoining lobby-lounge, the other amenity of the Maison de la Luz is Bar Marilou, accessed via a “secret” door from the lobby or an inconspicuous street entrance partially concealed by an arbor. We entered through the former, emerging from a trick bookcase into a scarlet space resembling a cross between a speakeasy and a library. Numerous options on the cocktail menu tempted and the selection of small plates was also impressive. I especially liked the Pommes Marilou (crispy cubes of thinly layered potato slices topped with crème fraîche and caviar) and the seared scallops with savory tasso ham cream and crunchy grit chips.

Guests of the Maison de la Luz also have access to the roof deck at the Ace Hotel across the street. The pool there is quite small, conducive to soaking, not swimming, and the food and drink were mediocre. Nevertheless, it’s a pleasant place to spend an hour or two with a book on a warm afternoon. (Changing rooms are available.)

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We reluctantly departed and headed west on St. Charles Avenue to an Uptown neighborhood, which, like the neighboring Garden District, is a gracious residential area of grand old homes shaded by live oaks. I’ve long hoped to find a luxury hideaway in this charming and quiet section of New Orleans, and **The Chloe** looked quite promising. Renovated by LeBlanc + Smith, this 14-room inn and restaurant, housed by a former mansion, opened in the autumn of 2020, just as Hurricane Zeta hit (it weathered the storm intact). The restaurant’s leafy patio in front of the 19th-century house, garlanded with strings of lights, made a favorable first impression.

Bedroom, sitting area, soaking tub and shower door handle of our Grand Studio Suite, Maison de la Luz





Public lounges, The Chloe



Inside, we discovered a surfeit of character. A cartoon alligator decorated the red carpet leading up the stairs, and opposite them, unrestored pocket doors led to a salon with an original mantelpiece, a palatial birdcage and a Spencer Tunick photo, among other disparate but surprisingly cohesive decorative pieces. In general, walking into The Chloe is a bit like walking into a cabinet of curiosities.

The ground floor is a warren of atmospheric rooms, including a small bar off the main salon, a gunmetal-blue lobby-lounge enlivened by modern art, and my favorite, the conservatory-like “Jewel Box” room, a hidden nook off reception where we started each day with scones and coffee from the simple continental breakfast buffet. Nearby, the airy, plant-filled main restaurant has become something of a hot spot, and understandably so. We had an excellent lunch on the shady rear deck overlooking the umbrella-lined swimming pool. My salad of sweet purple and golden beets with fried cubes of fish rillettes, mild horseradish cream and local greens offered appetizing flavor and texture contrasts, and I relished the wontonlike dumplings stuffed with shrimp pâté and garnished with crushed chiles, ginger and rich “étouffée sauce.”

One floor above, our Uptown King Room awaited us down a barely illuminated dark-green hallway. I quite liked the look of our room, with its ornate

mantel, oil paintings, comfortable sofa and armchair with upholstery resembling Iznik tile. A freestanding tub faced the bed, but we had trouble locating the rest of the bath as it was concealed behind a huge old wardrobe and accessible through its main door. The bath was quite compact, inciting conflict over territory for toiletries. The sides of the wardrobe also provided too little space for storage, and I didn’t appreciate the wire hangers within.

My mood improved after a spell beside the pool. I had almost forgiven our tiny brown bath by the time we headed to dinner. But noise from the bar directly below our room penetrated the wood floor, continuing until around 11 p.m. It was less intrusive than the train horns that had disturbed us at the Four Seasons, but I can’t endorse a hotel where it’s difficult to sleep. The search for a recommendable hideaway in Uptown or the Garden District continues. **HR**

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL NEW ORLEANS 88

LIKE The sleek renovation; the professional and helpful service; our room’s spacious and gleaming bath; the commendable restaurants. **DISLIKE** The building’s uninspiring architecture; our room’s lack of a sense of place; the loud train horns that repeatedly disturbed our sleep. **GOOD TO KNOW** The full-service spa is set to open sometime this month; there is a 34th-floor terrace available for private events. *Deluxe River View Room, \$860; River View Executive Suite, \$1,440. 2 Canal Street. Tel. (504) 434-5100.*

HOTEL SAINT VINCENT 89

LIKE The eye-catching style of the public spaces; the preserved period details; the inviting pool patio; the excellent Italian restaurant. **DISLIKE** Our suite’s claustrophobic, chopped-up layout; its garish bath; the restaurant’s pretentious sommelier; the room service-only breakfast. **GOOD TO KNOW** Avoid rooms 209 and 210, which have verandas flowing directly to a public veranda, giving the rooms little privacy; the guests-only Chapel Club is now open daily. *Veranda Suite, \$760; Superior Suite, \$1,920. 1507 Magazine Street. Tel. (504) 350-2450.*

MAISON DE LA LUZ 95

LIKE The grand architecture; the light but sumptuous décor; our large, airy room and its plush bath; the attentive and highly welcoming service; the chic speakeasy-like bar; the lobby-lounge’s well-stocked honor bar; the location convenient to both the French Quarter and Garden District. **DISLIKE** Guests have access to the neighboring Ace Hotel’s rooftop pool, but service there does not match that of the Maison de la Luz; the first morning of our stay, our coffee delivery was forgotten. **GOOD TO KNOW** Lower floors have the highest ceilings; make reservations for the bar in advance if possible; when we stayed, the breakfast buffet was set up only on the weekend (à la carte breakfast is always available). *Junior Deluxe Studio Suite, \$1,200; Grand Studio Suite, \$1,860. 546 Carondelet Street. Tel. (504) 608-4466.*

THE CHLOE 87

LIKE The tucked-away Uptown location; the dramatic and eclectic furnishings; the cheerful demeanor of the staff; the commendable restaurant; the bar’s creative cocktails; the attractive pool. **DISLIKE** Our compact bath clad in unappealing brown tile; the limited clothing storage; the continental breakfast buffet’s small selection; music from the bar invaded our room until around 11 p.m. **GOOD TO KNOW** The front desk keeps a selection of records guests can borrow to play on the high-quality turntables in the rooms; there is an elevator. *Uptown King, \$580; Avenue King, \$640. 4125 St. Charles Avenue. Tel. (504) 541-5500.*

Prices reflect average mid- to high-season rates (including taxes) and are subject to change.



Gulf fish amandine with Champagne cream sauce, brown-butter almonds, leeks and kale at Copper Vine; blue crab-stuffed beignets with malt vinegar aioli at La Petite Grocery; and gajar halwa with carrot, cardamom, amaretto cream and candied almonds at Saffron

Notable Restaurant Discoveries

New Orleans' Creole and Cajun restaurants have access to some of the world's best seafood. Many classic establishments show the influence of French technique, and Italian-inflected recipes are now popular as well. Today, more and more restaurants also reflect the traditions of the city's many Asian immigrants. Recent years have been tough for restaurateurs, but dining in New Orleans is as routinely sensational as ever.

COPPER VINE

This wine-themed restaurant won't win any awards for culinary innovation, but it's a pleasant venue for lunch in the Central Business District. Diners can sit on the shaded patio or in an airy dining room with a wall of windows. There are no fewer than 30 wines available on tap, as well as 19 additional higher-end selections available by half or full glass. We began with flutes of Dopff & Irion Crémant d'Alsace Rosé, which cut through the richness of some crawfish beignets with Meyer lemon aioli. My excellent main course of almond-crusted Gulf fish with Champagne cream sauce came atop leeks and kale studded with little dollops of briny tobiko. A glass of focused Sancerre was followed by a grapefruity Surh Cellars Sauvignon Blanc from the tap; I enjoyed both pairings. Lunch was tasty, but I can imagine coming here just to sit at the bar for a glass of wine. 1001 Poydras Street. Tel. (504) 208-9535.

MAYPOP

A block away from the Copper Vine in the Warehouse District, sleek Maypop has a fusion menu combining Creole, Italian and Southeast and South Asian cuisines. An example of the restaurant's approach was our appetizer of roasted bone marrow topped with escargot in a charred-lime jeow sauce accompanied by warm roti. This French-Lao-Indian mashup was a triumph: The garnish of fresh herbs leavened the sumptuous fattiness, as did the perk of lime. Main courses were also good if not as exciting. My crispy-skinned local pompano was moist and delicate, but the "spicy crab broth" lacked both spiciness and detectable crab. And I liked the pork shoulder with Chiang Mai curry and fried peanuts despite its being underseasoned. Overall, Maypop provides tasty contemporary New Orleans dining in a fashionable space that's convenient to a number of recommended hotels.

Closed Tuesday and Wednesday. 611 O'Keefe Avenue. Tel. (504) 518-6345.

MISTER MAO

Edgier than Maypop both in terms of cuisine and location, Mister Mao opened last July in an out-of-the-way cottage-like building in Uptown. It has two tropical-themed dining rooms and a chef's counter. On the menu, I spotted dishes with Mexican, Spanish, Italian, Indian, Thai, Korean and Hawaiian influences, among others. The majority of options are moderately to seriously spicy. A large bowl of lechon kawali (Filipino-style fried pork belly) was dangerously addictive, accompanied by toyomansi (citrusy soy sauce). A pile of sweet crab claws came dressed in olive oil, sherry vinegar and Turkish Marash chile. An Indian chaat platter had an oval of creamy burrata at its center, contrasting with the crunchy fried lentils and chickpeas and purple cauliflower florets coated in curry-

leaf oil. The coconut-red-curry sauce beneath a ring of chunky Thai shrimp cakes topped with mustard greens was yet spicier. But hottest of all was the Kashmiri fried chicken, seasoned with Sichuan peppercorn, cumin and ancho and arbol chiles. It was moist, complex and fiery. Dinner here was one of the trip's most memorable, and it was well-worth the taxi ride. *Closed Tuesday and Wednesday. 4501 Tchoupitoulas Street. Tel. (504) 345-2056.*

LA PETITE GROCERY

James Beard award-winning chef Justin Devillier and his wife, Mia, own this restaurant in a sunny former grocery store in Uptown. Its original pressed-tin ceiling and old wood floors give it the feel of a charmingly worn-in bistro. Here, carefully prepared French-inflected comfort food has enough creative twists to keep it interesting. I nibbled blue-crab beignets — generous mounds of fresh crab encased in tempura and served with malt vinegar aioli — accompanied by an LPG French 75 cocktail, an elegant and fragrant aperitif composed of Champagne, pear brandy and lemon. Though tempted by the turtle

Bolognese and the duck confit, I chose the paneed rabbit. It resembled a thinly breaded schnitzel, with housemade spinach spaetzle, salty sauerkraut, heirloom carrots and (not quite enough) sauce Robert. And I couldn't resist an autumnal dessert of buttermilk and cornmeal clafoutis with Ozark Gold apples, calvados, Gruyère ice cream and thyme-spiked whipped cream. *Closed for lunch Monday-Wednesday; open for dinner daily. 4238 Magazine Street. Tel. (504) 891-3377.*

RALPH'S ON THE PARK

This outpost of the Ralph Brennan Restaurant Group is within walking distance of the New Orleans Museum of Art and its magnificent sculpture garden. In need of a lighter meal, I ordered two appetizers. The shrimp Skully with a reduction of Crystal hot sauce and pepper jelly had a satisfyingly crunchy breading but tasted like basic sweet-and-sour shrimp. Better was the "award-winning" turtle soup, rich and thick and chock-full of tender turtle pieces, with an optional drizzle of sherry (mandatory in my book). Ralph's is convenient for both museumgoers and those exploring the park. Note that many patrons dress up, even at lunchtime. *Closed Monday and Tuesday lunch. 900 City Park Avenue. Tel. (504) 488-1000.*

SAFFRON

Lively Saffron serves upscale Indian cuisine with Southern influences. The velvet-upholstered chairs in the earth-toned interior do little to dampen the din of the fashionable crowd's animated conversations. Nevertheless, I didn't mind putting up with a bit of noise, considering the delicious cocktails and cuisine. One memorable example of the former was the complex "I See Stars," mixed with gin, Aperol, dry vermouth, lemon and saffron and garnished

with star anise. On its heels followed a platter of roast oysters, a local classic traditionally topped with breadcrumbs, butter, garlic and Parmesan, enhanced here with caramelized onions and aromatic curry leaf. My main course of nariyal Gulf fish came crusted in spices, served atop sticky rice and garnished with mango pickle and crispy strands of fried ginger. It resembled an Indian version of blackened redfish. For dessert, I tried Saffron's take on gajar halwa: two scoops of sweet, buttery cardamom-infused carrot shreds flanking some amaretto whipped cream and dotted with lightly candied almond slices and candied orange peel. Anyone with even a passing interest in Indian cuisine should make a point of visiting this justly popular restaurant. *Closed Sunday and Monday. 4128 Magazine Street. Tel. (504) 323-2626.*

SAINT JOHN

Saint John opened last October in the French Quarter a block away from the Soniat House hotel, a location that's close to the jazz clubs of Frenchmen Street. The white-painted brick interior with dark wood floors and marble tables draws stylish diners of all ages. This "haute Creole" restaurant is the second venture of chef Eric Cook, who also owns the well-regarded Gris-Gris in the Lower Garden District. Saint John had already found its stride by the time we ate there. I started with the hot shrimp rémoulade, a dish usually served room-temperature, with seven large local shrimp arranged on crunchy fried green tomatoes, all drizzled with a buttery version of remoulade sauce. Acid from the accompanying okra-corn chow chow cut the richness. My main course, the bacon fat-seared duck popper, recalled duck à l'orange, the crispy-skinned slices of duck breast daubed with satsuma gelée. A slash of cream cheese beneath

the duck offered jalapeño flavor without adding too much heat. We also ordered a side of al dente green beans smothered in shallot-bacon sauce. This was one of my favorite meals of the trip. *Closed Monday and Tuesday. 1117 Decatur Street. Tel. (504) 581-8120.*

SYLVAIN

In the heart of the French Quarter, Sylvain is under the same ownership as The Chloe hotel. On arrival, we discovered a dark, romantic dining room. However, we opted for a table on the long patio extending behind it. A mix of tourists and locals dined beneath strings of lights on recipes drawing from a range of influences around the world. We began by

splitting a bowl of spicy-sweet heirloom carrots dressed in a habanero vinaigrette and topped with cool coconut yogurt and almonds. This provided a delicious mix of textures and flavors. I continued with the flavorful red adobo pork shoulder (actually two small chops and a slice of pork belly). It came with "kimchee rice grits," like creamy, overcooked risotto. Pickled tomatillo and marinated onion added welcome tang and crunch. Sylvain is a casual restaurant where one can enjoy a simple burger, but everything we tried on the menu was well considered and carefully composed. *Closed for lunch Monday-Thursday; open for dinner daily. 625 Chartres Street. Tel. (504) 265-8123.*

Classic Cocktails Class



Our proper Hurricane, sans grenadine

Although New Orleans is one of the country's major mixology centers, it offers surprisingly few cocktail classes. The timing didn't work out for us to try one at the Sazerac House, a museum and distillery just outside the French Quarter that opened in 2019, but we were able to book a workshop with Drink Lab. We ascended to a cozy barroom above the company's cocktail lounge, Victory, located in the Central Business District.

Our teacher, Sean, proved well versed in mixology (and is also qualified as a level 2 sommelier). The class covered three classic New Orleans cocktails: the Sazerac, the Ramos Gin Fizz and a proper Hurricane. I've made Sazeracs at home but never a Ramos Gin Fizz. The ingredients are a bit complicated — gin, Meyer lemon, lime, orange blossom water, cream and egg white — and the sheer labor involved is daunting. We shook our shakers for a full five minutes, but the effort yielded a wonderfully frothy, aromatic and refreshing concoction. And I appreciated the balance of our grenadine-free Hurricanes, made with tart passionfruit syrup and two kinds of rum. The class, although informative, was quite casual. Students came to have fun. But fun deserves pride of place on a vacation, especially one spent in New Orleans. *343 Baronne Street. Tel. (504) 522-8664.*

Four New Jazz Clubs



Wolf in Lamb's Clothing (gin, lemon, honey, basil and Lambrusco) at Bayou Bar and seating at the Peacock Room



We've written before about New Orleans' jazz scene, recommending venues like the Davenport Lounge, Fritzel's, the Palm Court Lounge and Snug Harbor. I wondered, though, how live music was faring in the midst of current difficulties. Despite reduced schedules due to staffing shortages, we found four new

venues. During our visit in autumn 2021, these places were crowded, and social distancing was often difficult. Nevertheless, we had a fantastic time listening to some of the first live music we've experienced since the start of the pandemic. For the most current live-music schedule, consult the website of New Orleans' jazz-themed radio station, WWOZ.

1 BAYOU BAR
This lively little spot on the ground floor of the Pontchartrain Hotel is an ideal Garden District choice for a range of ages. I appreciated its cozy décor incorporating wood and exposed brick and its selection of creative cocktails. Most seats were occupied, but we ended up being invited to join a family of locals who had a couple of extra chairs at their table. We chatted and listened to the classic sound of the Peter Harris Trio (a pianist, bassist and drummer). Having enjoyed the company of our new friends, we took up their invitation for a nightcap on the hotel's rooftop terrace, which afforded a panoramic view of the downtown skyline. Live music Tuesday-Sunday. 2031 St. Charles Avenue. Tel. (504) 323-1456.

2 FAVELA CHIC
A brief stretch of Frenchmen Street, just east of the French Quarter, is the heart of the New Orleans jazz scene. Whereas nearby Snug Harbor requires tick-

ets, we had no trouble walking into this casual club a short walk down the street. The guide of a jazz-themed walking tour we took led us inside to one of the well-spaced candlelit tables. The quality of the jazz was unimpeachable. We heard the seven-piece Jelly Roll Stompers play sets of propulsive music, inspiring a number of audience members to get up and dance. I particularly enjoyed watching the clarinetist. When it came time for his solos, his feet lifted off the floor as he lost himself in improvisation.

If you get hungry during a show, Favela Chic has a menu of unfussy Tex-Mex, Cuban and Jamaican options. There is music most nights, but consult the calendar on the bar's website in advance to be sure there will be a performance. 525 Frenchmen Street. Tel. (504) 312-3912

3 MAHOGANY JAZZ HALL
Named after one of New Orleans' most infamous Storyville brothels, this popular jazz venue and absinthe bar

occupies an atmospheric space on the southwest side of the French Quarter. The band plays near the front, where a couple of dozen seats face the stage, but by the time we arrived, it was standing-room only. Fortunately, the band finished a set just as we entered, and some stools at the bar toward the back opened up. Had we been in the mood, we could have selected from a dozen different absinthes (served from traditional absinthe fountains). The crowd had a palpable energy — they, too, likely had a revived appreciation for live music — and the audience paid close attention when Joe Lastie's New Orleans Sound began playing another set of soulful traditional jazz.

Mahogany Jazz Hall usually has music seven nights a week, and in keeping with its namesake, it also sometimes hosts burlesque performances. 125 Chartres Street. Tel. (504) 598-5241.

4 PEACOCK ROOM
This opulent turquoise and electric-blue lounge and restaurant in the Kimpton

Hotel Fontenot has live jazz each Thursday from 8 to 10 p.m., when Da Lovebirds perform. Robin Barnes, the lead singer, has a powerful voice backed by talented instrumentalists. Her renditions of various standards were mesmerizing. Alas, we had to enjoy the music from the hotel lobby, because we had failed to make advance reservations. Those who do have the foresight to book a table can also enjoy the bar's extensive list of upscale creative cocktails and the kitchen's short but appealing list of small plates. Next time I'm in town, I'll order a cup of duck-and-oyster gumbo to start and perhaps a burger topped with bacon-Boursin cheese and crispy shallots, accompanied by a "Tawny Façade" cocktail of single-malt scotch, kummel and pine liqueur. That should do the trick!

Check the bar's website for listings of special events, including occasional jazz brunches. Closed Tuesday. 501 Tchoupitoulas Street. Tel. (504) 324-3073.



Edward A. Davis House, seen on the Two Chicks Garden District tour

Two Walking Tours

Pedestrian-friendly New Orleans amply rewards the casual stroller. But since having a guide also bestows clear benefits, we tried out two small-group walking tours. On these outings, we discovered numerous attractions that we would never have seen or experienced on our own, and we met congenial groups of like-minded travelers.

NEW ORLEANS SECRETS: MAGAZINE STREET FOODIE TOUR

Uninterested in a run-of-the-mill gumbo-and-jambalaya tour, we booked this three-hour itinerary that concentrates on Garden District restaurants popular with locals. We met the other six participants at Mahoney's, a casual po' boy shop. There, we sipped bloody marys mixed with vodka infused with lemon, okra, bell pepper and onion, and sampled half po' boy sandwiches topped with long-cooked roast beef. Our guide, Roger, requested that we not divulge the names of the other restaurants we visited, four more in all. But I can say that all the food we tried was absolutely delicious, including (but not limited to) an alligator-and-pork sausage covered in rich crawfish étouffée, flawlessly fresh chargrilled oysters, a decadent "eggplant napoleon" with a shrimp cream sauce and, for dessert, divine beignets enhanced with matcha custard, apple pie filling or a s'mores topping of marshmallow and chocolate. The tour runs Thursday-Monday.

TWO CHICKS WALKING TOURS: GRAND GARDEN DISTRICT TOUR

The staff of The Chloe recommended this tour. Our excursion had only four participants, and our vivacious guide, Christie, had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Garden District's history as well as insight into current controversies (such as the years-long closure of Lafayette Cemetery No. 1). Today, the Garden District has the most extensive collection of antebellum homes in the South, all interspersed with moss-draped live oaks. We saw the district's largest residence and its oldest. We also saw homes in Federal and Greek Revival styles, among others, and passed by mansions owned (or formerly owned) by various celebrities, including Nicholas Cage, John Goodman, Anne Rice and Sandra Bullock. Overall, the tour was both fascinating and amusing. I recommend it to anyone who can manage the uneven brick sidewalks of the Garden District.

Antiques Shopping

New Orleans contains some of the finest antiques shops in the United States. On my recent visit, I checked in on a longtime favorite, and then browsed another well-stocked store nearby.

M.S. RAU

The most impressive of New Orleans' antiques shops is 110-year-old M.S. Rau. Owner Bill Rau is the third generation of his family to run the business. He has completely renovated the original building and expanded into two more. The former main display space has been converted into a spectacular jewelry gallery. The most dazzling pieces, such as a diamond-and-platinum tiara that belonged to the Duchess of Alba, grace the "Crystal Palace," an oval glass-walled room where visitors can try items on. The rest of the ground floor has remarkable pieces of furniture with historic pedigrees. We were able to inspect the desk at which Napoleon wrote from his exile on St. Helena and marvel at an elaborate armoire belonging to Czar Nicholas II. Upstairs are rooms

containing smaller objects, as well as an extensive art gallery. This displays everything from medieval sacred paintings to works by major artists like Monet and Renoir. The staff members are happy to relate the fascinating stories of the various pieces and seem justifiably proud of the store where they work. *Closed Sunday. 622 Royal Street. Tel. (888) 557-2406.*

KEIL'S ANTIQUES

I also recommend a visit to Keil's Antiques, a 123-year-old shop located just down the street. Keil's has assembled a sort of opulent clutter, a profusion of inlaid-wood sideboards and bronze-embellished end tables illuminated by a vast array of crystal chandeliers. A sterling silver coffee and tea set by Tiffany & Co. dating from the 1840s particularly caught my eye. But the ground floor is just the beginning. An elevator took us to two additional floors of treasures. Keil's may not be as well known as M.S. Rau, but its immense collection makes a stop well worthwhile. *Closed Sunday. 325 Royal Street. Tel. (504) 522-4552.*



"Napoléon Before the Battle of Moscow," by Joseph Franque, and "Liberty Enlightening the World," by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, M.S. Rau



Blair Hill Inn above Moosehead Lake, Greenville

Maine: Classic Inns and a Fine Seaside Resort

Rural tranquility, reviving ocean breezes, outstanding cuisine, spectacular wildlife

After a sweltering summer, the rocky coastline of Maine, with its ocean vistas, iconic light-houses and lobster shacks, beckoned to us last fall. Apparently, we were not the only ones to hear the summons. In mid-October, the tourist season was still in high gear, so reservations were tough to secure. But with help from our Travel Office, we patched together an itinerary that would include two historic inns — one on Moosehead Lake and the other on the coast in Camden — a

seaside hotel on Cape Elizabeth and a woodsy property near Kennebunkport.

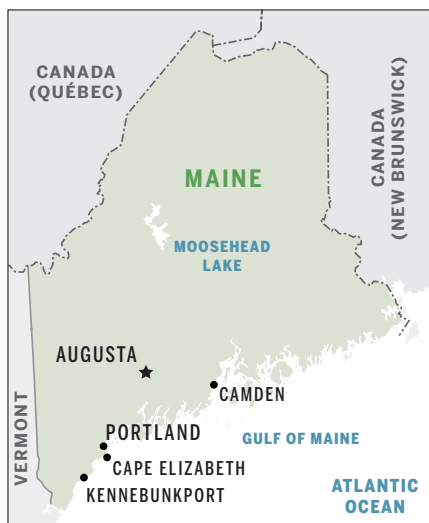
Moosehead Lake, Maine's largest glacial lake, is a four-hour drive from Portland. It became a tourist destination in the late 1800s, when Victorian "Rusticators" arrived from crowded cities to experience the natural splendor of the Pine Tree State. It was during this period that Lyman Blair purchased 2,000 hillside acres and created a working farm. The home he built for his wife, Cornelia, was finished in 1891. Roughly 100 years later, it came to be owned by Dan and Ruth McLaughlin. Now called **Blair Hill Inn**, this 10-room country house hotel was our first stop.

Even before arriving, I experienced the warm hospitality that would be the hallmark of our stay. Ruth was always on hand to answer the phone and act as our eager-to-please concierge. She even called me, unprompted, to offer a last-minute room change that would make for a more comfortable visit.

Set on 15 acres near Greenville, the inn rests on a hilltop. On the night we arrived, it was aglow from within, and the light of a full moon illuminated the house's exterior. Our suite, Guest

Room 8, was on the third floor. The door opened onto a short hallway and dressing area that led to our two bedrooms: one fitted with two twin beds, perfect for children, and the other with a queen-size bed, vaulted ceilings and a cushioned window seat. Off the hallway, the bath blended old-fashioned features, like the black-and-white penny tiles and an arched shower entrance, with the square lines of a modern tub and black-and-white toile curtains. Double vanity sinks were outside the bath — convenient in some ways, but less so in others.

Opening the shades the next morning, we found a glorious panorama of autumnal trees and the shimmering lake. Downstairs, we discovered all the expected characteristics of a Victorian mansion: high ceilings, crown moldings, stained glass and original light fixtures with patterned glass shades. The breakfast room was a bright white space with a self-serve coffee bar. Our chia seed pudding with coconut and raspberry was an unexpected prelude to a full spread of French toast, baked pears and crispy bacon. Throughout our stay, separate parties ate at individual tables,



“

On the night we arrived, the hilltop inn was aglow from within, and the light of a full moon illuminated the house's exterior.

but there was the same camaraderie that you might expect at a traditional bed-and-breakfast, with guests sharing experiences across the aisle.

While we loved relaxing in this gracious home, our days were spent exploring the area, shopping at the outfitters in Greenville, driving to see Mount Kineo with its dramatic 700-foot cliffs and — the highlight of our stay in Maine — going on a moose safari (see sidebar).

Open from 5 to 9 p.m., the property's lounge, which is surrounded by windows and overlooks the lake, is the perfect place to enjoy a cocktail while admiring the sunset. The dining room

is open five nights a week. It is closed on Sundays and Mondays, and on Tuesdays and Wednesdays the “Chef's Choice” four-course dinner is available to inn guests only. The evening we dined, we were served a satisfying seafood chowder of haddock, clams and lobster with a dollop of caviar, a spinach salad and a tender pork loin with gnocchi.

Throughout our trip, when Mainers learned we'd visited Moosehead Lake, they were impressed that we'd left the coastal tourist track to discover an authentic part of the state on the doorstep of the North Woods. Next time, we'll visit when the weather is warmer so we can canoe and hike.

• • •

Two hours to the south, **Camden Harbour Inn** is set on a knoll in the wealthy coastal enclave of Camden, overlooking the town's picturesque harbor and Mount Battie.

Built in 1874, this 20-room mansard-roofed Victorian home was purchased

in 2007 by Dutch owners who bestowed it with a Euro-chic aesthetic. After checking in, we were given vouchers for two glasses of Champagne and escorted up two flights of steep, off-kilter stairs to our Bayview Deluxe Room. The unmistakable scent of mothballs wafted along the carpeted hallways. Our bellman was efficient, but he left without any sort of room orientation. Welcoming touches included a cheese-and-fruit plate, a handwritten note and, oddly, a toy Holstein Friesian cow, apparently a reference to the owners' Dutch heritage.

The lodgings at Camden Harbour Inn are individually decorated, and their names seem to reflect nostalgia for the

Moose Safari



A young bull moose, Moosehead Lake

Our moose safari was arranged by the co-owner of our hotel, Blair Hill Inn on Moosehead Lake. Ashley, from Lone Wolf Guiding Services, a registered Maine guide, picked us up at 6 a.m. and drove us along logging roads in hopes of seeing a moose at dawn. It was rutting season, and females were not hard to spot in the clearings. We would get out of the truck, tiptoe a bit closer and Ashley would rustle the brush to mimic a male moose (fooling them isn't difficult, as their eyesight is quite poor). During our four-hour tour, we learned much about moose: their gestation periods, eating habits and the differences between Maine moose and their Alaskan counterparts (the former are much less aggressive). By the end of our journey, we'd seen eight of these gentle giants, along with twin calves, in the brush, staring back at us in the soft morning light.

Main bedroom and bath of Guest Room 8 and dining room, Blair Hill Inn



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More concerning than the stylistic incongruities were the dirty shag carpeting, the mildew in the corners of the shower, the broken blind pulls, the torn wallpaper and the bed's scuffed footboard.

high-water mark of the Dutch colonial empire. Our room was called “Bonaire,” but that is where the Caribbean homage ended. The décor was a mashup of colors and styles: shimmering blue-and-rose damask wallpaper, boxy brown leather-and-chrome club chairs and a decorative Delftware tulip vase that was another callback to the owners' homeland. More concerning than the stylistic incongruities were the dirty shag carpeting, the mildew in the corners of the shower, the broken blind pulls, the torn wallpaper and the bed's scuffed footboard.

The bedroom lacked artwork, and the only mirror was in the bath. In the shower and behind the single white porcelain vanity were iridescent tiles that changed color from purple to green depending on where you stood. On one wall, geometric 3D panels featured over-size dots that resembled Braille. (I kept hoping they would offer a secret message to explain these bewildering design

choices.) The ThermoSol steam shower had selections for light, music and temperature but proved too confusing to operate without instructions.

Service was, thankfully, the hotel's saving grace. Nightly turndown came complete with chocolates, slippers, bottled water and a friendly note urging a restful night's sleep, and housekeeping timed their cleanings to align with our Champagne breakfasts.

Dinner at Natalie's, the inn's fine dining restaurant on the first floor, was also commendable. The popular venue was buzzing. Both the pork loin, with celery root and mustard seed, and the Caldwell Farms New York strip, with black trumpet mushrooms, short rib and kale, were inventive and flavorful. The chef sources produce from local farms and the hotel's garden to augment his fresh take on modern New England cuisine. In another show of good service, a waiter helpfully delivered our after-dinner drinks to our room, probably realizing how difficult it would be to negotiate the stairs with glasses in hand.

I wouldn't hesitate to revisit Natalie's. But the hotel ultimately came up short.

...

I wasn't sure what to expect at the **Inn by the Sea**, located south of Portland on 12-mile-long Cape Elizabeth. Locals had advised that there wasn't much to see or do in its residential setting, but we

needn't have worried. The 61 beach-chic accommodations of this shingle-style retreat are so comfortable, there's no need to leave the grounds. And if one wants to see more than the nearby light-houses and parks, downtown Portland is less than a 20-minute drive away.

Beyond the central hallway and reception, glass doors open to a lawn sprinkled with white Adirondack chairs, plus a small swimming pool. Guests can take in views of the Atlantic from their balconies and the deck outside the dining area, or they can see the ocean up close by following a raised boardwalk through the dunes to the semiprivate Crescent Beach, a 1-mile stretch of sand that is part of a larger state park.

The original inn offers single-bedroom accommodations and ground-floor garden suites with separate living areas and patios. Similarly styled newer buildings hold Cove Suites, with two bedrooms, a full kitchen, a living room and an outdoor space, and Beach Suites, with one- or two-bedrooms.

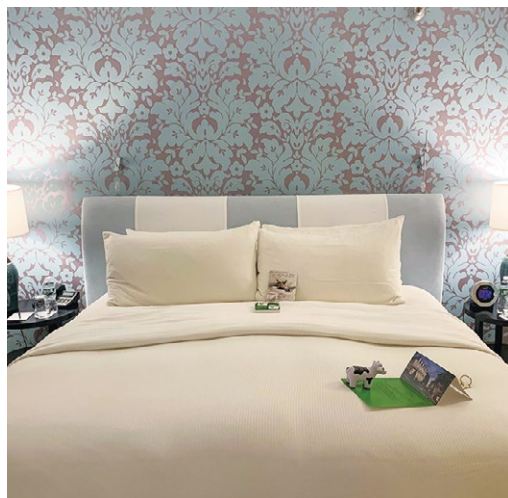
We spent two lovely days relaxing in a Cove Suite. Our main bedroom was contemporary in style with a color palette of blue gray, brick red and white. On each side of the king-size bed, tall mirrors opened up the space by reflecting the light from the bedside lamps around the room. In front of the bed, two armchairs faced a TV, dresser and closet. A sizable second bedroom held two queen-size beds and more closets. All the furnishings were in immaculate condition.

The spacious bathroom was finished in tan travertine and dark wood, with a large walk-in shower, long double vanity and soaking tub. The hotel prides itself on its eco-friendly initiatives. Here, Gilchrist & Soames organic BeeKind toiletries were in refillable containers to reduce waste, and we were encouraged to take home our used hand soaps in the little paper bag provided.

The combination living room, dining area and kitchen gave us plenty of space

CAMDEN HARBOUR INN: ANDREW HARPER EDITOR

Bedroom and bath of our Bay View Executive Corner Room, Camden Harbour Inn, Camden





Living room and deck of our Cove Suite, Inn by the Sea



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The resort is a family-friendly, dog-friendly beachside escape and is perfect for a weeklong trip amid unpretentious laid-back luxury.

to spread out and coming back inside at the end of the day to sit by the fireplace was a treat. Our chef's kitchen had everything we needed: a full-size stainless-steel refrigerator, dishwasher, microwave, two electric burners, dishware and cooking items inside white beadboard cabinetry. Instead of plastic bottles, Inn by the Sea provides pristine, unfiltered water from Sebago Lake in refillable glass jars. Large windows over-

looked a private deck, with views of the lawn, woodlands and ocean beyond. A pair of binoculars was provided on the sill of a porthole window.

The Sea Glass Restaurant, inside the main inn, offers breakfast, lunch and dinner. My hake entrée, with a roasted mustard seed crust and beet-caraway hash, was as delicious as it was beautifully presented. And I still crave the charred carrot appetizer I had with dukkah, goat cheese mousse, herbs and honey. After hearing us talk about other restaurants, our server kindly returned with a list of seven recommendations in the area.

Inn by the Sea is a family-friendly, dog-friendly beachside escape. With a full-service spa, a pool and beach, a fine restaurant and numerous on-site activities, the resort is perfect for a

weeklong multigenerational trip amid unpretentious laid-back luxury.

• • • •

The small coastal community of Kennebunkport, 28 miles south of Portland, has been a tourist destination for more than 100 years, but it was put on the map in the 1980s by the Bush family, whose compound, Walker's Point Estate, is nearby. To get to the area, we avoided the highway and took the more scenic Route 1 to reach **Hidden Pond**, 10 minutes from downtown's Dock Square. Turning into the resort's understated entrance, we found that the property lived up to its name. A lack of signage made the main lodge difficult to find amid the 60 forested acres of birch and balsam fir. Once we got to reception, the staff there began the formalities promptly and gave us a short list of activities, as well as a map to Bungalow No. 30, "Hunky Dorrie." There was no offer of an escort to the room, but it proved a short drive away.

Hidden Pond has 46 Treetop Lodges, Cottages and Bungalows, all scattered around the property. The exterior of our tan shingle-style Bungalow was charming and in great condition, with a small deck and two bicycles parked outside. Our accommodations consisted of three rooms: a screened-in porch with a wicker chaise longue and chair, a living room-bedroom combination and a bath with an adjacent outdoor shower.

Inn by the Sea, Cape Elizabeth





Entrance and living area of our "Hunky Dorrie" Bungalow, No. 30, Hidden Pond, Kennebunkport

From the porch, French doors opened into the living area, complete with a sofa, two armchairs and a stone fireplace. The room's dominant color was chocolate brown, but it was brightened with white pitched ceilings and moldings. A wooden stepback cupboard doubled as a small kitchenette with a mini-fridge, microwave and sink. Unfortunately, our galley-style bath had no door, so it was often chilly. This room, too, was brown, with accents of Carrara marble in the shower and the single vanity.

Each morning, the staff delivered a pot of coffee and pastries to our doorstep. It was a thoughtful touch but couldn't make up for the disappointing breakfast at the main lodge. Instead of being served at Earth, the on-site restaurant, we were given a menu of six items for a "Food Truck Breakfast." After ordering from the to-go bar, we were presented with coffee in a paper cup, a baked egg sandwich in tinfoil and plastic utensils in a paper bag. Unsure where to eat, we claimed a picnic table in an empty play area. It was hard to know if this was another casualty of COVID or an end-of-season misfortune.

Thankfully our experience at Earth was far better — divine in fact. Before dinner, we had cocktails by the fire pit near the Serenity Pool and Tree Spa, a lovely way to start the evening. The restaurant's intimate interior was romantically lit with candles and lights wrapped around tree branches hanging

from the ceiling. The floor-to-rafters stone hearth held a blazing fire. Dinner was a success start to finish, from the gin and tonics made with Batson River Riparian gin, a local product from Portland, to our three-course prix fixe menu. The wood-fired broccoli with smoked eggplant was outstanding, while the venison loin with sweet potato and spaetzle was sublime. To eat so well in such a beautiful space elevated our whole experience at Hidden Pond.

I wish the rest of our stay had been as exceptional. Due to the weather, we were unable to take part in many of the amenities and activities ordinarily on offer. With a front desk staff seemingly ready for the season to be over, it felt as if we'd rented a nice cabin in the Maine woods, rather than being on the grounds of an award-winning resort. Whether our experience is typical or related to our timing, it's impossible to know. Either way, we had expected more. **HR**

BLAIR HILL INN 91

LIKE Our accommodating hosts and comfortable, quiet suite; the views of the lake; the authentic Victorian furnishings; the fact that the owners spend the off-season staying in each room so they can learn what improvements need to be made. **DISLIKE** Our squealing hair dryer needed replacement; the dining room is closed on Sunday and Monday, and the area lacks other high-quality places to eat. **GOOD TO KNOW** Moose safaris are available May through October and can be taken by canoe or vehicle; the spa is in a former blacksmith barn and is closed during the winter, but in-room treatments can be arranged; those with mobility issues may want to reserve Guest Room 9 on the main floor, or Guest Room 10, a garden suite, one level down. Guest Room 8, \$550; Guest Room 9, \$720. 351 Lily Bay Road, Greenville. Tel. (207) 695-0224.

CAMDEN HARBOUR INN 88

LIKE The proficient service; the wraparound heated porch at the restaurant. **DISLIKE** The lack of a room orientation; the smell of mothballs; the need for a design update. **GOOD TO KNOW** The hotel's on-site spa does not employ its own therapists, so book in advance to guarantee a treatment. Of the three Grand Suites, the spacious "New Amsterdam" offers two decks and has the advantage of being on the first floor. Bayview Deluxe Room, \$700; Grand Suite, \$940. 83 Bay View Street, Camden. Tel. (207) 236-4200.

INN BY THE SEA 93

LIKE The contemporary design of our suite and its pristine condition; the pet policy, which doesn't discriminate according to size or weight, and provides each pet with a personalized L.L.Bean dog bed as part of its pets package; the hotel's green initiatives and dedication to sustainability. **DISLIKE** The bland design of the Sea Glass dining room. **GOOD TO KNOW** Provisions for meals can be preordered to ensure a well-stocked kitchen upon arrival; the hotel can provide a list of pet-friendly beaches and trails, but dogs are not allowed on the beach April 1 to September 30. Beach Suite, \$1,150; Cove Suite, \$1,380. 40 Bowery Beach Road, Cape Elizabeth. Tel. (207) 799-3134.

HIDDEN POND 88

LIKE The food and décor at Earth; the well-made cocktails by the fire pit; our room's inviting sunroom; coffee delivery every morning. **DISLIKE** The engineered-wood floors of our Bungalow were scuffed and looked inexpensive; the lack of privacy in the bathroom; the lack of a return call when trying to book a spa appointment. **GOOD TO KNOW** The property's sister restaurant, Tides Beach Club, at Goose Rocks Beach is a shuttle ride away; Hidden Pond is closed for the season through May, but Earth is open during winter. Bungalow, \$830; Cottage, \$1,200. 354 Goose Rocks Road, Kennebunkport. Tel. (207) 967-9050.

Prices reflect average mid- to high-season rates (including taxes) and are subject to change.

Favorite Dining Experiences



Salmon with seasonal vegetables at Primo and spicy seafood bucatini at Tides Beach Club

PRIMO

Both locals and friends back home implored us to go to dinner at Primo in Rockland, a charming art community just south of Camden. Apparently, everyone else in the state had been advised to do the same. Even on a chilly fall night, the restaurant was packed. Hopeful diners waited shoulder to shoulder in the small entrance, while we braved the cold on the porch of the old Victorian home. After about 30 minutes, we were finally called. Dinner was worth the wait. The drinks menu, with 18 craft cocktails, was impressive, and my Jack Sparrow, with applejack, vermouth, Grand Marnier and mole bitters, warmed me right up. My baby red Russian kale salad with peppery radishes and creamy garlic-cashew dressing was colorful and bursting with flavor. And the earthy pumpkin-walnut pasta with duck sausage was the perfect fall entrée. This is the ultimate convivial farm-to-table experience, where chef Melissa Kelly's "full circle

kitchen" wastes nothing and emphasizes sustainability. *Closed January to May. 2 Main Street, Rockland. Tel. (207) 596-0770*

SCALES

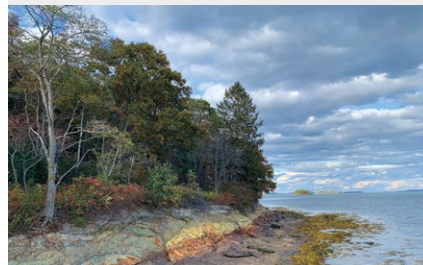
It was with great regret that we only had time for one dinner in Portland, but we chose well in Scales, an upmarket seafood restaurant in the city's historic waterfront district. Its weathered exterior fits right in on the Maine Wharf. Inside, the well-worn floors and wooden ceiling beams recall its former life as a warehouse, while big multipane windows look out onto the water and nearby fishing boats. Our reservation was early, at 5:30 p.m., but the restaurant, with its open kitchen and raw bars, was already buzzing. We began with fresh Johns River Oysters (unique in that they are started in the Damariscotta River and then grown 10 miles away in Johns River, where they develop their briny-creamy flavor). Next were light and fluffy crab fritters, an appropriately autumnal sweet potato-

lobster bisque and, our favorite, baked haddock with chanterelles in an indulgent fumet-cream sauce. This is how all Maine vacations should begin. *Dinner only. 68 Commercial Street, Portland. Tel. (207) 805-0444*

THE TIDES BEACH CLUB

The sister property of Hidden Pond, The Tides Beach Club is set within a four-story Gilded Age inn that was built in 1899. The shingle-style property is the only waterfront hotel facing Goose Rocks Beach, just outside Kennebunkport's town center, and the night we were there, a full moon lit up the ocean with a romantic glow, which we could see from our table on the converted porch. We particularly enjoyed the spicy seafood bucatini, overflowing with clams, scallops, shrimp and lobster claws; the crab hushpuppies; and a cup of lobster chowder that we wished had been a bowl. *Closed November to May. 930 Kings Highway, Kennebunkport. Tel. (207) 967-3757.*

Sightseeing



View from the trail, Mackworth Island

MACKWORTH ISLAND

We were antique shopping in Falmouth, northeast of Portland, when the store's owner suggested that we visit nearby Mackworth Island State Park. We are so glad we did. After crossing the causeway, we parked near the entrance. Unsure what we'd find, we walked the gentle 1.25-mile trail around this 100-acre island, passing through scented pine forests and stopping at benches and swings to enjoy the lookout points along the way. We took a small detour and ended up at a charming pet cemetery, which is a loving tribute to former Maine governor Percival Baxter's numerous Irish setters and his "noble horse" Jerry Roan. Baxter donated the island to the state in 1943 to be used as a "sanctuary for wild beasts and birds." *Andrews Avenue off U.S. Route 1, Falmouth. Tel. (207) 688-4712*

VICTORIA MANSION

Along with viewing lighthouses near Portland, we found time to visit Victoria Mansion, one of the finest examples of an Italianate villa in the United States. It was built between 1858 and 1860 as a summer home for New Orleans hotelier Ruggles Sylvester Morse, who spared no expense in decorating and furnishing it with the most modern amenities, such as hot and cold running water, flush toilets, central heating and gas lights. Ninety percent of the interior is original, with trompe l'oeil ceilings, a stained-glass skylight over the central staircase, intricate plaster and woodwork and lavish custom fabrics. The opulence of Victoria Mansion cannot be overstated. *Closed January to April. 109 Danforth Street, Portland. Tel. (207) 772-4841*

New & Noteworthy



Peninsula Villa, COMO Laucala, Fiji

COMO COMES TO FIJI

The 15 properties that comprise COMO Hotels and Resorts include some of the most glamorous in the world. The company was founded in 1991 by Singaporean Christina Ong. On December 15 of last year, three decades after the firm's inception, COMO took over the management of Laucala Island in Fiji, a 3,460-acre private retreat situated a 50-minute flight from Nadi, the country's international gateway. Originally owned by Malcolm Forbes, Laucala was purchased in 2003 by Dietrich Mateschitz, the billionaire co-founder of the Red Bull energy drinks business. Having been closed for eight months during the pandemic, the resort has undergone extensive refurbishment. It features 25 standalone residences, some with private beaches and all with private pools and butlers. Amenities include an 18-hole David McLay Kidd-designed golf course and a private submarine for observing Pacific marine life. COMO properties are renowned for the quality of their spas. Laucala will now feature COMO Shambhala Retreat, a wellness center offering the brand's signature Asian-inspired massages and products.

GROOTBOS REDESIGN

Set on a hillside overlooking the gleaming expanse of Walker Bay, 100 miles southeast of Cape Town, Grootbos Private Nature Reserve comprises two self-contained

lodges and two multibedroom villas. Despite its many challenges, the pandemic has recently provided the resort's owners with an opportunity to make significant improvements. Built in 1996, the original Garden Lodge will reopen in April after a comprehensive redesign. Its 11 freestanding suites have been refurbished in a more modern style. Nearby, a new Wellness Center will provide three treatment rooms, while a wine cellar now offers an intimate dining space for up to eight couples. The pool area has been upgraded, a lounge and childrens' playroom have been added, and an all-new dining area has been designed to maximize views over Walker Bay. Grootbos continues to offer 4x4 botanical safaris; marine safaris to view migratory whales (June through December), great white sharks, dolphins and penguins; and superb hiking, either through the surrounding fynbos (shrubland) or along the unspoiled southern Atlantic coastline.

Grootbos Private Nature Reserve, Walker Bay, South Africa







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FROM THE EDITOR

The variety of the United States never ceases to amaze. This issue contains reports from New Orleans and Maine, two places that could scarcely be more dissimilar. In the Big Easy, as well as searching for potential new recommendations, I was keen to see how the city's famous restaurants and vibrant jazz scene might have been affected by the pandemic. And I was thrilled to find that New Orleans has once again proved its resilience. As ever, my trip contained a mix of discoveries and disappointments, but the new Maison de la Luz, a 67-room property within easy walking distance of the French Quarter, proved a delightful surprise. During my stay, I also found time to enroll in a course at a cocktail school, explore some of the city's remarkable antique shops and take two excellent Garden District walking tours. March may seem like a strange time in which to publish a story about Maine, but summer 2022 may well prove a repeat of summer 2021, when many domestic destinations were heavily oversubscribed. Despite the ongoing revival of international travel, I suspect that it will be prudent to make Maine travel plans as early as possible. Last fall, we stayed in three coastal properties, as well as at a 10-bedroom inn, located at the edge of the North Maine Woods. During our journey, we ate our fill of superb local lobsters, oysters and crabs, revisited some of our favorite lighthouses and toured an astoundingly lavish 19th-century Italianate mansion, built, coincidentally, as a summer residence for a wealthy New Orleans hotelier. As ever, Maine's clear air and refreshing breezes sent us home feeling thoroughly rested and revived. — *Andrew Harper*

COMO LAUCAULA: JASON BUSCH

HOTEL RATINGS

-  **99-100** — A truly great hotel, among the finest of its kind in the world
-  **96-98** — An exceptional hotel of great individuality and distinction
-  **93-95** — An outstanding hotel of genuine sophistication
-  **90-92** — A fine hotel with considerable charm about which we have minor reservations

89 & Below — A hotel that did not meet the required standards

Find all of our recommended hotels at AndrewHarper.com.