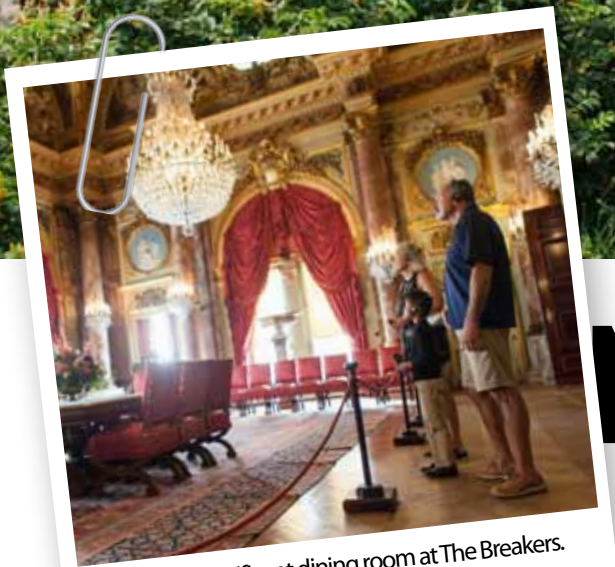




Offering access to eight mansions, the three-hour walk features a serpentine path aligned with the shoreline.



The magnificent dining room at The Breakers.
Photos by Erin McGinn/PSNC

Newport's Cliff Walk

On the edge of opulence

By Anne Bokma

It's only 5.6 kilometres long, but it's one of the most famous walks in the world. The elevated Cliff Walk that wraps itself snugly along the eastern shoreline of Newport, Rhode Island, offers two dramatic — and dramatically different — types of views.

Turn your head to one side and you'll take in the most commanding coastal scenery New England has to offer — a jagged shoreline where powerful waves batter against mighty boulders in the salt-kissed air of the Atlantic Ocean. Swivel your head in the opposite direction and you'll see the spacious, green, backyard expanse of

the opulent Gilded Age mansions that were once the summer homes of America's wealthiest families, including the Vanderbilts and the Astors.

Both vistas are lavish — one man-made, the other heaven-sent. Best of all they're free.

More than a quarter of a million visitors — nature lovers, trail trekkers and mansion gawkers alike — traverse this path, designated a National Recreation Trail, every year. "National Geographic Traveler" has named the Cliff Walk one of its "50 Places of a Lifetime".

It takes about three hours to complete the walk, during which you'll pass under stone archways and through short tunnels as you fol-

low a serpentine path that mimics the shoreline. About two-thirds of the path is flat and easy to navigate with wide walkways and railings that protect visitors from drops of up to 20-metres. The final third has more rugged terrain and is reserved for the sure-footed — at certain points you'll have to scramble from rock to rock in order to make it to the end.

At the half-way mark, you'll want to linger a while at the Cliff Walk's 40 Steps, a series of stone steps that plunge right to the ocean's edge. Originally built in the early 1800s so the Newport rich could give their children direct access to the beach, it also became a social gathering spot for their servants, mostly im-

migrants from Ireland, on their rare days off. The steps were restored in the early 1990s, making them much safer to navigate.

Given the stunning views of this coastline, it's no wonder the wealthy were drawn to Newport to build their epic mansions in this summer colony. The Cliff Walk was created by the estates' owners in the 1880s and millions have been spent over the past century by the city and the state on its expansion and restoration after it was damaged by several hurricanes. In the 1970s the restoration committee was chaired by the infamous aristocrat Claus von Bülow, who summured in a nearby mansion with his heiress wife Sunny and was acquitted of the charge of attempting to murder her via insulin overdose in 1980. His name is featured on a plaque at the entrance of the walk.

The Cliff Walk runs directly behind many of these famous mansions, eight of which are open to the public with formal tours run by the Preservation Society of Newport. The grandest of these is The Breakers — named for the waves that continually crash into the cliffs below — and it's the most easily accessible mansion from the Cliff Walk. The 70-room, 65,000 sq. ft. Italian Renaissance-style palazzo was built by railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1895 for \$12 million as a summer "cottage." Its fabulous features include marble baths with hot and cold water taps that pumped salt water directly from the ocean, a blue marble fireplace, and mosaic ceilings that took Italian artisans six months, lying on their backs, to install.

Other mansions along the Cliff Walk include Rosecliff, where scenes from "The Great Gatsby" were filmed, the Beechwood, once home to Mrs. Astor, the queen of American society in the late 19th century, and Marble House, known for its extravagant gold ballroom.

If you are looking for a posh place to lay your head for the night after touring these ornate mansions, you can't go wrong with the upscale accommodations offered by Newport's Hotel Viking and The Gilded Hotel. For a truly luxurious experi-



Fare at the ocean-side Spiced Pear



ence nothing beats the opulence of The Chanler at Cliff Walk, a 19th century mansion where each of the 20 guest rooms is decorated in a distinct historical period, from the seaside serenity of the Nantucket Ocean Villa to the quaint colonial charm of the Williamsburg Room.

The room rates were a little too dear for our budget but we did treat ourselves to an outstanding meal at the hotel's oceanside restaurant, The Spiced Pear, voted one of the 100 Most Romantic Restaurants in

America by the OpenTable Diners' Choice Awards. The only restaurant along the Cliff Walk, it offers the kind of meal you'll remember on your deathbed. Dine like a Rockefeller on butter-poached Maine lobster, grass-fed New York sirloin or free range duck breast while you listen to the soothing waves of the Atlantic right outside.

Our decadent dinner was definitely worth the splurge. After all, as even the ultra rich know, you can't take it with you.

(Top left) The mosaic ceilings like this one in the music room at The Breakers, were created by Italian artisans. (Above) The Italian Renaissance-style palazzo built by railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1895. Photos by Erin McGinn/PSNC (Top right) The Chanler Inn is a 19th century mansion where each of the 20 guest rooms is decorated in a distinct historical period. Its ocean-side restaurant, The Spiced Pear, offers dining with a view and food fit for a Rockefeller..