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# Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report®

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CANDID REVIEWS BY A WRITER WHO TRAVELS INCOGNITO AND ALWAYS PAYS HIS OWN WAY

## Australia: Spectacular Discoveries Down Under



FOR MANY PEOPLE, THE dramatic natural beauty of Australia, including its unique flora and fauna, provides the main reason for a first visit. But nearly everyone who returns, myself included, does so because Australia is one of the happiest, friendliest and most optimistic places on earth. Add its incredible food and wine to the mix, plus some remarkable new hideaways, and you have a truly irresistible destination.

Australia has long been called “The Lucky Country,” and certainly this is as true today as ever, since China’s voracious appetite for its coal and minerals has led to boom times Down Under. Nowadays, Sydney sports a high gloss of prosperity, and its newfound wealth makes many locals

insouciant in the face of eye-watering prices. For visitors, the situation is aggravated by the new parity between the Aussie dollar and the greenback. Still, expensive though it has become, Sydney remains a spectacular city with iconic architecture, intriguing restaurants, wonderful museums, a raft of excellent hotels and perhaps the most beautiful natural harbor in the world, crisscrossed by its famous fleet of green ferries. For me, it is a thrilling combination of everything there is to like about San Francisco, Los Angeles, Vancouver and Cape Town.

### The Blue Mountains

AFTER SEVERAL DAYS TRYING SOME OF THE CITY’S excellent new restaurants (see box), we traveled by car and driver to the most talked-about new hotel in Australia, the **WOLGAN VALLEY RESORT & SPA**, which opened in October 2009. Located three hours northwest of Sydney in the Blue Mountains of the Great Dividing Range, the property is set on a magnificent 4,000-acre former cattle ranch in a U-shaped valley defined by dramatic sandstone escarpments. Purchased for \$6 million in 2005 by the Emirates group of Dubai, it subsequently received an investment of almost \$140 million and is now one of Australia’s great destination lodges.

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Forty colonial-style bungalows come with screened verandas, corrugated metal roofs and private decks. Inside, leather wing chairs and sofas are grouped around gas-burning fireplaces, and the extensive use of local materials, notably slate, provides indigenous character. Bedrooms offer indulgent four-poster beds and spacious walk-in closets. Stylish, slate-faced baths are equipped with separate tubs and showers. Every cottage has a private heated plunge pool.

Guests cycle, walk or call for buggy service to the main homestead. This contains two excellent restaurants serving contemporary Australian cuisine. Somewhat surprisingly given the complex logistics of the sprawling estate, the resort offers a lengthy room service menu, so if you want to relax in the privacy of your bungalow, fine dining is just a phone call away. Other amenities include a heated swimming pool and a first-rate spa.

Wolgan is a blissful place to relax, but there is also a full daily schedule of activities, including horseback riding, hikes and four-wheel-drive “safaris.” One wonderful afternoon excursion delivered numerous wildlife sightings — including kangaroos — and ended with sundowners and canapés on a hilltop deck overlooking the property. We also enjoyed a narrated after-dinner stargazing session, learning to identify Southern Hemisphere constellations while sipping a first-rate local eau-de-vie.

Though Wolgan is splendid, it is not perfect. The food is good but could be better. We liked our informal lunch at the *Country Kitchen* restaurant more than the rather fussy

fine-dining dinner menu in the main restaurant. And the local wines tend to be pleasant rather than memorable and have a very high alcohol content. The property will also be more attractive when the landscaping around the bungalows has filled in. But overall, this fine resort provides a memorable taste of the Australian great outdoors within easy reach of Sydney. **95 Heritage Suite**, \$1,475 (including all meals, local wines and most activities). 2600 Wolgan Road, Wolgan Valley, Lithgow. Tel. (61) 2-6350-1800. [www.wolganvalley.com](http://www.wolganvalley.com)

## Adelaide and Kangaroo Island

AFTER A HELICOPTER TRANSFER BACK TO SYDNEY, WE flew on to Adelaide, the capital of South Australia. In their eagerness to reach the Barossa wine region, many people see nothing but the airport, which is a shame, since Adelaide is an attractive place with many beautiful Victorian and Edwardian buildings (see *Hideaway Report Online* at [www.AndrewHarper.com](http://www.AndrewHarper.com) for a rundown on the best of the city).

On previous visits, we have stayed at the **INTERCONTINENTAL** hotel, but in search of more local character, we took the advice of an Australian friend and checked into the **MEDINA GRAND ADELAIDE TREASURY** hotel. In an excellent location, it occupies a renovated sandstone Victorian building, which originally housed the State Treasury of South Australia. Though not sure what to expect from a self-described apartment hotel, we took to the place right away. Staff members proved exceptionally hospitable, and our spacious junior suite came with a large lounge, kitchenette, dining table and views over Adelaide’s handsome Victoria Square. The on-site pool was welcome on a warm day, and the hotel bar overlooking a pretty courtyard garden with subtropical plantings and a cast-iron fountain was frequented by a friendly local crowd. The Medina Grand is not a luxury hotel, but rather a very comfortable and well-run property, ideal for an overnight stay and very good value for money. **89 One-bedroom Premier Grand Apartment**, \$290. 2 Flinders Street, Adelaide. Tel. (61) 8-8112-0000. [www.medina.com.au](http://www.medina.com.au)

A 40-minute flight from Adelaide brought us to Kangaroo Island. More than 90 miles long, but with just 4,300 inhabitants, this is a wild and magnificent place. Owing to its dramatic scenery and teeming wildlife — including sea lions, koalas and kangaroos — the island is often referred to as “Australia’s Galapagos.” On arrival, we were greeted at the tiny Kingscote airport by Andrew, a



friendly Tasmanian. The ensuing one-hour drive through a landscape of moors and lamb-dotted pastures reminded us consecutively of Big Sur, Nantucket and the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland.

It has been some time since we've been as impressed by a new hotel as we were by **SOUTHERN OCEAN LODGE**, which opened in March 2008. At the end of a long, bumpy road, iron gates swung aside, and shortly thereafter, we caught our first glimpse of the property, perched high above Kangaroo Island's spectacular southern coast. There, dramatic wind- and sea-gouged cliffs are scoured by white-crested breakers and punctuated by glorious white-sand beaches.

Check-in and orientation were exceptionally gracious and charming. Stylishly dressed in a linen tunic and loose white trousers, our receptionist Heather outlined the itinerary that had been planned for us and suggested a light lunch followed by a four-hour tour of the island. Initially, however, we relaxed in the magnificent Great Room, a huge pavilion with floor-to-ceiling windows and a wall of golden limestone. The space is compartmentalized by the exquisite furniture of Adelaide-based, Malaysian-born furniture designer Khai Liew. Liew's pieces are inspired by '60s Scandinavian and traditional Chinese designs, and many are crafted in pale American oak. The décor is augmented by a suspended woodburning steel fireplace and tables piled with magazines and books.

The 21 suites all come with hypnotic views of the Southern Ocean, which extends as far as Antarctica, and are situated on a sloping hallway that runs along a cliff top. Our room, #2, required a long walk, but the compensations were privacy and magnificent views over a sandy cove. A paved limestone entrance gave way to floors made from recycled timber. In front of the window, an inviting sofa was dotted with oatmeal canvas bolsters, kangaroo-print cushions and a soft brown wool throw. Bedside switches operated blackout shades on the ocean-facing wall. There was no television, which would be superfluous in such a gloriously remote location, but we found a Bose CD player with an iPod dock on a long, built-in oak desk. (Three suites have TVs, and can be specifically requested.) The bath was faced with toast-colored limestone, equipped with underfloor heating and a stall shower, and provided locally made lavender-scented toiletries. Suites #6 and #8 have soaking tubs and Jacuzzis. An outdoor terrace came with a built-in couch. All told, our suite was one of the most delightful places we've had the pleasure of occupying in a very long time.

The resort's cleverly designed dining room has tables set in intimate niches in the limestone wall, as well as

others by windows overlooking the ocean. Given the constraints of a remote location, the food is excellent, with a daily market menu augmented by one of appealing comfort food. Among the dishes we especially enjoyed were grilled squid with a chili dipping sauce, smoked abalone with soba noodles and shaved pickled ginger, and grilled locally caught snapper in a lime and ginger sauce.

Southern Ocean Lodge is owned by Hayley and James Baillie, both of whom are committed environmentalists.

## Sydney Restaurants Not to Miss

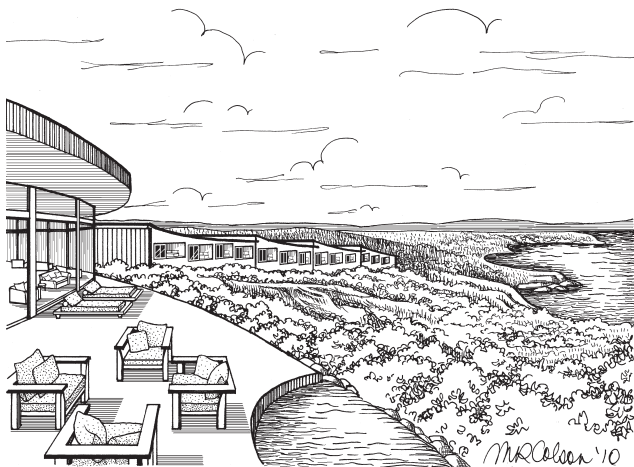
**MANLY PAVILION.** (West Esplanade, Manly Cove. Tel. 9949-9011.) Set in a former 1930s beachside changing pavilion, the new restaurant of chefs James Parry and Jonathan Barthelmess recently won a prestigious "hat," the local equivalent of a Michelin star, from the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The white split-level dining room draws discerning local food lovers with a Mediterranean-inspired menu of dishes such as scallops with celery ragu and bagna cauda (an Italian sauce of anchovy, garlic and olive oil), cuttlefish and eggplant with chilies and lemon, John Dory with white beans in a light vinaigrette, and roast lamb with caponata. Delicious desserts include cocoa ravioli with Gorgonzola and honey. The wine list is outstanding, too.

**MARQUE RESTAURANT.** (4/5 355 Crown Street, Surry Hills. Tel. 9332-2225.) Located in arty, upscale Surry Hills, this place was named Restaurant of the Year 2010 by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Chef Mark Best cooked with the great chefs of France before coming home and hanging out his shingle. The service is a bit precious, but Best's food is superb, so the multicourse tasting menu is recommended. It changes often, but may include dishes such as roasted shrimp with mustard-and-ham vinaigrette; beetroot and locally made goat cheese salad; grated smoked squid salad; and cod with mushrooms and kumquats. There is a fine assortment of wines by the glass.

**SEPIA.** (201 Sussex Street. Tel. 9283-1990.) After a stint with Marco Pierre White in London, Australian chef Martin Benn worked for many years as head chef at the famous Sydney restaurant *Tetsuya's* before launching his own place in the central business district last year. With a low-lit décor that combines elements of an old-fashioned men's club with those of a Parisian brasserie, it is a popular spot for corporate dining at noon, but draws serious gourmets in the evening. Benn's menus follow the seasons, but often include superb starters such as crab and buckwheat risotto with mustard butter, and main courses such as an Angus tenderloin steak with short ribs, buffalo-milk "tofu," roasted quinoa and garlic flowers.

(Their first project was the Harper-recommended Capella Lodge on pristine Lord Howe Island in the South Pacific.) As a result, solar panels are scattered around the grounds, the lodge has only a small plunge pool, and water is drawn from an underground well and has to be desalinated. Nonetheless, facilities include a terrific spa with idyllic treatment rooms overlooking the Southern Ocean.

On a memorable four-hour excursion to Flinders Chase National Park, we saw dozens of Australian sea lions and New Zealand fur seals, volcanic blowholes, several historic lighthouses and numerous kangaroos, wallabies



Southern Ocean Lodge, Kangaroo Island

and koalas. Southern Ocean Lodge was undoubtedly the highlight of our trip to Australia. **98 Flinders Suite**, \$990 per person, including all meals, drinks, excursions and airport transfers; **Remarkable Suite**, \$1,500. Hanson Bay, Kangaroo Island. Tel. (61) 8-8559-7347. [www.southernoceanlodge.com.au](http://www.southernoceanlodge.com.au)

## The Barossa Valley

FOLLOWING OUR WEEKEND ON KANGAROO ISLAND, we drove north for two hours from Adelaide to the Barossa Valley. Australia's most famous wine region is just 20 miles long, an enchanting place with a landscape of rolling hills and neat vineyards. Its small but sophisticated towns such as Tanunda and Lyndoch display a Teutonic tidiness, which, along with excellent charcuteries and Lutheran churches, provides evidence of the German immigrants who joined the original British settlers. Barossa should be toured at a gentle pace, stopping for a wine-tasting, a really excellent meal or a walk down an old-fashioned main street lined with bakeries, bookstores and colorful boutiques. (See *Hideaway Report Online* for a list of our favorite wineries.)

After an excellent lunch at the *1918 Bistro & Grill* in Tanunda, we headed north to **THE LOUISE**, an elegant

15-suite contemporary country house hotel at the northern end of the valley. The hotel was purchased by Jim Carreker, an American who had previously worked in the San Francisco high-tech world. A decade ago, he and his wife opted to start a new life, and after several years of travel, they decided to open a hotel. "We took notes," Carreker told us during a chat before dinner. "Our goal was to create a hotel that was almost perfect."

Ideally situated for touring the Barossa vineyards, The Louise stands amid beautifully landscaped grounds that overlook neat rows of vines. A bank of lavender and a long rectangular pool line a stoned-paved path that leads up to the main building. This houses reception, the hotel's acclaimed *Appellation* restaurant, a sauna and a swimming pool.

Our suite was both luxurious and exceptionally well-conceived. Opening a wooden gate in a stone wall, we found a pretty interior courtyard with a table and chairs in an alcove that later proved ideal for a sunny breakfast. The peaceful sitting room came with a high ceiling, crown moldings, a gas fireplace, a Bose CD player with an iPod dock, and contemporary paintings. French doors led to a spacious private terrace with twin chaises longues. Beyond a pair of heavy wooden doors, the bedroom provided a counter desk, an extremely comfortable double bed and sophisticated lighting. The well-lit limestone bath was equipped with a whirlpool tub and a stall shower. (An additional outdoor shower was enclosed by a high stone wall.)

*Appellation* is one of the most highly rated restaurants in Australia, and despite occasionally slow and rather mannered service, we enjoyed an excellent meal that included smoked salmon with tiny cubes of cucumber, tomato and crushed hazelnuts with a pool of wasabi cream; barley risotto with spinach and shavings of tangy local cheese; and filet of beef — all accompanied by a superb assortment of local wines by the glass. It should be noted, however, that the prices here are as steep as those in the best restaurants of New York or San Francisco. (For food and wine travelers, The Louise provides a variety of excursions, including a "Winemaker Private Introductions" package, from \$930 for two.) **93 Suite**, \$430-\$1,030, breakfast included. Corner of Seppeltsfield Road and Stonewall Road, Marananga. Tel. (61) 8-8562-2722. [www.thelouise.com.au](http://www.thelouise.com.au)

Anyone looking for a less expensive and possibly more authentic experience of the Barossa Valley might want to consider the **ABBOTSFORD COUNTRY HOUSE**, a hospitable and attractive eight-room hotel on a

hillside just outside of Lyndoch. The property is run by the delightful Julian Maul, an Australian who worked in advertising in the United Kingdom before throwing it all over to build this property with his charming Scottish wife, Jane (a highly talented cook who produces delicious country breakfasts).

Bedrooms are located in a set of outbuildings that evoke rural Australian architecture with corrugated roofs and wide verandas. Our spacious room was decorated in traditional English country house style with a floral chintz-covered sofa and a large and inviting bed. Surrounded by a beautiful rose garden, a 50-acre working cattle ranch and vineyards, this is an exceptionally pleasant and peaceful property. **89** *Deluxe Suite*, \$275; *Super Deluxe Suite*, \$355. *Yaldara Drive, Lyndoch. Tel. (61) 8-8524-4662. www.abbotsfordhouse.com*

## Hamilton Island

THE FINAL STOP ON OUR JOURNEY WAS LUSH, GREEN Hamilton Island, a 90-minute flight from Brisbane off Australia's northeast coast. Located in the Whitsunday Islands, Hamilton is not on the Great Barrier Reef, but close to it. Until recently, it was not an upscale destination, but following a \$75 million investment by the Oatley family, Hamilton attempted to join the world of luxury travel with the opening of 60-room QUALIA resort in late 2007. My encyclopedia informs me that the word "qualia" derives from Latin and is now "a term used in philosophy to describe the subjective quality of experience." From this definition, you may perhaps discern the level of the property's aspirations!

Following a seamless transfer and a welcoming glass of sparkling wine, we were driven through the attractively landscaped property to our Windward Pavilion, a low building with stone walls and a corrugated iron roof in the Australian vernacular style. The electric golf buggy was ours to use for the remainder of our stay. Our huge air-conditioned cottage (1,290 square feet) featured a dramatic cathedral ceiling, teak floors, a built-in couch, a wet bar and an elaborate television and audio setup that included an iPod dock. Spacious and comfortable though it was, the room was dark, and the fabrics and colors failed to create a tropical atmosphere. A large wooden deck with lovely sea views was furnished with a pair of wooden armchairs, as well as an uninviting daybed with a stained mattress. A small, unheated plunge pool flanked the deck. Our bedroom came with an effective ceiling fan, louvered windows with screens, and a high white clapboard ceiling. A huge black basalt-faced bath

provided a tub and a large stall shower. A glass door led to an outdoor shower.

When we returned to the main lodge for dinner, it, too, seemed dark. A sunken seating area overlooked a long, narrow swimming pool that no one used, probably because it was in full view of the hotel's public spaces. The food, however, proved to be one of high points of our stay. Both the veal with a relish of mint and fresh peas, and caramelized salmon with shaved fresh pineapple and soba noodles, were delicious. The service was very friendly, but disorganized and exasperatingly slow, especially at breakfast. Lunch was served in a seaside pavilion on the resort's pebbly main beach, but the restaurant lacked atmosphere and, as the menu was limited, we went to the Hamilton Island marina for our midday meals.

One conspicuous virtue of Qualia is its spa, housed within an airy stone bungalow with six spacious treatment rooms. The menu is extensive and appealing, and the outstanding therapies include the superb 90-minute "Kumali Ritual," which begins with an exfoliation and massage using native Australian herbs and plants and continues with a body treatment of almond and macadamia nut oil followed by a hot poultice massage.

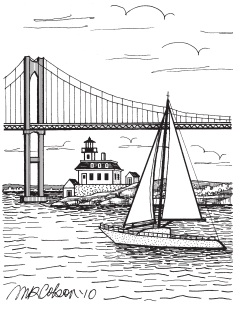
Qualia has received a good deal of ecstatic publicity, but we found it somewhat disappointing. Ultimately, it isn't a destination resort for Americans, but rather an expensive jumping-off point for anyone who wants to explore the Great Barrier Reef. **89** *Leeward Pavilion*, \$900, including breakfast, airport transfers and some water activities; *Windward Pavilion*, \$1,500. *Hamilton Island, Queensland. Tel. (61) 7-4948-9222. www.qualia.com.au*

## Australian Wines and Vineyards

IN MY EXPERIENCE, VINEYARD VISITS IN AUSTRALIA are unadulterated pleasure, as the winemakers are so instinctively generous and hospitable. The Australian wine industry is thriving, and the Barossa Valley in particular now produces some of the New World's most distinguished and distinctive reds. The Andrew Harper wine concierge, Hal Oates of Porthos, is married to an Australian, and over the years he has acquired a fund of knowledge and experience. In this month's *Hideaway Report Online*, he describes in detail some of his Barossa Valley favorites. (Visit [www.AndrewHarper.com](http://www.AndrewHarper.com)).

Responding to their global popularity, more Australian winemakers are adding rosés to their lines. Many are excellent, and in the March online edition, I list those that I most enjoyed on my recent trip Down Under.

## Rhode Island: Reinventing a Classic Vacation



AS A BOY, ONE OF MY FAVORITE diversions was a wooden puzzle of the United States, each state being a different piece. The only problem was that I kept losing the tiny red square that was Rhode Island!

But in one respect the puzzle was misleading, for despite its size, the smallest state in the union possesses a coast of wide bays dotted with islands that give it an impressive length of shoreline.

This natural asset, plus proximity to both New York and Boston, long ago made Rhode Island a favorite summer retreat. The lovely city of Newport, with its enormous mansions — quaintly referred to as “cottages” — became an important part of American social history. On a lesser scale, the town of Watch Hill, set on a beautiful peninsula in the southwest corner of the state, drew wealthy families from the Midwest looking for seaside retreats after the Civil War. Arriving by train in nearby Stonington, Connecticut, they boarded steamships for the brief journey to the pier at Watch Hill, where they would disembark and then be taken by coach to one of the many grand hotels that sprang up to accommodate them.

Built in 1868, **OCEAN HOUSE** was a Victorian mansion with a curved portico and rocker-lined verandas set on a hill that sloped gently down to an inviting arc of golden sand. Guests sipped tea in the afternoon and, after dinner, men in white tie and women in couture gowns danced to bands brought up from New York. Ocean House thrived and became known as “The Queen of the Atlantic Resorts.”

Watch Hill became so popular, however, that people began to build summer homes, gradually turning the town into a residential community. The hotels declined, and many succumbed to negligence and fire. Ocean House continued, but time and the salt air finally caught up with it. In 2003, its owner decided to sell. An initial group of buyers planned to tear it down, but an outraged community prevailed upon a local resident, Charles Royce, to save it. Royce put together the financing, but studies showed that the original building was too far gone to restore. Unfazed, Royce determined to recreate it. So more than 5,000 original elements — such as the 19th-century elevator

and numerous architectural details — were put into storage so they could grace Ocean House in the future.

The reborn hotel opened in the late spring of 2010 and is an astonishingly faithful recreation of the original, with the same sunny yellow clapboard exterior, black shutters, wide verandas and soaring mansard roof. We checked in for our incognito visit at the restored registration desk, though in place of a ledger, there is now a discreet computer screen. In the lounge, clusters of overstuffed chairs and potted palms were reminiscent of days gone by, but the massive stone fireplace blazed with a gas rather than a log fire. And therein lies the appeal of Ocean House: It evokes the charm of another age, but is also a comfortable modern hotel.

All 49 rooms and suites are generously sized and come with views of the sea, the most desirable being those with terraces on the second floor. The décor might be described as country house colonial, with meticulously wrought moldings, paneled doors, thoughtfully executed lighting and a full complement of comfortable furniture. Walls are hung with local scenes. In general, the colors are muted and those of the floral fabrics are pretty but subdued. Sumptuous baths come with marble vanities, river-stone flooring in the showers and soaking tubs with their own flat-panel TVs.

The hotel’s primary restaurant, *Seasons*, has a horseshoe-shaped bar that faces an ultramodern open kitchen. If you wish, you can have dinner at the chef’s

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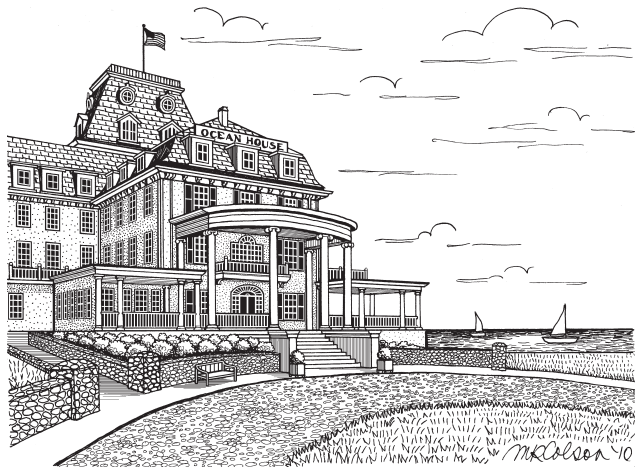
The reborn hotel is a faithful recreation of the original, with the same sunny yellow clapboard exterior and soaring mansard roof

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counter and watch all the activity. We opted for the traditional dining room, however, drawn by its walls of windows with views of the sea. Executive Chef Albert Cannito’s commitment to regional products is immediately evident on the menu, which lists the source for the primary ingredient of each dish. Everything we tried was delicious, but we especially enjoyed the handmade agnolotti filled with Hooligan cheese from Cato Corner Farm in Connecticut, which were served with walnuts, orange, pickled fennel and arugula in a rich bacon-blueberry

emulsion. The roasted rib eye (from Wolfe’s Neck Farm in Maine) was perfectly cooked as specified and came with grilled baby leeks, sautéed maitake mushrooms and puréed potatoes, all in a rich sauce Périgourdine. It was a memorable meal.

The next day, we attempted to mitigate some of the previous night’s indulgence with a session in the lovely indoor pool. (This is part of an inviting spa and is open to the outdoors in good weather.) Further exercise was provided by a walk along the gorgeous beach, part of which is private to the hotel. Other diversions at Ocean



Ocean House, Watch Hill

House include golf at the Lake of Isles courses, tennis at the Pond View Club, fishing, boating and culinary classes that are part of the hotel’s “Farm + Vine” program. The charming village of Watch Hill, with its shops and galleries, is just a short walk away.

Overall, we greatly admired this carefully updated recreation of a classic Atlantic resort, not least because of intangibles such as the superb service and accommodating attitude of the staff. Obviously, summer is the peak season, but Ocean House would be a terrific getaway for anyone in the southern New England area at most times of year. **94** *Standard Room, \$285; Terrace Room, from \$450; Suite, from \$525. 1 Bluff Avenue, Watch Hill, RI 02891. Tel. (888) 552-2588 or (401) 584-7000. [www.oceanhouseri.com](http://www.oceanhouseri.com).*

I had been looking forward to renewing my acquaintance with Newport and to staying at a recently revived property, **VANDERBILT HALL**. Alas, my stay proved highly unsatisfactory, and I cut it short. However, the hotel was unexpectedly sold in late 2010, so it would clearly be unfair to review it.

From Newport, a pleasant drive took us to the eastern side of Rhode Island, through a landscape of gentle hills and towns with steeped churches set against a backdrop

of the sparkling sea. Our destination, Little Compton, is situated in a lovely area with old farmhouses, stone walls and a ruggedly spectacular shoreline.

We stayed at **STONE HOUSE**, which opened last year. Built in 1854 as a private residence, it became an inn in the 1920s. The current owners have completely restored and renovated the property, as well as an adjacent 1870s barn. Alas, our stay didn’t get off to an auspicious start. There was no good signage when we arrived — after dark — and the location of the main entrance was unclear. We chose a small door with a portico and, finding our way to what seemed to be a reception area, received a greeting that was casual to the point of being offhand.

Clearly a great deal of thought and money had been invested in our spacious suite in the barn. But the conversion had been done in a startling contemporary style that seemed wholly at odds with the exterior of the main building. Rather than feeling I was in an old house by the sea, it seemed as though I’d walked into a showcase apartment in downtown Manhattan. There was a sectional sofa set in front of a big flat-panel TV, a little corner kitchen with views across the lawn to the ocean, and a glass-tiled bath with a tub so deep that it required steps to clamber into it. The “fireplace” was a recess in a silvered wall with nothing but a gas strip burner to provide the flame: a design cliché from the Hip Hotel handbook. To be fair, the next morning I was able to see some of the suites in the main house. These were more appealing, with old architectural details mixed in with contemporary furniture and fixtures.

That evening we had dinner in 1854, the basement tavern in the main house. With dark walls and furniture, it was cozy and atmospheric. And the food was utterly delicious: The chowder was thick, sea-salty, slightly smoky from the bacon and contained a generous quantity of clams. The slow-roasted pork that followed was tender and juicy, with a side of maple-infused apples. Having eaten so well, we were looking forward to breakfast. Served in a plain room on the first floor of the main house, it turned out to be little more than bread and pastries, containers of yogurt, and cereal in the tiresome little boxes intended for children.

There are things at Stone House about which it is possible to enthuse. But I cannot recommend it unreservedly to Harper members, which is a shame, as this is such a beautiful part of New England. Perhaps much younger folk will feel more at home. **84** *Suite, \$270-\$360. 122 Sakonnet Point Road, Little Compton, RI 02837. Tel. (401) 635-2222. [www.stonehouse1854.com](http://www.stonehouse1854.com)*



## WHAT'S HOT, WHAT'S NOT

THIS REGULAR COLUMN SUMMARIZES THE OBSERVATIONS OF READERS AND **DOES NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE OPINION OF YOUR EDITOR**. Based on the hundreds of letters, emails, critique cards and forum posts we review each month, the following hotels and resorts received the most revealing positive and/or negative comments —

↑ **TWIN FARMS** *Barnard, VT* — According to many, this deservedly renowned New England inn just keeps getting better, thanks to “outstanding service,” a “great GM” and “unbelievably delicious” food. Even with its exalted reputation, the “stunning” property exceeds “all expectations.”

↑ **THE GREENWICH** *New York, NY* — Those in search of a superior Manhattan boutique hotel need look no farther than this Tribeca favorite, which is consistently praised for its “quiet, spacious and comfortable” rooms, plus public areas that are “welcoming,” “inviting” and “serene.” Add “friendly and helpful” staff and “great food” to the mix, and you have a place that is just about “perfect.”

↑ **MAROMA** *Mexico* — This perennial Harper favorite is lauded for “amazing” cuisine, “one of the best beaches” in the world and “attentive” staff members who “could not have been nicer.” Even for those who experience the occasional glitch, “positives far outweigh the small negatives.” For one

member, her vacation was simply “a few days of paradise.”

↑ **RAMBAGH PALACE** *India* — An established favorite housed within the former residence of the Maharajah of Jaipur, this Rajasthan palace hotel goes from strength to strength, owing to “extraordinary service,” “spacious rooms,” “pretty gardens” and an Indian restaurant that is “out of this world good.” One satisfied customer wonders whether this could be “my favorite hotel in the world.”

↑ **ROYAL MALEWANE** *South Africa* — Located in the private Thornybush Game Reserve adjacent to Kruger National Park, this “outstanding” safari lodge draws a steady stream of plaudits from Harper members. “Charming” GM and “outstanding chef” John Jackson is consistently cited as being integral to the place’s allure. Suites, spa and game drives are all “perfect.” One euphoric traveler “can’t say enough” and insists that everyone should “get to experience...the property at least once in their lifetime.”

↔ **LES MARS HOTEL** *Healdsburg, CA* — For the disenchanted, this wine country property is “not worth the price” owing to “small” rooms with “poor” lighting. But others beg to differ and cite “super” service, an “intimate” atmosphere and a “perfect location.” Indeed, one enthusiastic correspondent was “frankly blown away” and couldn’t “wait to return.”

↔ **SHUTTERS ON THE BEACH** *Santa Monica, CA* — Despite “wonderful” cuisine, “speedy room service” and “helpful valet people,” several Harper members insist that room choice is the key to happiness at this California classic. The street noise can be “very loud,” and a view of the parking lot “isn’t quite the same as looking at the ocean.”

↓ **TURTLE INN** *Belize* — Despite some praise for its “atmospheric” oceanside villas and “exotic location,” there is trenchant criticism for “unprofessional” staff, “repetitive” food, “uncared-for” gardens and a beach ruined by “sea grass covered in algae.” One disgruntled traveler was “glad to return home” and wished that “it had been sooner.”

### ANDREW HARPER HOTEL AND RESORT RATINGS

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- 90-91** A fine hotel/resort of considerable charm

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- 85-89** A commendable hotel/resort, providing high levels of comfort and service

*Not Recommended*

- 50-84** A hotel/resort that did not meet the Andrew Harper standard

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