

The IMPROPER BOSTONIAN

Travel

A Shore Thing

Local Charm and World-Class Luxury at Rhode Island's Weekapaug Inn

ANDREW RIMAS



Photo Credit: Chip Reigel

A few miles west of Newport's monied bluffs, there's a strip of low Rhode Island coast stippled with milkweed and pepperbush. Shingled mansions lean back from the barrier beaches, and autumn loons settle in the reeds to weather the Atlantic winds. This is old vacation country, drawing families since the railroads first steamed out of South Station or Grand Central. Nestling in the curl of a tidal pond, the Weekapaug Inn has sheltered summering urbanites since 1899, although you wouldn't guess it. A year after a bone-deep reconstruction that converted it into a luxury vacation spot, it's now got Frette linens, heated bathroom floors and Relais & Chateaux accreditation.

All great properties are rooted in a sense of place, and the Weekapaug is defined by its surrounding sedge, sand and inlets. After valeting your car, walk upstairs past an enormous mural showing the property's beaches and resident waterfowl, several of which make appearances

in the lobby's framed Audubon prints. Along with the fizz of a welcoming glass of sparkling wine, your first impression is formed by the view over the back lawn and Quonnie Pond. Look past the swooping ospreys over the open water for a glimpse of distant Block Island—there isn't a window in the house that fails to overlook blue serenity and cormorants. Mark Bullinger, the inn's resident naturalist, leads guests on birding tours, nature walks on the beach and stargazing expeditions, or he can tailor a fishing or kayaking excursion to your taste. He'll also stop by to say hello during the evening wine-and-cheese hour and give you an update on kingfisher migrations or the visibility of constellations.

The outdoors is often best appreciated from an armchair by the fire or, better, the inside of a soaking tub. Since its renovation, the inn drastically reduced the number of rooms, making them more spacious while retaining a lot of the original furniture—reupholstered and refinished—and painting the bedroom floors per the fashion in 1899. The most majestic rooms are the four signature suites. The Green Heron Suite, for example, sports a Viking kitchen, a television den with a fireplace, a private elevator and a half-dozen comfy, aesthetic nooks suitable for recumbent bird-watching (binoculars are on the coffee table). There's even a washer and dryer for the rigors of family beach vacations. Sunrises flood the suite with color, and you can watch clammers rake the edges of the pond as you nurse a morning mug of cappuccino. More secluded are the Fenway suites in a side building overlooking the 75-foot lap pool. Adults-only, these have enclosed decks with outdoor tubs.

In warm weather, the two miles of private beach unroll past the Bathhouse, which features luxury changing rooms and a snack bar pouring Del's Lemonade. A boathouse supplies guests with kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and a Sunfish sailboat. For cooler afternoons, the great lawn offers two shuffleboard courts and one for bocce, while nights bring s'mores around the fire pit.

In wintry weather, though, focus your energies on the menu in chef Jennifer Backman's restaurant. Despite the well-appointed fitness room and morning yoga classes, this is a place to break diet rules, then trample the pieces, grinding them into a sweet, confectionary powder. Start with the fresh breakfast croissants that hover in a physical plane between solid pastry, air and liquid butter, but leave room for lobster hash with poached eggs. The bar is a cozy place for a beer and Point Judith calamari so tender as to mimic the texture of scallops, or just a snack of warm garlic and Parmesan potato chips. But the crowning achievement is the dinner menu. Squid ink spaghetti with clams, red chili flakes, garlic and lemon is a thoughtful exploration of textures in an umami tenor. Roast duck crackles before melting into a velvet richness uplifted by notes of beet and cherry.

Afterward, put your feet up by the fire in the main parlor while you play a board game or tinker with a jigsaw puzzle, or simply look out at the water. It's a pleasant way to spend the evening. People have been doing it here for 114 years.

Traveler's Checks:

Most rooms lack televisions. This is intentional, since mingling in common areas is encouraged, but flat-screens will be delivered to your accommodations upon request.

Guest pantries are stocked with a changing array of snacks, 24 hours per day. Take special note of the muffins.

The Weekapaug's sister property is the majestic Ocean House, up the road in Watch Hill. All its facilities, from spa to squash courts, are open to guests.

Weekapaug Inn | 25 Spray Rock Road, Westerly, R.I. | 888-813-7862 | weekapauginn.com