

A Taste of the Rawatcha Global GETAWAY

by Margaret Swaine
Columnist and Author
www.margaretswaine.com



A VERY VICTORIAN CAPE MAY



Cape May, America's first seaside resort, is at the very southern end of the Jersey Shore. The coastal region of New Jersey encompasses about 227 km of oceanfront bordering the Atlantic Ocean starting from Perth Amboy in the north. So why drive all the way down the coast to exit zero of the Garden State Parkway? To view and enjoy the Cape May's amazing historic preservation of Victorian properties.

There are now about 600 restored Victorian structures in Cape May. The entire city has been designated a National Historic Landmark. It didn't come easy though. The Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts and Humanities (MAC) set up in 1970 as a non-profit to promote the preservation of Cape May and manage several historic sites came about because of a struggle between historic preservationists in the area and developers keen to tear down for new builds.

Susan Krysiak, Director of Media Relations for MAC, filled me in on the back story. In the mid century Cape May had a long period of not much happening and many of its Victorian buildings were neglected and run down. This came to a head in the sixties when the 1879 Emlen Physick Estate was slated for demolition. That galvanized preservationist residents to save the city's historic structures.

First they applied for historic status for the city and then received a grant to help with preservation efforts. Then they managed in a tight race to get a pro-preservation mayor, Bruce Minnix elected. His first act on the job was to accept the grant and get things rolling. He had a strong hand in shifting the focus in Cape May to the idea "Our Future is in our Past," and was a founding member of MAC.

The city today has been voted one of 'America's 20 Prettiest Towns', named one of the '1000 Places to See Before You Die' and one of America's 'Prettiest Painted Places'. Restored Victorian era inns, B&B's and houses line the streets of this 'Queen of Seaside Resorts' which first attracted visitors in the late 1700's.

MAC runs trolley tours throughout the day with guides who give insight into the buildings and Victorian architecture. You learn about second floor sleeping porches, Mansard roofs, Gothic arched windows, Italianate horizontal

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cornices and Dutch Colonial gabled roofs. You'll see Shingle Style and Stick Style houses, two styles of wooden architecture that weren't historical revivals. A house that's a mishmash of style forms is called "Drunken Style".

I stayed at the Henry Sawyer, a 1877 gable-roofed cottage-style Victorian Bed and Breakfast inn in the heart of the Historic District. Along with a hearty home cooked breakfast, the inn also offered guests complimentary tea with home baked pastries in the afternoon. This tradition seemed to be widespread among the B&B inns in town.

At Leith Hall B&B, when I met up with owners Suzie and Elan Zingman-Leith, Elan had just baked scones which he filled with whipped cream and jam and chocolate cupcakes for his guests. At Queen Victoria, a subtle Mansard style B&B inn built in 1881-82, owners Doug and Anna Marie McMMain use recipes from Anna Marie's family to serve up a savoury and a sweet at tea time for guests.

The bigger inns and hotels have full service restaurants, such as The Mad Batter at the 19 room Carroll Villa Hotel, circa 1882. Cocktails were delicious, as was my perfectly cooked blackened scallops on a bed of mashed sweet potato. Congress Hall, a large and impressive building that is America's oldest seaside hotel, has several dining options. At their Blue Pig Tavern I had local oysters, clams, shrimp and blue crab claws. I learned from Chef Michael Greenstein that their number one seller is the local scallops - they go through 300 pounds of them a week. (Cape May is the second largest scallop fishery on the coast.)

Congress Hall is part of the Cape Resorts Group of local properties owned by Curtis Bashaw. He and his partner Will Riccio also own Beach Plum Farm where they grow food for the Cape Resort restaurants. This 62 acre farm grows more than 100 crops, has free range chickens roaming about that provide eggs for the restaurants and heritage pigs. The Kitchen at the Beach Plum Farm is open for breakfast and lunch - offering farm raised bacon and egg on a fluffy brioche for example. Special farm to table dinners are offered once or twice a week depending upon the season. There are even beautiful cottages on the

property available for a weekend or longer stay.

The Ocean Club Hotel, a newly built beachfront boutique hotel, has the excellent SeaSalt Restaurant. The food here was the best of all. The steamer clams I ate and the Maryland crab cakes on sautéed spinach were perfection. Also first-rate were their specialty cocktails such as the cherry bourbon sour.

Not far from the historic downtown you can find wineries such as Willow Creek which offers tasting flights of wines from grapes grown on their property along with cheeses, charcuterie plates, sandwiches and other dishes to pair with them.

Fairly new to the area is Nauti Spirits, in Cape May's coastal farm distillery. They grow sweet potatoes on their 60 acre farm which are then distilled into a very smooth and gentle vodka. They also make a rum from southern American molasses and a nicely aromatic and botanical forward gin. You can try the spirits straight at their bar or order them in a cocktail. While Jersey laws don't allow distilleries to serve food (huh!?), food trucks are on property in the summer and you can order in from nearby restaurants.

Every month MAC organizes different events and activities in Cape May. Late September is the annual Food & Wine Celebration. In October it's Halloween Happenings. Christmas sees the whole town light up. There are holiday lights tours, Charles Dickens lectures, breakfast with Santa and Christmas extravaganzas. MAC has made sure Cape May's future is its past.

www.capemaymac.org



Egor serving a Delaware Bay Breeze cocktail at Nauti Spirits