

Checking In: A taste of the season at Asticou Inn

Maine's Mount Desert Island is home to a comfortable, classic hotel that has served guests for more than a century

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JULY 5, 2013



The Asticou Inn near Bar Harbor, Maine, is marking 130 years of refined hospitality and good cuisine.

Photograph by: Rogier van Bakel, Eager Eye Photography

It's summertime in Maine and you never know what will happen weather-wise. There are days of heat and sun and there are days when the sea is tempestuous and the clouds roll in. Still, it's all good.

The meteorological magic of the Atlantic coast comes together on picturesque Mount Desert Island. The island encompasses the lively tourist town of Bar Harbor, the smaller, quieter villages of Northeast Harbor and Southwest Harbor and the dramatic terrain of Acadia National Park. Summer vacationers, artists and sportsmen come for hiking, cycling and the sea. There are blueberry and lobster festivals, concerts and beach life. Sailboats, cruisers, fishing boats and kayaks criss-cross the bays and inlets and brave souls dip in the ocean, which typically does not warm up higher than 13 C. Guests at the Asticou Inn in Northeast Harbor have been enjoying this scene since 1883. Great families such as the Astors and Rockefellers would come for "the season" with entourages of chauffeurs and maids, their carefree days filled with sailing, swimming, tennis and lawn parties.

Today, the Asticou has the feel of a rambling old house. It's comfortable, with classic décor in well-worn chintzes and florals and more than a century of antiques and collectibles.

One of the few Victorian buildings to survive Bar Harbor's Great Fire of 1947, the inn has been carefully preserved and restored. It has elegant staircases, intricate woodwork and even a vintage telephone switchboard in the lobby. Just as it was back in the day, you can take afternoon tea with cupcakes in a salon, and have meals on a sweeping deck that overlooks the harbour and the Atlantic.

Asticou's accommodations are comfortable and cosy, without televisions, but with wonderful views. There are 31 rooms in the main inn and 17 more in four cottages. It's all very traditional, but it's not cluttered or fussy. A vase or a lamp is placed on a table, just so. The bed frames are wrought iron or solid wood, so they are sturdy. And the comforters are white, which is always pretty, and heavy, to ward off the chilly night air.

Making it to 130 years is an accomplishment and the Asticou is celebrating with a deal of a third night at \$130 U.S. until July 11, and also between Sept. 2 and Oct. 10. Another good buy is the two-night package with one dinner at \$380 for two.

The Asticou has an exceptional food tradition. It is a sister property of the White Barn Inn in Kennebunkport, Me., a Relais & Châteaux which is one of the top culinary experiences in the Northeast countryside. Peabody's At The Asticou has marvellous coastal views and cuisine that chef Stephen Barck calls contemporary New England, featuring local seafood, seasonal ingredients and herbs from the inn's own garden.

Even breakfast is gastronomic, with mouth-watering lemon-ricotta pancakes topped with blueberry compote, lobster frittata or eggs Benedict with crabmeat. Lunch is casually Maine with clam chowder, lobster rolls, scallop salads or shrimp sandwiches.

Dinner takes the gastronomic quotient up one giant step with appetizers such as bouillabaisse, foie gras, oysters and beef carpaccio, followed by main courses of garlic-roasted lamb, butter-poached lobster, citrus salmon, pistachio-crusting halibut and Angus steak. The desserts are creamy and comfort-style, but artfully presented and clearly new. There is an adorable "flight" of crème brûlées, plus bread pudding, Maine blueberry pie with ice cream and an espresso pot-de-crème. If you like to cocoon with a glass in your hand, the Asticou has a connoisseurs' selection of single-malt scotches, more than 20 fine wines by the glass and vintage liqueurs.

Life outdoors can be tame or strenuous, with activities on land or on the water. The inn has a heated swimming pool and a clay tennis court. For shopping and café life, guests can board a free shuttle to the centre of Northeast Harbor, which is about one kilometre down the road, and also to Bar Harbor, a much larger town about 18 kilometres away.

On land, the big draw here is Acadia National Park, a vast and partly-tamed wilderness that covers about half of Mount Desert Island, plus other land in the region. Acadia is prized for its panoramic views of the sea and rugged mountains of granite. Acadia has hiking trails up mountains and along several kilometres of coastlines. The network of roads for cyclists, hikers and horses was built by J.D. Rockefeller, who was struck by the beauty of the region. Northeast Harbor Farmer's Market operates on Thursdays throughout the summer and the festive Thursday Night Out on Main St. features street

music, gallery tours, happy hour and late opening hours for shops. On the water, the local marinas can organize cruises, sailing, lobstering, fishing for mackerel and kayaking.

IF YOU GO

Bar Harbor is an approximately seven-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 10 east, through the Mégantic region of Quebec and Bangor, Me.

Asticou Inn: 207-276-3344, www.asticou.com; 15 Peabody Dr., Northeast Harbor, Me. Open May-October.

Price: Main inn, \$160-\$360 U.S. per night, for two; cottages, \$180-\$520 for up to six people, all including continental breakfast, afternoon tea, heated swimming pool, clay tennis court. Third night at \$130 until July 11. Prices decrease Sept. 2. One night with dinner, Sun.-Thurs., starts at \$249 for two. Two nights with one dinner, Mon.-Sun., starts at \$380, for two. Extras: horse-drawn carriage rides, golf, kayaking and boating, bike rentals, whale-watching.

Peabody's @ The Asticou: breakfast, lunch and dinner open to the public daily. Children's menu available.

Bar Harbor, 207-288-5103, www.barharborinfo.com; Acadia National Park, 207-288-3338, www.nps.gov/acad; Northeast Harbor, 207-276-5040, www.visitnortheastharbor.com; Maine: 888-624-6345, www.visitmaine.com.

Rochelle@rochellelash.com

Twitter: [rochellelash](https://twitter.com/rochellelash)

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette