

Save \$500 on passes for the Food & Wine Classic in Charleston through Aug. 31

Advertisement

Advertisement

HOTELS + RESORTS > HOTEL REVIEWS

Sweet, Standalone Waterfront Cottages Are the Star of This Refurbished Maine Resort

Dunes on the Waterfront has been a Southern Maine staple for 88 years — and now it has a fresh look.

By Lila Battis | Published on August 10, 2024

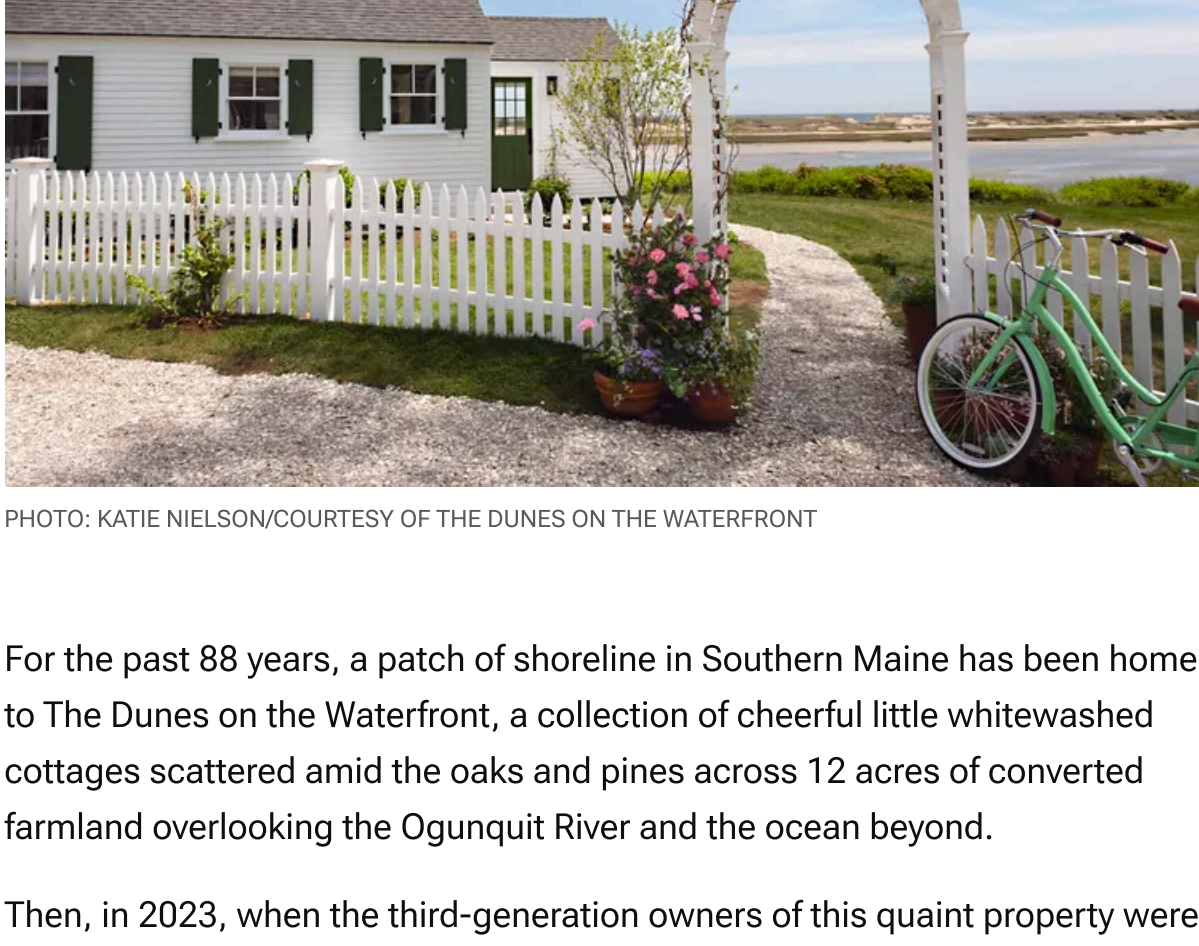


PHOTO: KATIE NIELSON/COURTESY OF THE DUNES ON THE WATERFRONT

For the past 88 years, a patch of shoreline in Southern Maine has been home to The Dunes on the Waterfront, a collection of cheerful little whitewashed cottages scattered amid the oaks and pines across 12 acres of converted farmland overlooking the Ogunquit River and the ocean beyond.

Then, in 2023, when the third-generation owners of this quaint property were ready to retire, they sold it to Tim Harrington, a hotelier who has been snapping up and refreshing properties from Kennebunkport to Southwest Harbor with an eye toward design-led makeovers that feel right at home on the Maine coast — and keep the historic bones of the existing buildings.

And though change can be a tricky thing in Maine — which has a sometimes-fraught relationship with its Vacationland reputation and all that comes with it — here, at least, it's been embraced wholeheartedly by longtime staff members, some with decades of tenure at the Dunes, and even the prior owners. That's partly due to the sensitive and detail-oriented redesign Harrington and his team gave the property, respecting the existing footprints and character of the cottages while updating them to feel light, bright, luxurious, and of the moment.

Rooms were opened up to bring in sunshine and ocean views, and local touches were woven throughout — antiques sourced from a dealer in Wells, leather-clad trunks with a natty white-and-green center stripe, and O.G.T. stenciled on the side handmade by a Scarborough craftsman. The shiplap trim, Jenny Lind spool beds in a soft sage green, and white slipcovered sofas with green-and-white ruffled accent pillows, among other design details, feel apropos for a coastal New England cottage without veering into caricature. There's not a lobster tchotchke or lighthouse watercolor in sight.

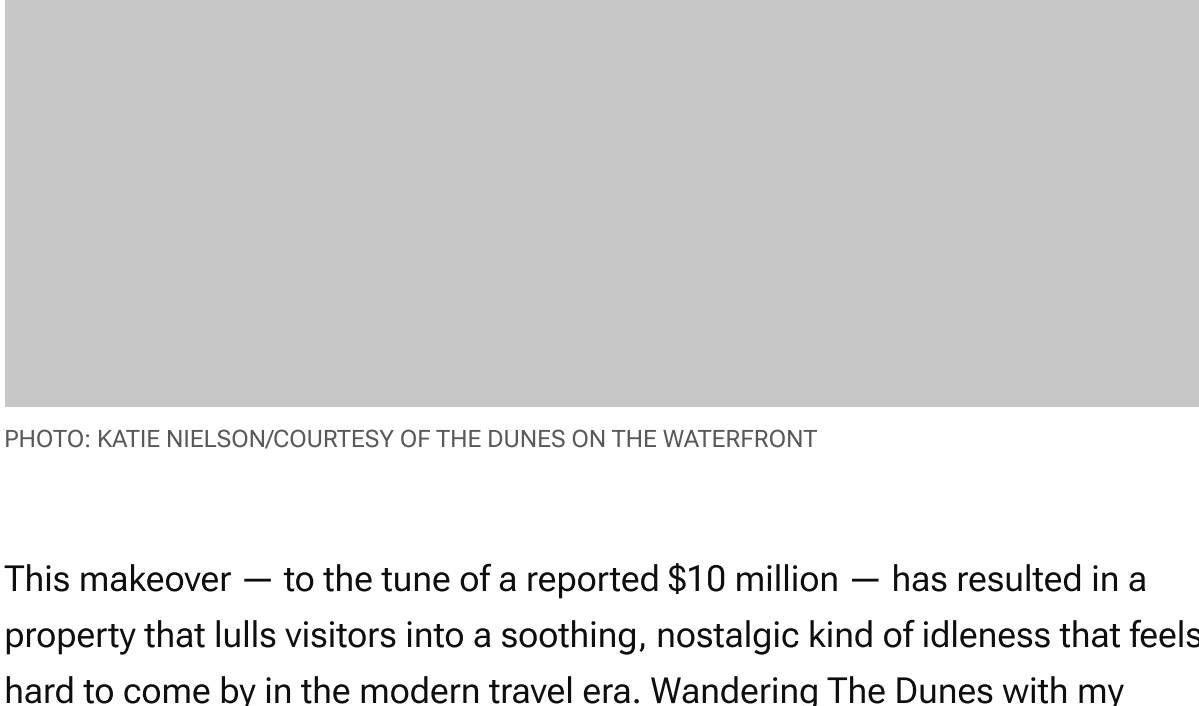


PHOTO: KATIE NIELSON/COURTESY OF THE DUNES ON THE WATERFRONT

This makeover — to the tune of a reported \$10 million — has resulted in a property that lulls visitors into a soothing, nostalgic kind of idleness that feels hard to come by in the modern travel era. Wandering The Dunes with my family felt like a snapshot of childhood summer if I'd had the kind of childhood summers that involved road-tripping to Maine and staying at impeccably designed seaside cottages. We sat and read on the screened-in porch as catbirds and sparrows chattered outside. We splashed around the pool (heated, a crucial feature here in the land of short summers and frigid ocean waters). We roamed the shoreline, gazing at far-off sailboats (me) and gleefully hurling rocks into the water (my toddler). We took a dinner-time jaunt to the 93-year-old Ogunquit Lobster Pound, which you can reach via a winding footpath through the trees right from the Dunes. We popped popcorn and snuggled in front of the fireplace for a movie night.

In an era when so many slick hotels open up with a half-dozen food and beverage venues, amenities stacked on amenities, and such extensive programming you'll get FOMO just from reading the activities roster, the Dunes on the Waterfront is luxurious in its simplicity. Spending time in a beautiful place where we could just be felt like a reprieve. It felt like the possibility and promise of summer in youth when those long, languorous days seemed infinite. It felt like, well, a vacation.

On my last morning, I took out one of the yellow sit-atop kayaks (graciously hauled down to the put-in for me by a staff member because this is not the kind of place where guests are expected to do *that*) and paddled along the river. It was a clear, quiet morning, with only birdsong and the water lapping against the boat. After paddling along the dune barrier separating the river from the sea, I turned back the way I'd come. A string of megamansions stuffed into tiny lots dotted the shoreline, each shouldered up to its neighbors like train commuters at rush hour. And then, a buffer of trees and the Dunes on the Waterfront — tidy white cottages dotted along the landscape, each appearing enveloped in its own green mantle of gardens, grasses, and oak trees. At the end of the property line, a dozen rowboats bobbed in the rising water. It wasn't anything dramatic or jaw-dropping, just the quiet beauty and simplicity of a decades-old seaside getaway spot, yet somehow, Vacationland had never looked so good.

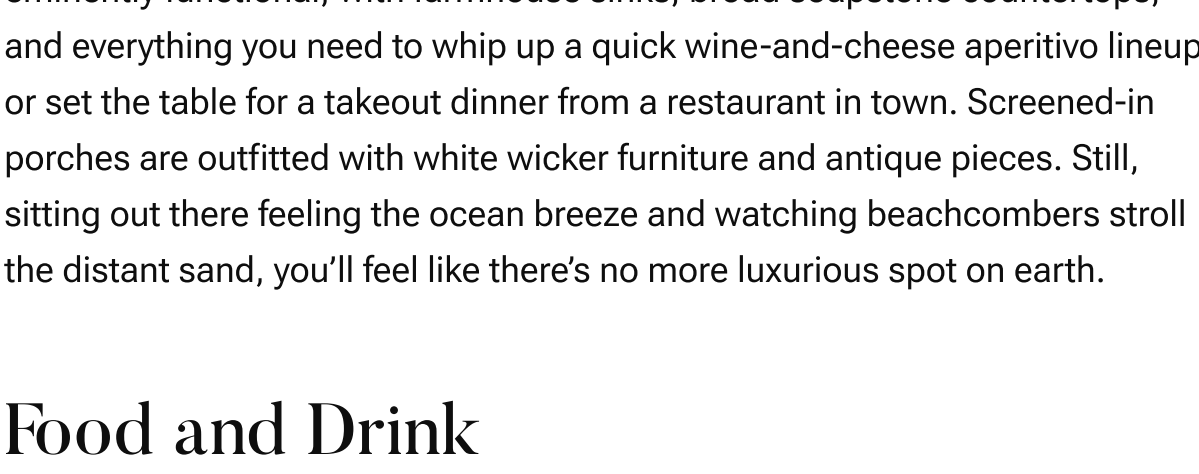
Here's a complete rundown of what to expect at The Dunes on the Waterfront.

WHAT WE LIKE

- Sweet, standalone cottages scattered across the property harken back to an earlier era of Maine summer haunts — but a considered redesign has brought them up-to-date, with supremely usable kitchenettes stocked with snacks and drinks, spacious bathrooms, fireplaces and screened-in porches, and floor plans that maximize sea views and light.
- The preppy-with-a-twist design feels breezy and collected, with locally sourced antiques intermingled with custom pieces by Maine artists and craftspeople.
- Situated just up Route 1 from Ogunquit's downtown, it's an easy jaunt to get to shops and restaurants but offers a welcome reprieve from the crowds during the busy summer season.
- A heated pool with river and ocean views (and a gently sloping kid-friendly shallow end) may seem like gilding the lily to the uninitiated, but dip a toe in the Gulf of Maine in early June, and you'll quickly understand why it's an early-summertime essential.
- The grounds are spread along the Ogunquit River, and it's a leisurely stroll across the sandbar to the beach at low tide, or you can take one of the property's kayaks or rowboats across when the water is high.

THE DUNES ON THE WATERFRONT

The Rooms



KATIE NIELSON/Courtesy of The Dunes on the Waterfront

1 of 3



The 21 whitewashed cottages of the Dunes on the Waterfront range from one to three bedrooms, all relatively compact but not claustrophobic — a one-two punch of thoughtful layouts and endless sunlight pouring in keeps the spaces airy. The design leans modern cottagecore, evoking the charming, quaint coastal retreat of a stylish — and decidedly WASPY friend: Jenny Lind spool beds, beadboard and shiplap details, scalloped side tables set with woven raffia trays. The bathrooms are elegant and understated, with marble countertops and chrome fixtures, and the kitchens are compact yet eminently functional, with farmhouse sinks, broad soapstone countertops, and everything you need to whip up a quick wine-and-cheese aperitivo lineup or set the table for a takeout dinner from a restaurant in town. Screened-in porches are outfitted with white wicker furniture and antique pieces. Still, sitting out there feeling the ocean breeze and watching beachcombers stroll the distant sand, you'll feel like there's no more luxurious spot on earth.

Food and Drink



PHOTO: KATIE NIELSON/COURTESY OF THE DUNES ON THE WATERFRONT

The property doesn't have a full food and beverage program, but that doesn't mean you're entirely on your own. Each morning, a tote bag appears at your door with a thermos of hot coffee and pastries from local bakery Bread and Roses, or you can wander up to the main building for a fresh-pressed juice or an espresso drink.

The in-room kitchenettes come with snacks and drinks — Kind bars, Cape Cod chips, Topo Chico, and so on — plus a Nespresso machine, should you need a pick-me-up. The property plans to add a self-service lobby fridge and pantry area, with bread, charcuterie boards, cheeses, and accomterments for sale, though for now, you can pop by to survey a cabinet full of local jams and jellies to take home.

And over in the northwest corner of the property, follow the "FRESH SEAFOOD THIS WAY" sign to a path under a whitewashed arbor and through the pines to Ogunquit Lobster Pound, where you can choose your dinner from a tank of fresh-caught lobster, then show your room key for a complimentary slice of blueberry pie. My favorite touch: Being welcomed at check-in with a fresh-from-the-oven chocolate chip cookie.

Activities and Experiences



PHOTO: KATIE NIELSON/COURTESY OF THE DUNES ON THE WATERFRONT

The water is the big draw here, and the activities follow accordingly. A fleet of kayaks and rowboats are available for exploring the river or crossing to the beach at high tide. If the river and ocean are too frigid for swimming, there's a heated pool at the heart of the property with cheerful yellow umbrellas and an extended shallow area just right for small children. Exploring downtown Ogunquit is a must, and the hotel has a collection of beach cruisers you can check out to get there. And it wouldn't be summer in Maine without a beach trip. The downtown public beach has plenty of amenities and the crowds to match, but head across the river to the stretch of sand right across from the Dunes, and you'll find a vast, empty expanse with only a scattering of umbrellas and a few beachcombers. In the evenings, gather at the fire pit overlooking the waterfront for s'mores as the sun goes down.

Family-friendly Offerings

There's nothing kid-specific on site per se. Still, the whole property feels just right for a family — two- and three-bedroom cottages make for easy multigen travel, the Ogunquit River is gentle and shallow enough that even little ones can wade and splash, and the heated pool has an extended Baja shelf ideal for kids. I traveled with a toddler in tow and felt comfortable and at ease. However, she was perhaps more impressed by the abundant opportunities to throw rocks into the water and run around the lawns than by the charming design or hotel amenities.

Accessibility and Sustainability

The rooms are all single-story, but there's a short step to get in, and the layouts might be tricky for wheelchair users. The property's next stage will include fully ADA-accessible cottages, but there's no specific timeline yet. As for sustainability, the property minimizes disposables and single-use plastic with bulk dispensers in the shower, coffee deliveries in insulated thermoses, and complete dishware and cutlery in each kitchenette.

Location

The property is just off Route 1, so it's easy to reach, but you'll likely need to rent a car. Portland is the closest airport, about 40 minutes away, but Boston-Logan has more direct flights and is an easy hour-and-a-half drive. Those particularly committed to public transportation could take the Amtrak Downeaster and catch an Uber from the station in Wells, but for maximum ease, it's well worth renting a car.

How to Get the Most Value Out of Your Stay

The property is independently owned, so if you're hoping to use a hotel rewards program, you're out of luck, though it is bookable with credit card points on some platforms. But the best way to save a few hundred a night is to visit during shoulder season — rates are significantly lower in September and October, but Maine in the fall, when the tourist crowds dissipate and the trees are awash in color, still holds plenty of appeal.

Related Articles

<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>Portland, Maine, Just Got Its First New Independently-owned Hotel in 20 Years — Here's What It's Like to Stay</p> <p>By Lila Harron Battis</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>A Couple Lovingly Restored This 19th-century Castle in Maine — Now It's One of Our Favorite New Hotels</p> <p>By Lila Harron Battis</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>I Loved This Peaceful Cape Cod Retreat — With Incredible Views, a Gorgeous Pool, and Loads of Activities</p> <p>By Laura Ratliff</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This Eco-friendly Brooklyn Hotel Is a Longtime Favorite — Here's What It's Like to Stay</p> <p>By Ryan Smith</p>
<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This Small-Town Vermont Rate This Resort As One of the Best in the World — Here's What It's Like to Stay</p> <p>By Deborah Lev-Tov</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>THL Readers Voted Istanbul the Best City to Visit in Europe — Here's What It's Like to Stay in One of Its Top Hotels</p> <p>By Paul Jebara</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This 8-room New York Inn Is Owned by Richard Gere — and It Just Got a Major Facelift</p> <p>By Dalya Benor</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This Resort in Canada Is a Longtime Reader's Favorite — Here's What It's Like to Stay</p> <p>By Annie Archer</p>
<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This Small-Town Vermont Boutique Hotel Blends Old World Charms With Modern Luxuries</p> <p>By Christine Chitnis</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This Design-Centric, 5-Star Swiss Resort Is a Haven for Wellness Seekers and Aficionados — Here's What a Stay Is Like</p> <p>By Blane Bachelor</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>One of Cape Town's Most Luxurious Hotels Just Had a No-Expenses-Spared Renovation — and We Were Among the First to Visit</p> <p>By Lane Nisest</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This Family-friendly Refurbished 1950s Motor Lodge Is at the Gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park</p> <p>By Kelley Marley</p>
<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>Hawaii Meets Hollywood Glamour at This Seaside Resort on Maui — Here's What It's Like to Stay</p> <p>By Sarah Sekula</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>Readers Rank This Central Coast California Resort Among the Best in the World — Take a Look Inside</p> <p>By Mariah Tyler</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>Want to Visit America's Most Popular National Park Without the Crowds? This Hotel Has a Private Entrance</p> <p>By Juliet Izon</p>	<p>HOTEL REVIEWS</p> <p>This Luxury Wellness Retreat Is Beloved by Celebs — and It's Now Just an Hour From New York City</p> <p>By Jess Feldman</p>