Travel And Adventure: Christmas at the Newport Mansions - Welcome to the Gilded Age

by Lillian Africano

NEWPORT, R.I. - Christmas comes to the Newport Mansions on Nov. 17, arriving in a blaze of sparkle and color and dressing those magnificent homes with thousands of scarlet poinsettias, fresh flowers, evergreens, trees, wreaths and 19th century ornaments.

MADE OF MARBLE - The foyer of Marble House, the most lavish house in America in 1892, sparkles during the holiday season. The mansion was built and furnished at a cost of $11 million. John Corbett photo courtesy of The Preservation Society of Newport County. HISTORIC HOME - The Breakers, built in 1895 for Cornelius Vanderbilt II, is the grandest of all the mansions in Newport, R.I. John Corbett photo courtesy of The Preservation Society of Newport County. DECK THE HALLS - The grand staircase at The Elms is one of the mansion's most striking features. John Corbett photo courtesy of The Preservation Society of Newport County. Back in the days when America's social history was being made by names like Vanderbilt and Astor, the epicenter of this Gilded Age was Newport. It was here that magnates and robber barons alike built their castles, employing architects like Stanford White and the finest craftsmen money could buy. That heritage, spanning more than 250 years of American architectural and social development, is reflected today in the 11 homes known as the Newport Mansions, owned and administered by the Preservation Society of Newport County.

During the holiday season, three of the mansions - Marble House, The Elms and The Breakers - are open daily through Jan. 1 (except Christmas Day) for tours.

Marble House was the summer home of Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt. Built and furnished at a cost of $11 million, it was the most lavish house in America when it opened in 1892. It served as the stage for Alva Vanderbilt's climb to social and political power, first as a leading society hostess and later as a leader of the Votes for Women campaign. Alva insisted on perfection, demanding - and getting - authentically reproduced French design for her white marble palace. And though the Vanderbilts, like their wealthy neighbors, spent perhaps six or seven weeks a year at Marble House, they employed a staff of 36, including butlers, cooks, parlor maids, footmen, coachmen, gardeners and laundresses. For balls and large parties, additional help was brought in and decked out in the Vanderbilt maroon livery.

Sadly, the Vanderbilt marriage was not as successful as the house, and Alva divorced William, later stating: "I don't believe in marriage. I never shall until we have true equality of the sexes."

The Elms, a copy of the Chateau d'Asnieres near Paris, was built in 1901 for Philadelphia coal magnate Edward J. Berwind. It stands in a 10-acre park with an elaborate sunken garden and has a grand staircase, fine parquet floors, ceiling paintings and ornate moldings. Most remarkable is the collection of monumental artworks, including wall-size 18th century Venetian paintings and Chinese lacquer panels. Although the Berwinds did not entertain on the same scale as the Vanderbilts, they did live well. And while Edward Berwind's work kept him in New York much of the time, he, like many of his fellow "cottagers," traveled to Newport for weekends, either by steamer on the Fall River Line or aboard his own yacht, the Truant.

The grandest of all the mansions, perhaps the one that best represents the Gilded Age, is The Breakers, a 70-room Italian Renaissance-style palazzo, built by architect Richard Morris Hunt in 1895 for Cornelius Vanderbilt II, president and chairman of the New York Central Railroad. French designer Jules Allard assisted Hunt with furnishings and fixtures, Austro-American sculptor Karl Bitter designed relief sculpture and Boston architect Ogden Codman decorated the family quarters.

The exterior, with its stone construction and massive Corinthian columns, is as imposing as its owners intended it to be. The interior spaces total 138,300 square feet, yet the construction took just two years, an extraordinary feat in the 19th century. As a time-saving technique, the Morning Room was one of two rooms created entirely in France by Allard. The Breakers incorporates beaux-arts and Victorian elements and features rare marbles and gilded rooms (the gilt is 22-karat gold), a 50-feet-high Great Hall, mosaic tile floors and ceilings, arcades and open-air loggias with commanding views of the Atlantic Ocean.

Last year, museum conservators at the Preservation Society of Newport County discovered that eight silver leaf wall panels that had not tarnished even slightly in more than 100 years were not silver at all, but platinum. That one man had amassed such wealth as to cover his walls with precious platinum - Vanderbilt's net worth at one point exceeded that of the U.S. Treasury - could only have happened in an age when there was no personal income tax. The original cost of the mansion has been estimated at between $7 million and $9 million; its current value, according to a leading insurance company, is about $350 million.

A tour of the mansions stirs the imagination, with glimpses of the lifestyle that Gilded Age wealth provided: the imperial bathtubs at The Breakers, carved from single pieces of marble; the bronze relief of Athena over the door leading to the ballroom of The Elms; the 25-feet, six-oven stove in the kitchen of Marble House.

In addition to the mansion tours, there will be Holiday Evenings, when visitors can sip eggnog, listen to music or take self-guided tours, perhaps picturing old Cornelius presiding over one of his fabled soirees, dispensing expensive cigars and fine port along with financial advice.

During some weekend afternoons, local groups will perform on Musical Afternoons at The Breakers, and on several Sunday afternoons in December children can visit with Santa amid the grandeur of the three mansions - just as the Vanderbilt children might have done.

IF YOU GO

Check the schedule of holiday events and the various ticket prices online at www.NewportMansions.org or by calling 401-847-1000.

To complement the activities at The Mansions, the annual two-week Christmas in Newport festival (www.christmasinnewport.org) celebrates the non-commercial aspects of the holiday season throughout the city. For information on lodging and dining options, visit www.gonewport.com.

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