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Inn helps you to smell the roses in downtown Chatham



The second-floor Port Fortune room can feel like a hideaway. (Ron Driscoll/Globe Staff)

By Ron Driscoll
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CHATHAM - We were enjoying our baked egg dish and mulling the offer of seconds in the breakfast room of the Old Harbor Inn when owner Ray Braz got a phone call.

We couldn't help but overhear as he discussed the time-zone difference with someone calling from a British airport. We assumed Braz was making arrangements for a guest on the way to Cape Cod for the first time.

He told us later that one of his five international staff members was en route for summer duty. Braz, a Fall River native who has run the inn with his wife, Judy, for 12 years, says he paid attention when US immigration laws were coming under scrutiny in Congress late last year.

"We anticipated what would happen in Congress, and that dictated what we had to do," Braz said. "We have one woman from Serbia, two from Bulgaria, one from South Africa, and one from Jamaica."

Three of the staffers are J1, or student visa workers, and two are H-2B, or extended guest workers - a full complement at a time when many businesses on the Cape and Islands are being forced to curtail their hours, and restaurants are closing off sections because of a shortage of help. Student workers have a four-month employment window, while the others can stay through the fall.

"In our 12 years here, we have found that August is always our best month," Braz said. "In six of those years, July has been our second-busiest month; in the other six years, it's been September."

In 1932, this beautifully restored inn was the home and office of Chatham's village physician, Dr. Carroll Keane, and Braz jokes that their discovery of a copy of Keane's medical license a few years back gives them the right to practice medicine at the inn.

"But only in our office," Braz said, referring to the room off the main entrance that had served as the waiting and examining rooms in Keane's day. A photo of the good doctor hangs over the desk in the office, one wall of which is now given over to brochures on activities and day trips for guests to consider.

The inn has eight guest rooms, and the most popular is the one we occupied, the Port Fortune (the name reportedly given to the Chatham area by 17th-century explorer Samuel de Champlain). It is on the second floor and was originally used as a storage area. When the house was converted to an inn, the room got its own entrance off the main hallway, and it sits under the slant of the roof, adding to its hideaway feel.

"That room really came out the way we wanted," Braz said. "You have the sense you're in your own private cottage."

A set of Norman Rockwell seasonal prints and wicker accents on the furniture, including the standing lamp and the bathroom mirror, lend an old-time air. Smallish windows with rose-patterned valances over lace lead to painted pink rose bouquets on the armoire and on to rose bed linens. It's roses, roses, everywhere, including an array of faux blooms atop the shower curtain. At some point, the bloom was off for us.

The love seat can be converted to a twin bed for a third person, and there is a comfortable writing desk where you can use your laptop. The inn offers free Wi-Fi access, and we were able to plug in the provided access code and get online easily. All rooms are stocked with complimentary snacks and soft drinks; a dish of hard candies did not go untouched, either.

The inn's best offering is its proximity to downtown Chatham. Next door, on the rotary, is the First Congregational Church of Chatham, dating to 1830, and to the left of that is Main Street, with dozens of shops, galleries, and restaurants in easy walking distance. Chatham Lighthouse, town beaches, and the fish pier are a short drive away, and the affable Braz is ready with day-trip suggestions, such as his tip to a visiting couple that whale sightings were up in the waters off Race Point in Provincetown.

"The flip side of the price we pay for our cold spring weather is the fall," said Braz. "Once the water heats up here, September and October are glorious."

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