



Quesadillas from George's Place



The Virginia hotel's wraparound porch



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# Adult Swim

One Jersey beach town eschews Ferris wheels and rowdy bars for Victorian elegance and fine dining. **By Joy Manning**

Out-of-towners may wonder about those Exit Zero bumper stickers, but locals know it shows an allegiance to just one thing: Cape May, N.J. For me, the Shore town's exit on the Garden State Parkway serves as a gateway to summer vacations amid Victorian gingerbread hotels, quaint cafés and salty sea breezes.

Cape May's chock-a-block with great places to stay, but Congress Hall is the granddaddy of them all. As I arrive in the parking lot, valets bustle about, whisking away luxury cars for guests with all the trappings typical of sophisticated city dwellers. Hermes scarves, oversized Dior

shades and BlackBerries abound, and one thing's for sure: This place isn't Wildwood.

Inside the hotel's pastel blue and sea green interior, the building's history whispers to me as I climb the stairs to my room. In 1816, it was a humble boarding house, the first floor one large cafeteria for guests. The property endured a fire and more than a decade of disrepair before it was restored in the '20s. Several U.S. presidents including Ulysses S. Grant summered here. But the drone of history recedes as I enter my up-to-date guest room. In fact, I'm instantly online, sending e-mails and making cell phone calls while taking in a spectacular

view of the Atlantic. The shoreline is dotted with Congress Hall's yellow-and-white-striped cabanas and beachgoers braving the still-chilly June waves.

**REAL R&R** Though settled in my posh room, I don't feel like I've arrived at the Shore until I indulge in a Kohr Bros. chocolate and vanilla twist cone. Walking the Washington Street Mall, cone in hand, I browse shops stocked with Exit Zero T-shirts and other Cape May themed attire. Other sites along the mall include the Ugly Mug tavern, where regulars keep their own beer mugs on the ceiling's many hooks.

Back at Congress Hall, I put on my swimsuit to catch some sun by the pool, which is flanked on all sides by cute attendants in shorts and vacationers sipping frothy neon-hued drinks from flamingo shaped straws. After an hour of sun-drenched relaxation, I'm ready to take a shower and sample some of Cape May's cuisine.

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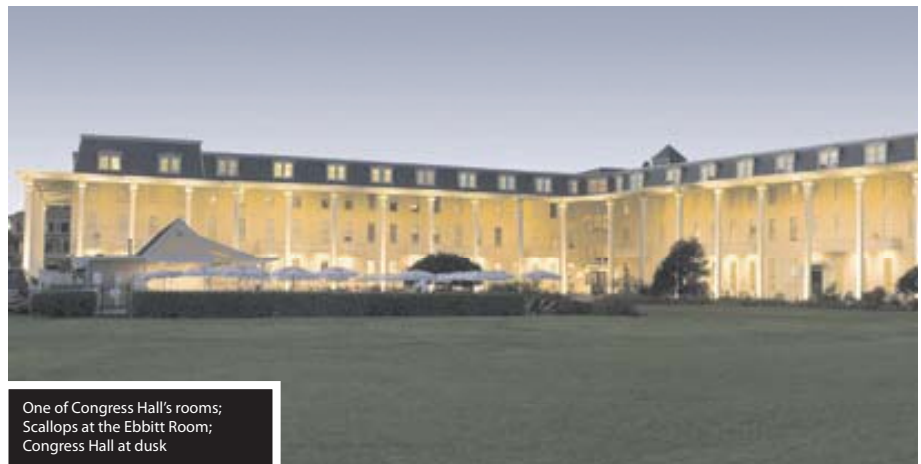
Cape May's chockablock with great places to stay, but Congress Hall is the granddaddy of them all.

Before dinner, I go for a drink at the hotel's Brown Room. It's impossible to avoid comparing it to my last trip here in November, when it got dark at 5 p.m. and the fireplace roared. Then, it felt like a sexy, secret escape. But in the summer, the room has a decidedly different vibe. Adjacent to the lobby, the Brown Room hosts everyone from those seeking pre-dinner cocktails to squealing kids running around barefoot and wet from the pool. Locals hit up the Brown Room, too, and I'm approached by a guy name Gary who tells me he owns a summerhouse in Cape May. He directs me to a hallway that displays staff photos from the early 1900s.

Congress Hall is home to the Blue Pig Tavern, one of the best and most comfortable restaurants in town. The menu is full of stick-to-your-ribs classics like macaroni and cheese, roast chicken, crab cakes and steak, and the outdoor dining area feels like a friend's seaside porch. But here's one caveat if you plan to dine al fresco: those seagulls are as fearless as they are hungry. As one snatches a pat of butter from the middle of my table, the server reports, "That's nothing. Last night one stole an entire scallop from someone's plate." Besides sharing the daily seagull report, servers can also knowledgeably recommend wines to pair with your meal. If you go, save room for the strawberry shortcake.

By luck, my trip coincides with a full moon. Congress Hall celebrates the celestial event with a party on the pool deck. It's a great opportunity to watch the giant white orb rise over the ocean while mingling and listening to crooners belt out a bevy of classic Sinatra tunes.

Cape May is a beach town, but if sunbathing isn't your style, there are plenty of activities to keep you entertained during the day. I'd heard that a dolphin and whale-watching cruise was the ideal way to spend an afternoon, so I walk across the island to hop aboard. During the ride, a naturalist points out the birds, but passengers eagerly await-



One of Congress Hall's rooms; Scallops at the Ebbitt Room; Congress Hall at dusk

ed the real show: dolphins and whales. The guide admits that it doesn't always happen, though my boat is pretty lucky. After almost an hour of gazing at the sea, a whole school of dolphins puts on a lively display and the shipmates crowd the boat's edges, clapping with excitement like little kids. No whales for us, but it's OK. After three hours we all got our \$35 worth.

**DINING DELIGHTS** If you're only going to eat out twice in Cape May, it's hard to decide where to go. With more highly rated restaurants than any other beach town in New Jersey, this place is known as the foodie's choice for a great getaway. For gourmands and romantics, one thing makes the Virginia Hotel's Ebbitt Room seem like the Le Bec-Fin of the Jersey Shore: the Victorian wraparound porch where diners can relax with a drink and watch the town's understated street life.

Like Le Bec, the dining room is ornate—almost too formal for the beach. The menu features classic dishes: no pan-Asian or trans-Euro-fusion experiments here. I start with a rich and sweet corn chowder with lobster. Fried calamari has a coating so light the

dish is almost a savory beignet. My potato-crusted halibut comes with pea greens and creamy wild morels. A cheese course is the perfect dessert; it arrives with creamy robiola, complex Rochbleu and heavy-hitting Stilton and pairs perfectly with my Chateau Duplessy Bordeaux.

By Sunday morning, I'm sad to see the weekend go. As I returned my old-fashioned metal room key to the desk and wait for the valet to arrive with my car, I want to prolong the inevitable with another Cape May meal. Friends of mine recommended a breakfast spot called George's Place. The diner prides itself on being open all year round, so I head there for one last bite. After my eggs and white toast with plenty of butter, it really is time to head home.

