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Chillin' on the Choptank

Not your grandma's B&B, Lodgecliffe on the Choptank offers guests contemporary comfort.

By Mary K. Zajac
 Photography by Scott Suchman



The Choptank is at my feet. Literally. I'm sitting on the bottom step of stairs that run

from Lodgecliffe's backyard straight down into the river. My feet dangle in the surprisingly warm water, as the gentle splash of waves, coupled with the splash of acrobatic fish, punctuate the air. I watch as two ospreys land gracefully on their platform nest just a few feet away. If I didn't have a dinner obligation this evening, I'd sit here all afternoon until the sun sets.

Views of the river dominate this comfortable, gray-shingled bed and breakfast, built in 1898 and nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood. All of the rooms offer a glimpse of the water, while a wide deck overlooks the lawn and runs nearly the length of the house. A screened-in breakfast room allows you to watch the birds that inhabit a hollow tree in the backyard.

A photograph of the original innkeeper, the late Sarah Richardson, hangs on a butter-yellow wall in the inn's living room. Richardson's son, Dawson, grew up in the house, which his mother opened as Dorchester County's first bed and breakfast in 1986. In 2005, after her passing, he completely renovated the home, wanting to maintain it as an inn. Along with the photo of his mother, there are nods to his father as well. Francis W. Richardson's 1948 appointment as a commander in the Coast Guard is enclosed in a glass-topped coffee table, and prints of the ships he commanded hang in the dining room. Dawson Richardson does not live on the premises, yet the inn has become home to another family. Jennifer and Carl Aasen, along with sons Max and Kai, came aboard as innkeepers in November 2007.

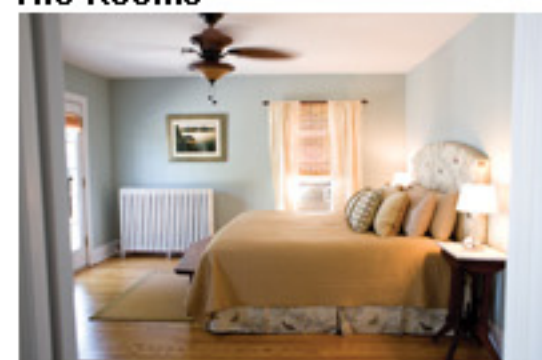
Innkeepers



"We're wanderers," explains Wisconsin native Jennifer Aasen. She and Carl, another Wisconsinite, were considering buying an inn in Utah when the owner urged them to try running the inn instead of buying it. The experiment worked, and the Aasens went on to manage other inns before coming to Lodgecliffe. Together they take care of everything from planting the front garden to planning Murder Mystery Weekends and tending to their two young sons.

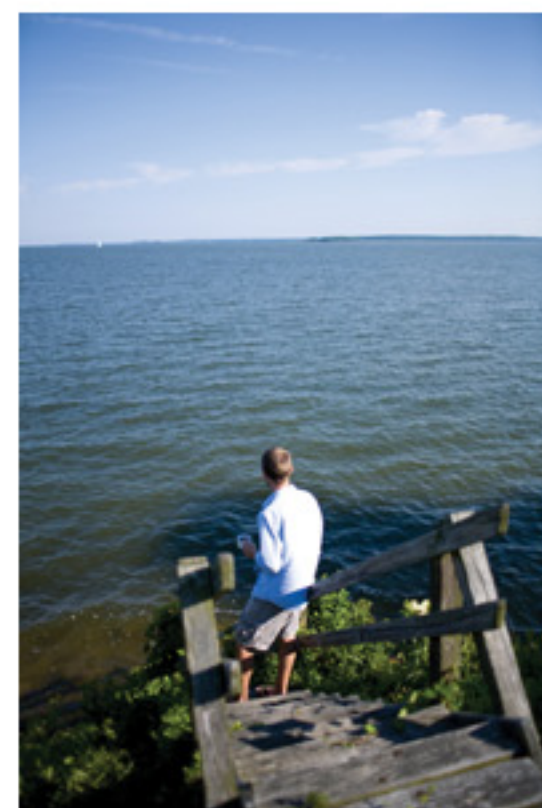
The Aasens are the first to admit that some folks might balk at the presence of children at a weekend getaway. And although the Aasens like their children to remain unobtrusive to guests, the couple also feels strongly about welcoming families to the inn. More than anything, however, the Aasens offer easy hospitality. They're only in their early thirties, but they know what folks want when they go away. "People need to relax," says Carl, "and we want them to feel like the place is theirs." "We want them to feel at home," Jennifer echoes, "but without the work."

The Rooms



Some bed and breakfasts feel like you're staying in grandma's house. They're fussy or overly formal or just plain old-fashioned. Lodgecliffe's casual style feels like you're staying at someone's smartly decorated home rather than at an inn, especially if you stay in the second floor Sarah's Loft, as I did.

The room, named after the previous owner, offers two queen beds, each with wicker headboards and covered with red-and-white linens, which provide a fresh foil to the room's pearly gray walls. Contemporary nautical prints hang on the walls, and a pair of oars fills one corner. The room's wide-planked bare floors provide a comfy balance between antique and modern.



Downstairs, the three guestrooms range in style. The traditional Jim and James Room, named for Dawson Richardson's Uncle Jim, a boatbuilder and the inspiration for a character in James Michener's Chesapeake, sports pale peach walls, a carved walnut queen bed, and a daybed for additional guests. The more contemporary and masculine Captain's Cabin has a nautical navy-and-white color scheme and brick (non-working) fireplace.

All rooms have ceiling fans and individual window air conditioning units. Both the Jim and James Room and the Chesapeake Zen Room offer direct access to outside.

Special Touches

While the rooms don't have televisions, there are plenty of diversions, including a full set of vintage board games, such as Risk, Clue, Scrabble, and Yahtzee, tucked away in the living room. Badminton racquets and lawn games are available, as are a pair of binoculars for curious birders. And don't forget to try one of Jennifer Aasen's homemade cookies. I lucked out with her Jumbles, a combination of white-and-dark chocolate chips, macadamia nuts, and apricots bound together with just a trifling of cookie dough. The inn also hosts weddings and even the occasional Murder Mystery Weekend where guests can dress up as 1920s gangsters and flappers and figure out "who dunnit."

What's For Breakfast



Our breakfast started with crisp granola, which Jennifer made that morning, mixed with yogurt and berries. Then came the homemade sticky orange rolls, chicken sausage studded with pineapple, and Chesapeake puff pancakes, similar to a popover and served with warm berry syrup. It was a feast.

Diversions

It's hard to make a trip to Cambridge and not stop at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge to scout for eagles or stately herons, but consider a two-hour tour of the Choptank on the skipjack Nathan of Dorchester. Or meander through Cambridge's historic district and gawk at the stately homes and gardens. Golfers can also indulge in a round at the River

Marsh Golf Club located on the Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay.

Romance Factor

Sunsets over the Choptank, no television to distract. That's an invitation to romance, no?

What It's Going to Cost

Rates range from \$150 to \$200 per room year-round.

Mary K. Zajac writes from Baltimore.

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