

BY LAND, BY SEA  
AND IN THE AIR





# THE ELEGANT BASIN HARBOR CLUB HAS BECKONED GUESTS FOR GENERATIONS

by Arthur Ristau

**W**AITING IN THE WARM OCTOBER WIND, the simple sign tells the story:  
“Since 1886 and still here. The Basin Harbor Club.”

It has been 114 years since Ardelia Beach was summoned from an Iowa schoolroom to return to her native North Ferrisburg, Vermont, to acquire and operate a 200-acre farm set between the Adirondacks to the west and the Green Mountains to the east. Four years later, she began taking in boarders.

They came via the nearby Vergennes stop on the Hudson Valley Railroad or by ferry up Lake Champlain from New York City. Pennie Beach and her brother, Bob Beach, Jr., are the fourth generation of the Beach family to welcome guests with Basin Harbor hospitality.

On the threshold of three centuries of operation, the Basin Harbor Club is still the centerpiece of a gorgeous farm and lakeside complex whose essential elements have changed only marginally since Ardelia converted her farmhouse into a tourist destination. The property remains prime dairy country in the heart of a county that calls itself “The Land of Milk and Honey.”

But Basin Harbor itself is much more. Given the comprehensive variety and quality of its many amenities, it is the gold standard of northern New England summer resorts. No hostelry in this part of the country can offer such a spectacular siting on the east's largest lake; accessibility by land, air and water; and widely diversified recreational amenities, including a mint-condition golf course. And then, there is the history.

Basin Harbor appears on the earliest maps of Colonial history. For a half century, France fought for hegemony in this segment of Colonial America, and the French flag was displayed on crafts plying the mile-wide waters between the

Vermont shore and the Adirondack palisades. There were Indian birch bark flotillas, British fleets and, most famously, in October of 1776, sixteen primitive Colonial warships commanded by Benedict Arnold.

Arnold's orders were to bottle up the superior British fleet, thereby delaying the invasion of New York. It was the first encounter in history between British and American naval units, and Arnold kept the invaders at bay until dusk when he sailed his battered ships into Split Rock, three miles north of Basin Harbor. Arnold scuttled the fleet and set fire to his flagship, the *Royal Savage*. Historians credit this stratagem with forcing the British to remain in Vermont the following winter, forestalling the assault on New York.

After the war, in a series of separate purchases, Platt Rogers acquired 2,000 acres in the region—at a then-dear \$3.50 an acre—and built the first permanent residence there. The current 700-acre parcel within that tract has remained intact ever since.

Basin Harbor's original farming and fishing focus began to broaden in 1909 when Allen Penfield (A. P.) Beach, Ardelia's nephew and a junior at the University of Vermont, came to work the farm.

“Grandpa worked literally day and night,” said Pennie Beach, who was named for A. P. “He took care of the

GUESTS RETURN TO THE SAME  
LAKE FRONT COTTAGES YEAR  
AFTER YEAR.

Photographs courtesy of Basin  
Harbor Club







A FESTIVE CELEBRATION EVERY DAY.

animals, rebuilt the farmhouse and began putting up tent platforms. Later he designed and built our first cottages and the original bathhouse.”

Enrolled in the university’s College of Agriculture, A. P. submitted as his thesis a master plan and landscape design that ultimately became the Basin Harbor resort. Five golf holes were built in 1926; four were added the following year.

“A. P. was a visionary,” Pennie said, “and a keen observer of every aspect of the tourist business. He began work on our golf course after he went to Florida and observed the popularity of golf there. Twenty years later, he went to Arizona where he picked up a copy of *Arizona Highways*, their state magazine. When he returned home, he subsidized the creation of a prototype that eventually became *Vermont Life* [the state’s promotional magazine].”

This was not his sole publishing venture. In 1959, A. P. wrote and published *Lake Champlain: As Centuries Pass*. The lake remains part of the Beach family legacy. Bob Jr. is cofounder and president of the neighboring Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, which promotes

and preserves the history of the lake by documenting shipwrecks, building replicas of sunken boats and developing educational materials concerning the crucial role the lake played in the nation’s early history.

Basin Harbor’s intergenerational emphasis is illustrated by A. P.’s son, Bob Sr., now 76, who still maintains an office in the Basin Harbor compound. “I’m available whenever Bob and Pennie need me,” he said, “and they do call about the business—about once a year.

“My father realized that, without golf, we would never grow. There were only three or four courses in western Vermont in those days, and he didn’t play himself. His nephew, Alan Beach, laid out the original course, and I was one of the first caddies.”

The evolution of this golfing gem is as faceted as a diamond. Take the fourteenth tee. “One day,” course superintendent Charlie Messenger recounted, “one of our guests, Barry Jones of Marion, Pennsylvania, came into the clubhouse with a complaint. ‘That fourteenth tee is too close to the woods,’ he said. ‘You really ought to move it. I’ll pay half of whatever it costs.’”



Messenger and his staff moved the tee 30 yards from the woods. "It cost \$14,000," Messenger said, "Barry was as good as his word, and we got his check right away."

Or consider the irrigation system. "In 1981, G. S. 'Skip' Sydnor of Richmond, Virginia, a Basin Harbor guest since 1960, volunteered to design a ten-year plan to water the course. Sydnor is president of Sydnor Hydrodynamics, Inc., a design and engineering firm that averages \$11 million annually in business and whose clients have included some of the southeast's finest courses.

"I've spent my career designing and building water systems," he said, "and working in Vermont was a new and interesting experience. Marine clay, such as that found at Basin Harbor, can be difficult. It varies from cement to Silly Putty. Bob Jr. worked closely with me on the project, and it was fun to do something useful for the Beach family—they are terrific people."

The inception of the irrigation project coincided with the partial reconfiguration of the course by Geoffrey Cornish, who has left his imprint on a dozen Vermont layouts. The five-mile walk features bentgrass fairways and greens. Its striking alabaster bunkers are composed of Shelburne limestone, a material later duplicated at Stratton Mountain's 27-hole layout. "The people at Stratton came to look at our traps and I guess they liked them," Messenger speculated.

"Now we have fifty bunkers," he said, "and we're in the middle of a tree-planting program. We put in seventy-five new trees this year, and we'll do another 100 in 1996." Trees and recently recontoured fairways offer definition to what had been a characteristically flat Lake Champlain landscape.

"We need definition, but not too much difficulty," Messenger said. "This is, after all, a resort course."

Basin Harbor hosted about 20,000 rounds in 1995, some 30 percent of which reflected tourist traffic. It has just 150 members, and the club's course/slope ratings are 70.4/120 from the 6,232-yard middle markers. Professional Golf Association Pro John Uzdilla presides.

Beginning this season, Basin Harbor will team with Equinox and Woodstock as the third leg of a Vermont golf tour triumvirate. One purchase will entitle the golfer to lodging, meals and green fees at all three courses.

Basin Harbor is one of a half-dozen Vermont courses accessible by air, but it is the only such resort that pro-

motes water recreation and marine-based services as well. It was the flat Lake Champlain landscape with its extensive visibility that facilitated the construction of a 3,200-foot airstrip adjacent to the eleventh fairway and the Club's Red Mill Restaurant and less than a mile stroll to the hotel desk. "The Civil Air Patrol wanted a field in this vicinity as part of the national defense program," Pennie explained. "It was built in the early 1950s."

The resort offers fishing, sailing and water-skiing. "Some of our guests use the harbor as a marina," Pennie said. "About 20 percent of our customers come to play golf, and that's a major part of our business." Basin Harbor also features five tennis courts and a pool.

Much of the resort's activities and personalities were once dutifully and meticulously chronicled in the pages

of the *New York Herald Tribune*, the tony arbiter of the northeastern social scene for more than 50 years. "That wasn't a coincidence," Bob Jr. said. "A. P. did business with an agency in Manhattan, and I'm sure that helped a lot. He understood the value of promotion."

Australia's pioneer golfing celebrity, Joe Kirkwood, who knew something about promotion himself, was an annual visitor and the subject of a *Trib* squib in 1932: "Mr. Kirkwood, the trick shot barnstormer, played a reverse shot out of the bunker, over his head and onto the green within inches of the pin." Kirkwood got serious later in the day, shooting a pair of 31s, which stood as the course record until the back nine was built in 1950.

Bob Beach, Sr., notes that the resort business was significantly different in the Kirkwood era. "In those days a business executive would take a six-week vacation with his family and spend it all at the same place. It was much



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more difficult planning everything—from meals to entertainment—and offering an appropriate variety than it is now. There was a July crowd and an August crowd and they were different, too. The July crowd was younger and liked tennis and golf. The August group was older and played a lot of bridge.”

Now the resort is open from mid-May to mid-October with an occupancy rate averaging almost 70 percent of the 137 rooms. The intergenerational ownership-management history—Pennie handles marketing and its sundry aspects, Brother Bob the physical plant—is mirrored in the clientele. “Many of our guests represent the second or third generation of families to stay with us,” Pennie said. “About 10 percent of our business comes from Massachusetts, and that has been the dominate state for several years.

“Our clientele hasn’t changed through the years but our presentation is evolving,” she continued. “Now there is a trend toward nature-centered experiences, such as hiking and bird watching. But we’ll never become a spa.”

Basin Harbor is a participant in the New York Audubon Society’s Cooperative Sanctuary Program, which emphasizes improved wildlife habitat through grass and tree cultivation, water and soil conservation and pesticide-free agricultural practices. The Champlain Valley is a migratory corridor for waterfowl. Half of Basin Harbor’s 700 acres are leased to nearby farmers.

Despite its quintessential New England flavor, the resort has a distinct international aspect. Rowland Oswald of Scotland’s celebrated Carnoustie course was its first professional. He was succeeded by Dan Wilson of North Berwick, Scotland. The British Isles tradition persists, with many of Basin Harbor’s 225 seasonal employees furnished via the English university system. “We have five foreign applications for every one from the U.S.,” Pennie said.

Pennie attended the University of Vermont, where she pursued liberal arts. “I never knew what I wanted to do,”

she said, “until I started here.” Bob Jr. is a graduate of the University of Denver’s Hotel Management School. Columbus Day signals the traditional close of both Basin Harbor and Vermont’s fall foliage season. But it’s not just another day at the Beaches.

“Today,” remarked Pennie, as she flipped through her calendar, “I’m playing art director.”

She is on the course supervising a photography session for Basin Harbor’s next brochure. She directs the positioning of a 16-ton truck, wigwagging the driver as he backs the bulky vehicle to the rear of the seventh tee. She gestures the photo models into position as the photographer, Clyde Smith of Westport, New York, is hoisted 20 feet aloft in the truck’s bucket loader.

Pennie and the models, an assistant pro and the marketing director, alternate hitting irons toward the seventh green as Clyde clicks away. “Is it too hazy, Clyde?” Pennie inquired.

“No,” the photographer responded. “This is perfect.”

Amazingly, the 30-minute photographic session was interrupted just twice by golfers playing through. All were wearing shorts in the glorious 70°F sun. A photogenic course on a

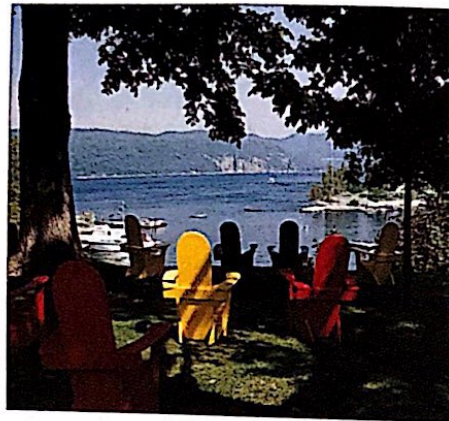
photogenic day.

But it is the last day of another season at Basin Harbor. Back at the main complex, a convention is breaking up. The remnants of the resort’s summer cadre are loading luggage into cars with out-of-state license plates. In two days, the golf course will be closed for maintenance in preparation for another Vermont winter.

A couple from Great Barrington, Massachusetts, arrive in a blue Cessna looking for lunch. The dining room is closed but someone volunteers to make a couple of sandwiches. Now the sign is swinging jauntily as the wind accelerates and one must pause to make out the message: “Still here.” Another year has passed.

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*Arthur Ristau holds a 14 handicap at the tough Country Club of Barre, and turned in a neat 79 last summer.*



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OF A HALF-DOZEN  
VERMONT COURSES  
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RESORT THAT PROMOTES  
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