

FALL TRAVEL GUIDE Snacks, Tunes, Drives

THE MAGAZINE OF MAINE

Down East

SEPTEMBER 2009

Maine's 10 prettiest harbors

Your All-Time Favorites Revealed

EXCLUSIVE!
Behind the
FairPoint
Fiasco

p. 25

The Most Powerful
People in Maine Art p. 52

Mythical Monsters p. 58

Dazzling Dahlias p. 66



www.downeast.com
\$5.99 U.S./\$6.99 Canada



A Writer's Island Retreat

Complete with a writing tower overlooking Somes Sound, this house is where Roxana Robinson, acclaimed author of *Cost* and a half dozen other literary works, perfects her craft.

BY ANNA KASABIAN PORTRAIT BY BENJAMIN MAGRO
HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN VANDEN BRINK

So often we wonder where writers write, where they live, and how on earth they manage to weave protective cocoons around themselves so that they can give us the books we can't bear to put down. For critically acclaimed novelist and biographer Roxana Robinson, all the magic that bubbles up inside and comes to land on paper is often coupled with being here, on Mount Desert Island, perched at treetop level in the silence of her writing tower, blue sky and views all hidden behind the shades she unfurls upon arriving to write.

"Views are actually anathema to a writer. It's better to write with the shades down. But quiet — yes, there is nothing more valuable to a writer than quiet," Robinson says.

Her writing tower, and the supreme quiet offered in this, her country perch, put her stark Manhattan apartment writing room (recently featured in the *New York Times*) light years away — the city's din and blaring lights replaced with a starlet sky and rich inspiration.

She has worked on four books here including her latest novel, *Cost*, which is set in Maine and was named one of the five best fiction books of the year by the *Washington Post*, and won the 2008 Award for Fiction from the Maine Writers and Publisher's Alliance.

A prolific writer of fiction and non-fiction that runs the gamut from gardening and travel writing to biography, she was named a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library.

Robinson has written four novels and three collections of short stories. Four of her works have been chosen Notable Books of the Year by the *New York Times*. Her biography of Georgia O'Keeffe was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Calvin Tomkins of the *New Yorker* called Robinson's tome "without question the best book written about O'Keeffe."

It is no wonder that this gifted writer needed a place to nurture her ever-growing garden of ideas, images, and thoughts.



A TOWER OF ONE'S OWN

"There's nothing more valuable to a writer than quiet," says author Roxana Robinson of her exquisitely designed Maine retreat. She should know: four of her books have been named Notable Books of the Year by the *New York Times*. The *New Yorker* proclaimed her biography of Georgia O'Keeffe to be the "best book written" about the artist.



It was just a dozen years ago that Robinson and her husband, Tony, began to search in earnest for a little piece of Nirvana, far from Manhattan, where quiet was the norm so that she could concentrate on her work, whose views would capture the natural landscape and take in the ever-changing colors of sea and sky. For Tony, in finance at the time (he is now retired), the peace of the place let him unwind and read.

In the planning stages for their new home, the couple toured and studied Mount Desert Island's architecture as well as other summer communities. They were drawn to this island in particular because they had history here. Tony had come here as a young boy with his parents, and the couple has been enjoying the island together since 1980 as renters and boaters.

Their collection of ideas would eventually translate into this earthy architectural sequin that, since moving here in 1997, looks as though it was skillfully stitched into the land. The 3,200-square-foot home, just 150 feet from the water, has six rooms. Dense woods surround the home, and a long, winding driveway keeps it invisible to the road. Not a neighbor is in sight.

The couple worked with the Boston architectural firm Albert, Righter & Tittmann, a natural choice since James Righter is a brother-in-law, and "we knew and loved his work!" Distilling preferred architectural styles and materials, became a collaborative effort. "I told Jim I liked the Northeast Harbor Tennis Club, which was long and low and modest," says Robinson. "It looked summery, had big wide porches, and has become part of the landscape." It was important, too, that the house sit quietly in and on the land, and as time passed, that it fade more and more into the moss greens and browns of the surrounding landscape.

"Jim also asked us interesting questions on how we wanted to live in the space," recalls Robinson. "Did we want a separate dining room; how many people would we have to dinner; how close did we want to sit to the fire; did we want to see the water from our bed? He got us to think about how we wanted to live here."

In the end, she says "There is nothing we would change!"

The home is a collection of wings and pavilions that wrap around a garden. "One side of the garden is defined by the living room pavilion that is higher than the other rooms and has its own hipped roof. Another side of the garden is defined by the wing of guest bedrooms. Roxana's writing tower, with its high peaked, hipped roof, sits at the crossing of all wings and serves as an anchor to the whole architectural composition," says architect Jacob Albert.

The stew of architectural elements here echoes those of a home built in 1910. For example, privacy was important, whether it be for the master or guest bedrooms, or Robinson's tower.

What appears to be the front door actually opens into an arcade with an interior garden, and a walkway leads down the long leg of the T before arriving at the main house. This offers a bit of restrained drama while giving visitors a few moments to appreciate where they are. The door, says Robinson, is what is termed a "Charleston" door, and the interior walkway recalls a detail of St. Jude's Church in Seal Harbor, a charming detail James Righter brought here.

To enter the master suite there is a separate hall, "with a little jog so you have to enter more slowly," says Robinson.



SHINGLE MEETS SCANDINAVIA

Designed by the Boston architectural firm of Albert, Righter & Tittmann, Robinson's four-season house claims diverse influences – from the profile of the nearby Northeast Harbor Tennis Club to “Charleston” doors to the Scandinavian cabinetry (at left) created by Carl Larsson. But the granite fireplace (below) is all Maine; it keeps the space cozy and warm on fall evenings.



Albert and Righter installed details that recall the early twentieth century spirit the Robinsons wanted to evoke. “Most windows are double hung with small panes in the upper sash, and the one large single pane in the lower sash offers a more unobstructed view at chair level,” says Jacob.

Choosing a color palette for the interior took a bit of reflection and research on Robinson's part. “We had rented a house in Provence for many years, and I wanted to use the colors I had come to love there — the ochres, umbers, and yellows,” says Robinson. “But I realized this was wrong for Maine.”

She concluded the subdued Scandinavian colors were more appropriate, and Righter took the theme further by integrating the cabinetry of Carl Larsson in the bookshelves he built.

The combined living room and dining room are conducive to informal vacation living. The series of bookshelves, a small library's

worth, houses the couple's collection of books, and warms up the big, open space. Most rooms enjoy water views of Somes Sound with the exception of the guest bedroom wing that looks out to a meadow, and now the vegetable garden.

The idea for Robinson's writing tower came after touring Fishers Island, in New York, where she saw a wonderful little nineteenth-century house with a tower. “It seemed the perfect environment for a writer,” she says.

And since it was built, the house's skin, made of cedar shingles, has taken in the salt air, winter winds, and pounding rains, all helping it settle into the landscape, become more invisible with mature growth, and, more quiet.

Not long ago the house's purpose expanded. It not only continues to inspire this writer's words, but it now welcomes the sweet voices and romping of grandchildren. They, in fact, inspired the latest building project — a playhouse. “It's eight square feet, fifty feet from the house, and it's just big enough to fit a sleeping bag and mattress,” says Robinson.

From June through mid-September friends and family come here to cook together, chat by the fire, and enjoy all that the area offers. Robinson also tends her ever-evolving gardens, mostly shades of green composed of native plants with a few specks of snow-white blossoms peeking through. And the vegetable garden, tucked off on a sunny perch of land, brings a bounty of tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, pole beans, zucchini, and sweet peas to the table, plucked fresh.

For the month of January, when the sea is often its deepest, darkest blue, and the wind can blow ferociously across the tower, Robinson is there, writing, her desk light shining at dusk like a star in the night. ♣

