



# PETRA ISLAND TOURS

## The Frank Lloyd Wright House

Frank Lloyd Wright Masterpiece  
On Petra Island

Story by Abby Luby  
Photography courtesy of  
Petra Island Tours and Janet A. Wortendyke





# It's

the rippling currents of water and the majesty of the ancient glacial rock that inspired famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a house on Petra Island on Mahopac Lake. Wright wanted to seamlessly intertwine the lake's vibrancy with the stone's worn dips and chiseled textures, forming an organic

hug between nature and man-made structure.

Now this privately-owned masterpiece by Wright is open to the public. Tours are led by owner Joe Massaro, whose personal story on acquiring the island and then building the house is, in itself, quite the saga.

Massaro and his wife Barbara purchased the 10-acre island in 1996. The island had an original cottage designed and built by Wright in 1951 commissioned by an engineer named Ahmed Chahroudi. The 1,200-square

foot cottage is set back from the water and is its own intimate Shangri-la.

The island purchase came with five original drawings and a floor plan for the unbuilt, larger residence. Once he became familiar with the island Massaro could envision the stately structure extending out above the water, adhering to Wright's design of building around the mammoth boulder, ushering it inside, through the dining room and back out the other side.

It would be a huge undertaking, one Massaro was ready to tackle.







Massaro is extremely energetic and no stranger to the construction world having owned a large sheet metal company in Elmsford, Westchester, where he grew up. A true renaissance man, Massaro has had his hand in a variety of businesses from construction to real estate to restaurants. To build the Wright house he tapped expert architects and structural engineers who could fully understand Wright's design and create a house conceptualized in 1949 but build a 21st century house without compromising Wright's vision.

In Massaro's autobiography "The Impossible Road," he writes how he assembled a core team that included architect and Wright historian Thomas Heinz to oversee the construction, structural engineer Augie Mosiman and Lidia Wusatowska as general contractor. His wife Barbara supervised the interior design; her beautiful stain glass windows in the house adhere to Wright's triangular signature stamp seen throughout. Massaro was the construction manager for the entire project.

Today, the team for his new tour business, Petra Island Tours, are Massaro's two daughters, Donna Massaro and Jennifer Derocher.

Finally in 2003, after legal hurdles with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and complying with local zoning variances and set back requirements, building permits were issued and construction began. Massaro recalls going to great lengths to haul equipment and building materials to the island. "When the lake was frozen and the ice was thick enough, we transported an excavator and building materials over the ice using a six-wheel gator. For some of us, it was nerve wracking, but it worked."

Massive amounts of concrete were also needed to be hauled to the is-

"Looking back, it is pretty clear that I had a learning disability, but with no diagnosis back then, I was on my own to figure out how to manage what was "wrong" with me. Thinking outside of the box wasn't really an option for me, because I had no box! Instead I created a successful method of trying and trying and trying again, I learned that if I tried enough stupid, crazy, "what's wrong with you" stuff, eventually something would work. And, you know what... I was right, boy was I Wright."

Passage from Joe Massaro's autobiography book, "The Impossible Road" and about the Frank Lloyd Wright House.

land. "We used over 300,000 pounds of poured concrete when constructing the house. It was all mixed on the island," Massaro says.

The house was completed in 2008. As designed, the cantilever extends 27 feet over the water, the largest cantilever Wright ever designed and twice the size of Wright's famous Fallingwater. Massaro refers to one of his many books on Wright

Facing page: The expansive living room with amazing vistas; Sunset patio; View perspectives of the Guest House.





that fill his library shelf, "The Many Faces of Frank Lloyd Wright", which quotes Wright saying the "island house will be more beautiful than my Fallingwater."

The deep red concrete walkway from the dock and up the steps to the house plateaus with plants and decades-old shrubbery, framing soft crags in the rock that form natural ravines for rainwater or wild plants.

Entering inside, one follows the dusty beige boulder weaving both grounded solidity with expansive spaciousness. Throughout the 8,415-square-foot house a variety of rocks all shapes and sizes are embedded in the concrete walls echoing the rock-work seen in Fallingwater and

Pictured from top left: Joe Masaro points to time on the hand-made rock sundial; Exterior at sunset; exterior at night; Traveling from the ferry to Petra Island, "As one gets closer, the house appears to emerge from the massive glacial rock, buoyantly adrift over the water." Facing page: Rock waterfall.









Clockwise from top, left: Kitchen; Dining Room; Helipad on Roof; Outside patio overlooking the reflecting pond and lake; Guest house exterior.

other Wright homes. The long series of glass doors cascade open to various porches overlooking the water.

Massaro, who is the perfect guide for the 90-minute tour, will show you original floor plans and paper drawings of the house he keeps on an easel in his office space. His attention to detail makes for a fun and interesting tour along many stories of how the house was built. He comments on every design element from the 26 skylights to the exterior copper panels and ceilings made with African mahogany. "These panels are eight-inch wide tongue and groove board," Massaro points out. "They have a special V-notch which was a special angle that only Frank Lloyd Wright used."

The heart shaped island is graced with an old growth forest including a 1769-Beech Nut tree and half a dozen other trees dating from the 1800s. One can find them on the trail behind the house along with a small tea house overlooking the water.

The seven-minute boat ride from the shores of Lake Mahopac slowly brings the house into view, lending to a growing wonder of the seemingly weightless cantilevered deck suspended over the lake. As one gets closer, the house appears to emerge from the massive glacial rock, buoyantly adrift over the water.

"I love showing this house," says Massaro. "Wright's house on Petra Island is a piece of art. Who gets to do something like this?"

For information on tours visit:  
[www.wrightoverwater.com](http://www.wrightoverwater.com)



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