

Woodstock Inn – A landmark for the season and the ages

By Susan Wood

WOODSTOCK, Vt. – The red carpet Vermont throws out in fall lies beyond the ground beneath its world-renowned maple trees.

In the heart of central Vermont, Woodstock boasts a AAA four-diamond rated hotel as rich with history and iconic to the quaint, colonial-style village as the Rockefeller name and the origin of its agricultural and railroad traditions.

Service and style are all a part of the Woodstock Inn & Resort, which operates under the Laurance Rockefeller-spawned Woodstock Foundation. The inn's early beginnings date back as far as 1793. The Inn as it's known today was built a century later with \$120,000 of the citizenry's money to keep up with the demand for the Vermont lifestyle.



Woodstock Inn

The Woodstock Inn has transformed to reflect the growing needs of local residents and tourists. In the early 1900s, each guest received a heavy fur coat in winter.

Recreation touches every season here – from alpine skiing at the nation's first rope tow on Clinton Gilbert's pasture in 1934 and cross country skiing in the hills behind the Inn's Racquet & Fitness Club to the early years of tennis and golf

inspired by Boston resident D.B. Harrington. In 1895, the doctor brought his clubs on one stay to play in a cow pasture behind the Inn. An 18-hole, Robert Trent Jones-designed golf course sits there now to entice summer and fall visitors.

But it's the fall that prompts visitors to flock in droves to witness the splendor of the vivid red, pink, orange and yellow foliage. They're welcomed by pure New England hospitality, and this year was no exception. Staffers greet guests with an open door and friendly hello. (Don't be surprised if at least one doorman remembers what your plans are and asks you later how they were.)

A month ago, the 142-room grand hotel covering one square block celebrated the addition of a 10,000-square-foot, full service spa costing \$10 million. It is next to the inn's scenic back courtyard that is lined with maple trees. But no need for guests to walk outside; it's also accessed via the Inn.

From the minute one arrives at the front entrance of the Inn, it's easy to see the visual Rockefeller was going for after buying the property in 1967 and rebuilding a grander version farther off the Village Green. (Prior to 1967, an older inn sat next to the Green, as shown in artwork hung in one of the hotel's hallways that this reporter's uncle painted years ago.)

The Woodstock Inn spans more than 9 acres, embracing its history and incorporating it into modern times where tourists insist on amenities and the perfect blend of relaxation and things to do. It perfectly complements the town of Woodstock.

The front desk even prints an activity list if it's a rainy day.

The hotel is an ideal launching pad to a hike through Faulkner Park and up Mount Tom, which "towers" over the village. Although only a few hundred feet up through a series of

switchbacks, it's steep in one section. But the nearly 360-degree view is well worth the jaunt.

At lower elevations, an easier stroll can be had around the village, which touts long-lasting retail establishments such as an independent bookstore that has stood since 1935.

For those who appreciate the historic, the interior of the hotel's library – one of several seating areas in the Inn – was built with barn wood.

Some rooms are equipped with wood stoves for a cozy atmosphere. A large stone fireplace sits square at the main entrance and looks inviting enough to tell stories around, but in the peace and quiet of the late hours of the evening the blaze represents mesmerizing comfort. Lamp stands resembling maple tree bark flank the fireplace, showing the importance of the region's sugarhouses.

For the modern-day guest, furnishings made of solid wood allow a guest to set up an office or lounge around in style to watch the high-definition flat-screen television or read in the comfy king-size bed adorned with a high wooden headboard. A half-dresser half-hutch includes a contemporary coffee maker with a plentiful stash of Vermont's own Green Mountain Coffee.

Instead of increasing the nightly room fee upfront, guests are greeted in their room with the news a \$4 housekeeping fee will be added to the bill. No chance of opting out, unlike what we encountered at the Sheraton in Boston.

A marble floor uses Vermont's signature stone in the guest bathrooms. Wall tiles look so clean it appears the military came in to scrub the premises. Nice touches include a small oil candle on the counter. A vanity mirror assists in getting the guest ready for an evening out at one of the Inn's varied dining choices.

The Red Rooster is the fine dining option – with its entryway

marked by a bar that even locals use to satisfy their appetites. The restaurant's food, in particular the prime rib, is excellent, but reservations come with a recommendation to request your waiter. A server may be disengaged or slow as the tables fill up during the Inn's demanding peak season. (Another suggestion: If wanting to dine with a group in the alternative, less expensive Richardson's Tavern, stake out your sofa, booth or bar stools early. It may fill up faster and even if five in your gathering were born in Woodstock and two are guests, you may never get a place to sit. And waiters will not find the time or inclination to serve you in the outside seating area.)

Woodstock Inn dining options may change down the road. Marketing director and hospitality veteran Courtney Lowe wants to bring more special events to the hotel, including wine dinners and culinary demonstrations.

"This is only the tip of the iceberg. We'd like to not just offer them during the off season, but we'd also like to maximize on the peak seasons when the people are here," Lowe said earlier this month while lounging in one of the comfy chairs near the front desk with Chef Jason Lawless steps away hosting a cheese sampling.

Lowe has worked for the Inn since March and has grand plans to expand on its offerings for foodies and increase partnerships with local businesses. One example would be teaming up with a local winery for late-night dessert wine tastings.

The Inn gets the word out on its offerings through mostly electronic means such as email blasts to its feeder markets of New York City and Boston. Packages are provided, and Lowe expects to extend them. One has a romantic theme. Another includes the full breakfast buffet in the dining room's cheery, open-air environment.

Lowe said after a few years in a downturn for tourism,

business has started to pick up.

“It’s been a good year. We started to see the group business come back, and the wedding business went up while everything else was down,” Lowe said.

Of all the features of the Inn, none accomplishes its full service goal and comes as heralded as its spa and salon that opened in September. More than 300 people showed up for its grand opening.

Spa Director Michelle Adams told *Lake Tahoe News* the reception of it has exceeded “all expectations” – with a clientele ranging from 75 percent tourists to a quarter of the users being local residents.

According to Lowe, the spa answers the quest of entertaining guests who don’t ski.

“Every day is good for a spa day,” Adams said during a tour of the facilities, which are open from 10am to 7pm.

The treatment menu is extensive – from the standard Swedish massage to a “hot chocolate firming body wrap.” Treatments in one of the 10 rooms can run more than \$300 for a couple. For \$25 guests may use the spa’s tranquil and holistic-style facilities that include a Eucalyptus-scented steam room. A dip in the hot tub is an experience with a wood fire blazing in the pit steps away from the tub and an attentive staffer checking in with guests. A Japanese lilac growing nearby marks the passages of the seasons, a critical part of life for Vermonters.

Those attending weddings and other special occasions are apt to enjoy the VIP room for relaxation upstairs, along with a full salon for hair styling, pedicures and manicures. Polishes come under names like “Get Off My Cloud.” Adams anticipates offering the spa’s own line of bath products in the near future.

Even the soundproof, calming acoustics suggest a harmonious balance between complete relaxation and isolation. Design aficionados will also appreciate accent touches from the likes of glassworks artist Simon Pearce and furniture maker Charles Shackleton, both local to central Vermont.

If you go:

The Woodstock Inn & Resort is located on South Street, taking up one square block of real estate in Woodstock where Routes 4 and 12 intersect at the town's Village Green.

Call for reservations at 800.448.7900 or visit online. A Woodstock single with a king-size bed can run \$317 a night for double occupancy in the fall.

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