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6 The Homestead

THE PORCH ALONE IS THE SIZE OF A FOOTBALL FIELD. It's my first glimpse of The Homestead, and I feel like I've died and gone to the Titanic, sans iceberg.

A resort, of sorts, has sat on this site since 1766, its popularity fueled by the nearby hot springs and early-1800s visits from Thomas Jefferson, who declared the waters "of first merit." Back then, Homestead was just a few cabins. In 1890, a consortium of millionaire investors recognized the value of the region and opulently refurbished the simple, Colonial-style accommodations.

It's one of the few remaining examples of the gilded age of travel. Think of Edith Wharton's cosseted heroines sweeping into high-ceilinged salons with Vuitton steamer trunks, then combine those sepia-tinted images with today's reality: Homestead is one of the country's most lauded spas (multiple-year AAA Four Diamond Award winner, 2007 *Luxury Spa Finder's* Best Mineral Springs).

The main building contains guest rooms, a grand dining room, an informal grill, a mini-shopping mall, several bars and coffee shops, and a movie theater built in the heyday of silent films (the first show was a Greta Garbo flick in the 1920s). And, oh yes, there's the palatial pool and spa. If this sounds dauntingly huge — it is. I need to use a map to navigate the property.

With time to kill before my spa treatment, I take a self-guided hike behind the golf course near an abandoned railway track. Walking toward the spa, my skin prickles in anticipation when I hear water bubbling from the the earth through the aluminum grates in the town sidewalk. Steam billows up through these grates as locals walk by, unperturbed by a phenomenon that's quite normal here.

The spa takes full advantage of the hot water under the town of Hot Springs, Va. I can smell warm, sulfurous minerals from the water running through pipes and pools around the beaux arts building. Inside is a magnificent indoor swimming pool where the healing water is pumped in for guests to enjoy year-round.

I chose mountain ginseng for my aromatherapy massage — I love scented oils, and I'm fascinated by herbal lore. Like most of the oils, scrubs and tonics used here, the massage oil is scented with the Homestead's own local ginseng (some products use other indigenous plants, including mountain laurel and highlands honeysuckle).

After being oiled, massaged, steamed, exfoliated and remoisturized, I plop down on the front porch and open my favorite Chanel compact (so incongruously New York here). My cheeks are pink, my eyes clear. I let everything go and concentrate on the fresh mountain air filling my lungs, the anticipation of visiting the nearby Jefferson pools tomorrow and another glass of Barboursville Octagon wine (harvested 20 miles north of Jefferson's own home at Monticello) with dinner tonight. I think again of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote, "Happiness is not being pained in body or troubled in mind." He must have written that after a Homestead stay.

— Gretchen Kelly

Soak in the Jefferson Pools (\$15 per hour). Relax in your birthday suit or in supplied cotton bloomers.

Ride through history on the back of a horse (\$80) or the back-seat of a carriage (\$165). The trails wind through the Allegheny Mountains.

1766 Homestead Drive
Hot Springs, VA 24445
1-866-354-4653
www.thehomestead.com

7 Westglow Resort and Spa

WESTGLOW RESORT, IN BLOWING ROCK, N.C. is best in winter, when snow rages over the mountaintop hotel and I'm cozy inside the Relaxation Lounge, with its welcoming fireplace and windows framing the gorge below.

Then again, spring works just as well: a breeze sweeping up the mountainsides, wildflowers dotting the forest floor. Summer has its own charm, the 360-degree view a wonder until darkness cloaks the 5,000-foot-plus peaks. And the fall colors rival all the seasons.

Named one of the world's top destination spas by *Travel + Leisure Magazine*, Westglow offers much more than natural beauty. The hotel, a Greek revival mansion, has been modernized with sumptuous furnishings and glittering gold accents. The attention to detail extends to the concierge service, a superb restaurant and spa itself, renovated in 2006.

Perched dramatically over the Blue Ridge escarpment, a world of treatments and fitness activities somehow fits within the compact Life Enrichment Center (aka the spa). Strength training, yoga, aquacise — it's all here.

The treatment rooms are a pleasure; some have little gas fireplaces built into the walls. After my herbal wrap and massage, I relax with a round of whirlpool, swimming and a steam in a spacious, all-tile lounge with a whiff of eucalyptus.

Deeply refreshed, I head for dinner, where I'm warned that at breakfast tomorrow the resident hiking guide will be recruiting companions for the daily hike. Why fight it? A morning walk sounds like an awesome way to work up an appetite for more spa treats.

— Nan K. Chase

Relax with the Blue Ridge Body Wrap (\$80 for guests), one of my favorite Westglow treatments. It involves lavender oil from head to toe, a massage and 15-minute wrap.

Hike for free on the daily after-breakfast trek. The staff guide takes visitors on the gentlest local trails.

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