

An oasis of service and style in Saratoga Springs

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 14, 2012



Roosevelt Baths & Spa

Photograph by: Rochelle Lash

Boutique hotels, be damned!

The Gideon Putnam Resort in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., is a historic establishment with all the trappings of a traditional hotel, and proud of it. It has a stunning marble lobby, magnificent grounds, sports facilities and a fulsome Sunday brunch that is perfect for special occasions. Guests are served by a platoon of staff that you simply don't encounter everywhere: valet parkers, bellmen, room-service waiters and concierges.

But what makes the Gideon truly distinctive is that it is at the heart of the impressive Saratoga Spa State Park. This state-owned preserve is a gorgeous swath of oak and pine forests cut with walking and cycling trails, dotted with fountains of natural spring water and home of the Saratoga Spa Golf Course, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and the National Museum of Dance.

The 970-hectare state park is so vast (more than four times the size of Montreal's Mount Royal Park) that visitors are advised to peruse the property map that comes with their Gideon hotel room key. Within a short walk of the hotel are the Victoria Pool Complex, housed in a noble Mediterranean-style pavilion, and the stately, colonnaded Roosevelt Baths and Spa, built around the bubbling mineral-rich waters that put Saratoga on the tourist map. This is classic estate grandeur, nothing boutique about it.

That's the Gideon Putnam's geography. In a microbyte, the history is that Mr. Putnam discovered the area in the late 1700s and developed Saratoga Springs during the 1800s, marketing the attraction of

its effervescent, sulphur-rich waters. During the 1930s, the then-governor of New York state, Franklin Roosevelt, created the park, the resort and the formal baths as an economic stimulus project. Saratoga took off once again like a stallion out of the starting gate.

In its heyday from the 1950s to about the 1980s, the hotel was famous enough to attract luminaries such as Fred Astaire, Cary Grant and Liza Minnelli.

Forward to today. Liza is having a banner year, and so is the Gideon Putnam, which is undergoing a gradual \$20-million renovation. The sprawling hotel might never look all-new, but during Phase I of the makeover, the common rooms and fitness and business centres have been updated. The bar and restaurant have been scaled down to a friendly, convivial bistro size instead of the outdated large, formal dining room. Dinner is more contemporary, too, no longer with a huge, cumbersome menu. Now Putnam's serves a more casual, accessible choice of large and small plates such as burgers, steaks, fish, club sandwiches and creative vegetarian dishes such as paninis filled with pesto and roasted squash or shiitake flatbread.

The 120 guest rooms have been updated with fresh bedding, new fabrics and flat-screen televisions. I stayed in a spacious, comfortable room with two queen beds, a work desk, a modest porcelain bathroom, and lots of hotel features such as a telephone with voice mail and a coffee maker. I was ecstatic that the hotel did away with bedspreads and made the switch to duvets covered in white sheeting — so much fresher. The most impressive accommodations are the Porch Suites, luxurious king-sized bedrooms with French doors opening onto a private screened porch overlooking the park. I think French doors add drama and glamour, and the porch is a perfect place to cosy up to your morning coffee or afternoon glass of wine.

The Gideon is a landmark in a tourist town that has seen it all. Saratoga Springs is well known for horse racing, but even though the frenetic thoroughbred season at the Saratoga Race Course ended on Labour Day, there is still a lot to do, including harness racing year-round at the Saratoga Casino and Raceway, shopping and a decorators' dream event, the Showcase of Homes, taking place Sept. 22-23 and 29-30.

And spa life is paramount, especially at the Gideon and its affiliate, the Roosevelt Baths and Spa.

The Roosevelt doesn't look like most modern spas. Outdoors it resembles an imposing Greek palladium, and indoors it has long government-issue corridors lined with 42 treatment rooms, each with its own bath.

But it does have a stunning new relaxation lounge, and the expertise is there with a full roster of beauty and body treatments. The ultimate experience is the indulgent four-hour Queen of Spas package with a facial, massage, manicure and pedicure.

Most spa-goers start with a soak in a bath of Saratoga's famous natural resource. The jury is out on whether the bubbling mineral water is a serious cure for medical ailments such as arthritis.

The Roosevelt spa's new director, Kim Rossi, says the water's negative ions promote well-being and increase blood circulation and cell oxygenation. Plus, soaking in a warm spa bath sure feels good, even if the benefits are fleeting.

rochelleink@aol.com

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