

Country Roads: Middlebury Inn as delightful as town

Historic hotel in Vermont features traditional comforts, modern amenities and a front-row seat to food, music and good times

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE APRIL 5, 2013



The guest rooms at the Middlebury Inn in Vermont are models of vintage elegance.

Photograph by: Middlebury Inn, The Gazette

The Middlebury Inn is at the centre of a small, vibrant college town, both spiritually and geographically.

It's an imposing hotel perched on a rise overlooking the main street and, after nearly 200 years, it continues to be a top draw. Best bets are lunch and dinner at Morgan's Tavern, beauty and body care at the Waterfalls Day Spa, and as a stopover for visitors to Middlebury College and tourists who come to hike or ski.

General manager Geoff Conrad took me through the hotel's three sections. Porter Mansion is a classic manor house turned into 10 suites with Victorian decor. The Courtyard Annex is a basic, serviceable row of 20 motel units. And my choice, the main building, is a 41-room model of quiet, vintage comfort. The corridors are wide, built long ago to accommodate ladies in crinolines.

In the guest rooms, white gauzy curtains drape down from high ceilings, and the beds are covered in white comforters against dark furniture — all with a soothing backdrop of walls in cream and

mushroom.

The Middlebury's public rooms have been updated with a more modern style, but with considerable respect for the past. The lobby lounge is open, bright and airy, filled with such striking antique pieces as a grandfather clock, credenzas and elaborately carved mantelpieces over fireplaces. Morgan's Tavern, renovated in 2012, has beautifully preserved chairs and tables, and classic equestrian art on the walls.

A fresh take on a historic public house, Morgan's Tavern is arguably the town's No. 1 gathering place for locals and visitors. The menu leapfrogs from traditional New England fare to creative fusions by executive chef Phil Gaulin. Besides steak, seafood and poultry, his specialties include crab cakes, wild mushroom strudel, duck spring rolls, chilled strawberry soup, New England clam chowder and hearty Otter Creek Stout onion soup (Otter Creek Brewing is just down the street, brewing ales, porters and stouts from the cold, clear waters of the river that runs through town).

Gaulin is an intense supporter of local food producers. His newest creations are an appetizer of Blythedale Farm Vermont brie with a grape compote and honey from Champlain Valley Apiaries; duck breast from Otter Creek Farm with Happy Valley Farm apple-butter, wilted chard and butternut squash risotto; and grass-fed beef from Fryslan Farm Grazers for braised short ribs served with Asian slaw and Korean barbecue sauce.

The hotel's latticework veranda is the perfect place from which to watch folks at leisure on the Middlebury Town Green, as well as the annual Memorial Day parade, which falls on May 27 this year. It will be a particularly strategic vantage point during the 35th annual Festival on the Green, July 7-13, an exceptional week of all-free shows by local and international musicians, plus lunchtime storytelling and puppetry for kids, evening performances of folk, blues and pop, and the Saturday night street dance, which closes the main street for big-band music from the Vermont Jazz Ensemble.

Among the musicians will be the Quebec-based group Raz-de-Marée (Tidal Wave) starring Montrealers Rachel Aucoin and Sabin Jacques, as well as Éric Favreau from Quebec City and Stuart Kenney from the U.S. Another major performer will be guitar virtuoso Frank Vignola, who has played with Ringo Starr, Madonna and the Boston Pops.

The Middlebury Farmers' Market runs year-round. It's a great place for mingling, sampling and buying organic foods, artisan cheese, woollens, apple cider and preserves. It runs until April 27, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays, at its winter home, Mary Hogan School. In summer, the market takes place at the Marble Works, a retail complex near Exchange Street, 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Saturdays, May 4 to Oct. 26, and on Wednesdays, June 12 to Oct. 9.

Middlebury is at the heart of Vermont's Green Mountains, and although the peaks are a little more modest than at more northern points such as Stowe or Warren, Vt., there are wonderful trails.

An easy hike with a literary bent is the Robert Frost Trail, which starts in East Middlebury's mountainous area about eight kilometres from downtown along Route 125. It's a three-kilometre loop

with marvellous views of the Green Mountains and many of Frost's poems mounted on boards for inspiration.

This calls for a box lunch, perhaps a superlative sandwich-to-go from Costello's Market.

IF YOU GO

Middlebury is a two-hour, 45-minute drive from Montreal, via Highway 10 east to exit 22, Routes 133 and 35 to the U.S. border and Vermont Highway 87 south to Route 7 south.

Middlebury Inn: 800-842-4666, 802-388-4961, middleburyinn.com; 14 Court Square, Middlebury, Vt.

Price: Rooms in three buildings, \$129-\$189 U.S. Sun.-Thurs., or \$149-\$219 on Fri.-Sat., for two, including afternoon tea, fitness centre, parking, business facilities; breakfast for guests cost \$9.50. Golf, hiking cycling and canoeing are available in the area. CAA discount of 10 per cent.

Shopping package: starts at \$655 for four people in two guest rooms for one night with breakfast, a bottle of wine, dinner for four at Morgan's Tavern, the Middlebury's shopping tips, taxes, service, early check-in and late checkout.

Morgan's Tavern, Middlebury Inn: 800-842-4666, 802-388-4961; breakfast daily; lunch on Mon.-Fri.; dinner on Wed.-Sun. from 5:30 p.m.

Information: townofmiddlebury.org; 800-SEE-VERMONT, addisoncountry.com.

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Previous

Next



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