

## NEW HAMPSHIRE

# The Mount Washington Hotel

STEVEN LANGEHOUGH

The first look up from the foot of the twisting mile-long driveway, lined with Gay Nineties overhanging lamps, is unforgettable. Up ahead, with the towering Presidential Range of New Hampshire's White Mountains behind it, the vast and splendid Mount Washington Hotel rises from the valley of Bretton Woods like a palace in a fairy-tale, its white stucco walls shining in the sun, the red tile roof gleaming, and the flags atop the twin turrets flapping smartly in the breeze. The Mount Washington is one of the proudest remnants of the golden age of summer resorts, and it seems just as fit now to receive royalty as it was the day it opened in 1902.

As may befit a building that stands next to the tallest mountain in the Northeast, 6,288-foot Mount Washington, the hotel is the largest wooden structure in New England. More than 700 feet long and five stories high, it lords over 2,600 acres of woods and fields the way the mountain rules the 20-mile-long valley.

Because of its proportions and those flapping flags, the resort looks like an ocean liner, and indeed it is no less self-contained. The Mount Washington maintains its own private telephone system, post office, laundry and printing press (for running up the dinner menus), the last of which is powered by a water-wheel turned by its own river. About the only thing they don't do is grow their own food.

And the hotel is grand in other ways, which can be glimpsed in the dozens of Corinthian capitals, the bucketsful of fresh flowers, and the tuxedos on the busboys, who are among the hotel's 350 employees. After leaving your car with an attendant under a large semicircular portico that resembles the auto entrance to the White House, you come into the building through the 150-foot-long lobby—called, because of all the hanging plants, the Fern Court. The 35-foot ceiling is supported by a series of square pillars, each topped off with scrollwork, which turns the hall into a forest of Greek columns. All around, the windows are adorned with medallions of Tiffany-style stained glass that seem to have been made with fine slices of so many colorful and precious minerals. An elaborate chandelier tinkles pleasantly when the doors are left open to admit the cooling breeze. To take the edge off chilly evenings this far up in the mountains, there is a massive fireplace, so big that a staff member has to step inside it to lay the logs. Of course, a brandy, best taken in the plush couches ringing the fireplace, can also help warm you.

Farther down the Fern Court is the long, colonnaded Mount Washington Ballroom, scene of evening entertain-



A grand summer resort from the Gilded Age

by John Sedgwick

ment from the resident musicians, the Brettonians, who do double duty as waiters and waitresses in the dining room. While the notion of the singing waiter might provoke anxiety in the hearts of some prospective guests, there is no need to fear. These young men and women have been culled from some of the best music schools around the country and are genuinely talented. The Brettonians are backed by Fred Petra's band. Besides handling the expected show tunes, they have branched out to genres as disparate as English Renaissance madrigals and Kenny Rogers-style country and western.

The Fern Court also opens into the Conservatory, a large circular room decked with plants, where chamber-music recit-

als and even aerobics classes are often held during the summer. The room has extraordinarily clear acoustics thanks to the dome in the ceiling, which, like a miniature rotunda, "throws" sound around the hall.

It is said that the first pioneer to make his way into this valley was Timothy Nash, who spotted the entrance through Crawford Notch in 1771 after climbing a tree to look for a moose he was chasing. On hearing about the new territories, the royal governor named the land Bretton Woods after his ancestral home in England, and he rewarded Nash with a grant of more than 2,000 acres, much of which is now taken up by the grounds of the hotel. No doubt, Nash would be

astonished to see what has become of the property.

The area became a popular tourist resort as soon as a railroad track was laid through the mountains in the 19th century. A number of small hotels sprouted up. Rail and steel magnate Joseph Stickney had the idea for something a bit more impressive when he acquired 10,000 acres of Bretton Woods for his resort. A man of European tastes, he had in mind a building in the style of the Italian Renaissance. To this end he brought more than 100 craftsmen from Italy to do the delicate plasterwork, the intricate stained glass and the wood carving—to say nothing of the massive engineering—for this palace.

The work took two years, but when it was done in August of 1902, Stickney was able to charge \$20 a night, four times the going rate, and still pack the 235-room hotel to the rafters. In that era, this region was so popular that as many as 57 trains a day made their way up into the valley. Guests at the Mount Washington occasionally arrived in their own private railroad cars, which they parked on a sidetrack for the duration of their stays. A coach drawn by six horses carried them to the hotel itself. The roster of famous guests includes Winston Churchill, Thomas Edison, Joan Crawford and three Presidents of the United States.

But the hotel's claim to historic recognition comes from having been the site of the famous Bretton Woods Conference, an assembly of representatives from 44 nations who gathered to decide international monetary issues in 1944, in the waning days of World War II. The conference established the International Monetary Fund and set the gold standard at \$35 an ounce. As a result of the agreement, the world's economy operated on a sound basis, pegged to the American dollar, for a quarter-century.

The government took over the hotel for the season of the conference and refurbished it somewhat after years of decline during the Depression and the war. The general assembly was convened in the ballroom where the Brettonians now hold forth, and the key agreements were signed in the nearby Gold Room, which has been roped off and preserved as a small museum. For the gathering, the Mount Washington had to truck its food in from Boston. The U.S. Army cordoned off the area for security, and a platoon of Boy Scouts served as messengers during the conference. Since all the rooms were taken, the Scouts had to camp out on the lawn in pup tents.

### Summer Pleasures

Even if the guests have not come to settle questions of international finance, the Mount Washington is still wonderfully accommodating. It offers a wide vari-



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## Mount Washington continued

ety of rooms, from narrow stateroom-size chambers to spacious suites, all off long halls the size of bowling alleys on the upper four floors. Mine was vaguely old-time, with flowery wallpaper and imitation French antique furniture. Its bay window faced the other direction from Mount Washington, toward the Willey Mountains to the southwest of the hotel. But no view in such a setting is disappointing. Many of the other rooms I glimpsed had an assortment of New England antiques. Still others contained classic wicker or more modern

cushioned sofas. In several, the furniture was grouped around elegant fireplaces. On the upper floors, which have yet to be fully made over by the hotel's new owners, the rooms await redecorating.

Once ensconced in the Mount Washington, you need never leave. In former days, guests would come for the entire summer, which might strain a pocket-book these days. However, there are still a summer's worth of activities. A squadron of carts stands ready by the golf pro's shop to whisk you around the 18-hole PGA championship golf course,

which spreads out across the valley. The first tee is just a putt away from the hotel's back door. There is a large heated pool ringed with Spanish tile, and there are at least 50 amply cushioned chaise longues at poolside for post-dip reclining. There is a smaller heated pool indoors in case of rain or cold weather.

A number of jogging trails have been laid out in the surrounding countryside; they are graded by degree of difficulty in a descriptive brochure that can be obtained at the desk. And hiking trails have been blazed by various climbing groups for treks deeper into the mountains; guides are available as well. For those who prefer to take their exercise while seated, a stable of horses is maintained on the property, with English and Western tack. Several dozen miles of bridle paths have been cut for riding. And, finally, the hotel has equipment for a range of other slightly more informal summer sports, including badminton, volleyball, bicycling and horseshoes.

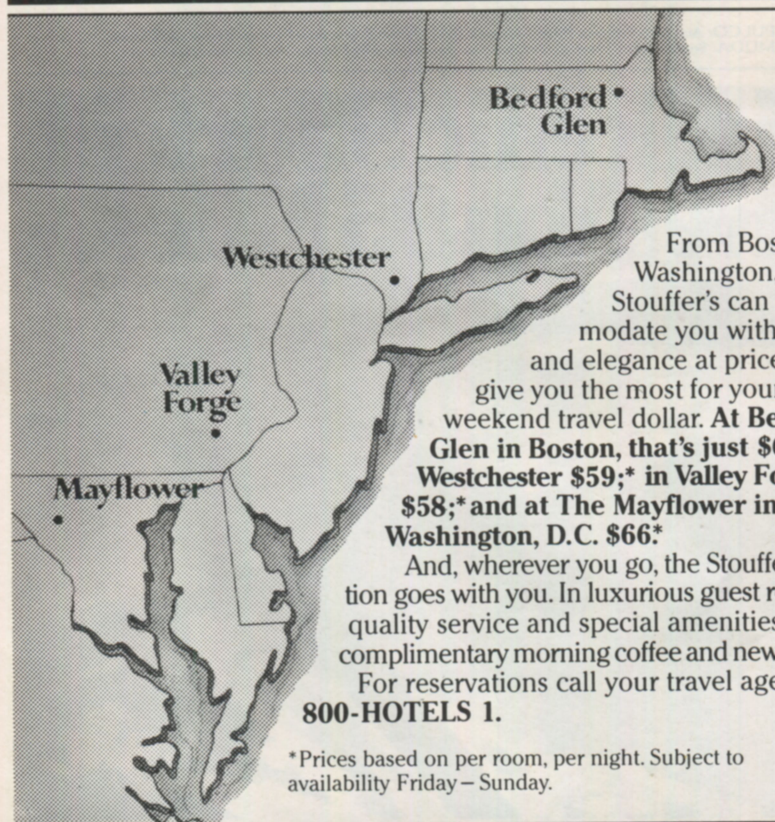
Just as satisfying, however, is to partake in none of this but merely to observe it from the comfort of a wicker rocker, bench or chair on the veranda that rings the southern end of the hotel. When it rains, the veranda has been known to serve as a sheltered track for joggers desperate to get in their laps. Since the veranda is 900 feet long, it takes only three round trips to do a mile. In the evening, step onto the veranda's South Portico to watch the moon float up out of Crawford Notch, that gap in the mountains Timothy Nash discovered hunting his moose.

## Dining and Nearby Sights

Breakfast and dinner are included in the room prices. The meals are served in a vast octagonal dining room, designed so that no guest is seated in an isolated corner. The room sparkles with crystal and china. It is adorned with dozens of leafy Corinthian pillars and lit by bulbous chandeliers and by natural light, which streams in through louvered windows so huge it takes two men to open them.

Dinners are formal, the waiters in black dinner jackets and bow ties. A series of courses commences with an appetizer such as asparagus remoulade and winds up many dishes later with desserts like baked Alaska and Boston cream pie. And there are so many waiters there to serve you—four per table—that the hard part is finding enough for them all to do. The food is prepared with a decided European influence on what would otherwise be standard domestic fare. One night's sample of entrees, which change daily, included beef Stroganoff, fillet of turbot, and spring chicken. The results are a good deal better than one might expect from an institution with a kitchen the size of a basketball court that is geared to

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servicing as many as 700 meals a night. Although this dining room is not quite equal to a proper big-city restaurant, its elegant setting, the cheerfulness of the waiters and waitresses, and the terrific views of Mount Washington more than make up for any slight deficiencies in the cuisine. The four-piece band plays dinner music, and the Bretonians can be counted on to gather during the meal to sing in tight four-part harmony.

For lunch, you can go downstairs to Stickney's, the former billiard room, now made over into a pleasant café with blond bentwood chairs and wood paneling. Its menu lists sandwiches, soups and salads, and a meal comes to about \$10 a person. You can also take advantage of the poolside grill, at similar prices, and dine in repose. Or drive a mile down Route 302 to Fabyans. This restaurant has a more expansive lunch menu—including chicken curry, and fettuccine with shrimp—and is housed in a former train station. Run by the hotel, the restaurant is on the lobby side of the station, near the ticket window; a bar has been installed across the way in the baggage-claim area. With kerosene lamps hanging from the ceiling, and large cast-iron gears decorating the walls, the place has a country feeling. Lunch costs about \$30 for two.

For those interested in a day trip, the best direction to head is north on Route 302 to Route 3 and Franconia Notch, where there are several sites worth a look. Probably the most famous is the Old Man in the Mountains, a rock formation that took shape 200 million years ago and bears an uncanny resemblance to the stereotypical craggy New England farmer. At The Flume, a waterway running down a narrow chasm, visitors can climb a boardwalk along the rocky slope to a 25-foot waterfall. And there is an 80-person tramway ready to hoist you to the top of Cannon Mountain, a major ski area in winter, with spectacular views of the White Mountains.

Closer to home, of course, is the king of the local range, Mount Washington itself. To drive up, take the road from Glen House on the far side of the mountain, which is up Route 16, 30 miles away. Or hike up from the Bretton Woods side. A much more leisurely means is the cog railway, which departs barely a mile from the hotel. The railway dates back to 1869. When railman Sylvester Marsh petitioned the New Hampshire state legislature for the rights to build it, the incredulous legislators granted the request, then threw in their permission to build a railroad to the moon as well, since they figured that would be about as easy to do. But Marsh persisted, and his railroad is still there, still consuming a ton of coal to huff its way to the top on each trip. You can view the train's exertions from

the hotel, but it's more fun to take the ride. The view from the top, as P.T. Barnum said, is "The second greatest show on earth."

If that is so, the Mount Washington Hotel, with the high-spirited Bretonians, gorgeous surroundings and impressive history, has to be the third. ■

## How and Where

Conventions take up most of the hotel during June and September, so the best time to come is July or August, when

the weather is likely to be at its best anyway. Room rates, MAP, range from a low of \$70 in spring to a high of \$95 per person per day in summer. Address: Bretton Woods, N.H. 63575; 800-258-0330; in New Hampshire, 278-1000.

To get to Bretton Woods from major cities of New Hampshire, take Route 93 north to North Woodstock, where it becomes Route 3. Stay on Route 3 about 20 miles to Twin Mountain, then go east on Route 302. The Mount Washington Hotel is plainly marked about five miles along.



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