

THE BREEZY LIFE OF THE BALSAMS

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

New Hampshire's grand old hotel

It's morning at the Balsams, and the sun rises through the narrow V of Dixville Notch in the New Hampshire mountains, sending a shaft of light across Lake Gloriette and onto this stunning resort hotel on its shore. The light spreads as the sun rises, and soon the whole place is alive with color—the deep green of spruce-lined ridges, the dark blue of cool water, and the shimmering red of the palatial hotel's roofs and turrets.

It's a heavenly spot for a grand, 232-room resort. It's also an unexpected one. For the Balsams is located on what's known as New Hampshire's roof, 1,800 feet up on the northern side of the White Mountains, only 13 miles from Canada. The town of Dixville Notch has about 30 adult residents, all but two of whom live

and work at the hotel. And the next town over, Colebrook, is 10 to 15 minutes away. So remote is the Balsams that the hotel operates its own telephone company and provides most of its own heat and electricity by burning waste wood from the many nearby logging operations in a plant tucked behind the hotel.

Far away as it is, Dixville Notch enters the consciousness of the nation every four years. Starting at the stroke of midnight on election day, the Balsams' specially designated Ballot Room is the scene of the town's high-profile voting—making Dixville Notch's results the first to be reported in the nation. In the 1984 election Reagan won 29 to 1 in this staunchly Republican district. "There have been some fingers pointed," jokes the Balsams

co-manager Warren Pearson, "but nobody has admitted to being the one." The attendant politicking can produce some unexpected guests, such as Popsicle, the Republican elephant who showed up to lend his support for George Romney's Presidential campaign in 1968. Popsicle declined to stay the night at the Balsams.

There have been innkeepers on this rugged pass since the 19th century when, in the tradition of the American frontier, the pioneering Whittemore family welcomed to their farmhouse travelers who were cutting through the mountains between Montreal and the Maine coast. But the Balsams was officially started by the Dix family in 1873 as a country inn for city folk escaping the summer heat. They'd come up to the country from Boston and by railroad along the Connecticut River. As the number of competing resorts grew, however, vacationers began to expect more than the small white-clapboard inn; in fact, the farther they traveled, the grander the hotel had to be. In the outback of the Canadian border, they expected a lot. So the hotel expanded at the turn of the century, adding more stories and extensions, and transforming itself into the year-round luxury resort it is today—a cluster of tall buildings with the aspect of an alpine chateau—offering fine dining, ballroom dancing, a small theater and considerable nightlife for such an isolated place.

Not only has the hotel survived, though so many other luxury resorts have gone under (the Balsams is one of only three left in New Hampshire), it has an architectural beauty that makes it all the more distinctive. The "new wing," built in 1916, and still so termed, gives the hotel much of its charm. The addition is a splendid, Italianate stucco structure with high turrets, that now contains about half the rooms in the hotel. It was the first steel-supported building in New Hampshire, and so impressive was it that at the opening John Philip Sousa brought up his band to play and New York City's Mayor Jimmy Walker was in attendance. Incongruous as this European-style wing might appear amid the rugged American wilderness, it provides just the right note of old-

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world dignity, and goes a long way toward justifying the hotel's claim to being "The Switzerland of America."

Inside, the Balsams provides luxury accommodations with a personal touch. Returning guests find a flask of maple syrup bearing the handwritten message, "Welcome back to the Notch." Guests who have come annually for a decade receive a Paul Revere-pattern silverplated pitcher engraved with the words "In appreciation of a decade of mutual esteem." And even first-time visitors feel pampered when they find candy on their pillow to mark certain holidays (on Valentine's Day, we found four chocolate hearts). And when they call room service and barely have a chance to put down the receiver before a bellhop knocks at the door.

And when they sit down to meals. Dining is possibly the central experience at the Balsams, and the price for all meals, without wine, is included in your bill. Even if there *were* an alternative to the hotel's fare closer than Colebrook, you wouldn't want to miss these hearty, four-course breakfasts, the elaborate luncheon buffets, or the spectacular dinners. Visitors on a diet should be warned in advance; they'll have a hard time at the Balsams. The dining room is a vast, T-shaped hall with about 100 tables; it's forested with Corinthian columns and lined with picture windows. Although there may be as many as 500 people seated at one time, the service is excellent. Pristine cotton tablecloths, fine china on all the tables and freshly cut flowers lend a decided elegance to the scene. Gentlemen, incidentally, are requested to wear jackets at dinner.

Master chef and part owner Phil Learned, who runs a cooking school on the premises, oversees all meal preparations. The menu changes daily in a three-week cycle and the food is remarkably fresh and well-prepared. The haddock served one night during our stay had been delivered from Maine's Boothbay Harbor that afternoon. The hotel obtains the best beef available and buys its lobster by the boatload from Maine lobstermen. At dinner, the chefs display all the entrées on a long table so you can size up the day's offerings. But you can have a little bit of everything at the hotel's celebrated buffets; a 50-foot buffet table groans under the weight of the selections—sides of beef, roast pork, sole stuffed with crabmeat and chicken Florentine. For dessert, if you have room, return for a sampling of such delicacies as Linzer tortes and raspberry tarts from the hotel bakery. Or top off the meal with an assortment of fresh

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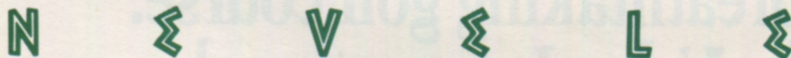
Because scattered all around the course are freshly

planted wildflowers. A blazonry of poppies, sea holly and globe thistle...a delight to behold. (Providing you don't lose a ball in them.)

Presently, there are three flower 'patches' on the course. The effect is so spectacular, we'll probably add

more around the course and the rest of the property, too.

Just superficial details? Hardly, because it's all the little differences—in the golf course, the tennis courts, the cuisine, and everything—that place the Nevele in a class by itself.



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fruit and cheese. To accompany this feast, the hotel offers a good selection of European and California wines.

The Balsams is an entirely self-contained community that seemingly exists only for the pleasure of its guests. You gather for meals in the dining room, and then disperse to the surrounding countryside, for the hotel owns 15,000 acres. After dinner, you might enjoy a nightclub act in the Wilderness Room lounge or dancing in the ballroom. And later, of course, you will retire to your room in Dixville House, the older section, or in the new wing, called Hampshire House.

The rooms, varying in shape, are all furnished with painted Ethan Allen bedsteads, tables and dressers. The floors are carpeted, and there is extensive closet space, presumably left over from the days when guests were likely to stay a whole summer. Most rooms have good views of the surrounding mountains. Dixville House rooms are generally smaller than those in Hampshire House, and they have flowered wallpaper; the rooms in the new wing are painted blue-green. None have television sets, which are consigned to the common rooms downstairs.

Playing golf is one of the main summer activities at the hotel. A nine-hole course, the Coashaukee, begins close outside the back door. An unusually scenic 18-hole course, the Panorama, is a mile up the road in the rolling hills. Featuring teacup sand traps and bowl-shaped greens, the Panorama was designed in 1912 by Donald Ross, a distinguished golf-course architect. From the course's clubhouse, built on a hilltop, you can see into Canada and Vermont, and if it weren't for one intervening hill you could see to Maine.

If golf is not your game, you can play tennis on any of the six courts behind the hotel or try your hand at more casual amusements like badminton, boccie or shuffleboard. Lake Gloriette rarely gets warmer than 60 degrees, so lake swimming is just for the hardy. For everyone else, the Olympic-size pool is heated to a civilized 72 degrees. There are paddleboats, rowboats and canoes for forays onto Lake Gloriette, which is stocked with trout; no fishing license is required. If you catch anything, take it to the waterfront attendant, and he'll arrange to have the staff cook it for your breakfast, lunch or dinner.

The hotel owns and maintains many miles of jogging trails and hiking paths, which double as cross-country ski trails in winter. You can also ski downhill at the nearby Balsams Wilderness ski area on

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Hodge Mountain. The area is owned and operated by the hotel, and there are three lifts and a dozen trails.

Outdoor activity is by no means obligatory, and you'll feel perfectly comfortable just lounging in the library, soaking up the rays on the sun porch, or taking fresh air in a rocking chair on the veranda. Or, in winter, you might get the chill out of your bones by sitting and reading near the fireplace in the vast Victorian living room; its handsome couches and comfortable armchairs allow for intimate gatherings.

So leisurely and peaceful is the rhythm of life at the Balsams that, after a while, you might find you lose track of time altogether. Indeed, the management has taken to slipping a reminder under the door of the guests whose day of departure has arrived. In the past, they often had to send a bellhop out to the golf course or a hiking trail to collect forgetful patrons. And you will probably think in bewilderment at the end of your stay, what? we have to go now? It's one of life's bitter truths. After settling in at such a comfortable, carefree place as the Balsams, no sensible person would ever want to leave.

How and Where

GETTING THERE: Drive north from Boston on Interstate 93, and bear right onto Route 3 in Lincoln, New Hampshire. About 70 miles north, turn right at Colebrook onto Route 26. The Balsams is about 10 miles down the road on the left, in Dixville Notch. Allow at least four hours for the trip from Boston. From New York, follow Interstate 95 to I-91 north through Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont; at St. Johnsbury, go east on Route 2, and then north on Route 3 in Lancaster. That's at least a seven-hour drive. Your best bet is to fly to Laconia, N.H.; a bus from there takes you to Colebrook, where hotel staff will meet you if you call ahead.

ABOUT THE BALSAMS: The hotel operates on the American Plan; all meals (except lunch in winter, from December 20 to April 5) and most services, even greens fees and winter lift tickets, are included in the price. There is no restaurant at the Balsams; the dining room serves meals at set times during the day. Summer rates range from \$180 to \$240. In September, rates go to \$70 to \$105 per person per night, depending on the date and the size of the room; there are weekend and weekly rates as well. For more information, telephone the Balsams at 800-255-0600 or, in New Hampshire, 800-255-0800. ■