



THE UNEQUALED EQUINOX

This superbly restored hotel in Manchester, Vermont, is once again receiving guests

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEOFFREY CLIFFORD

In Manchester Village, Vermont, the sugar maples will soon flame like torches against the blue sky. The whole valley, from the Taconics to the Green Mountains, will be a vast forest fire of foliage. Every year autumn turns this historic hilltop town, lined with Greek Revival houses and paved with marble sidewalks, into a place of startling beauty. And no part of Manchester is more stunning than the Equinox, the grand resort hotel, newly restored, that holds the crest of the hill at the town center.

The facade of the Equinox is quite a sight: 31 squared columns, three verandas, countless green-shuttered windows and no fewer than seven front doors. From every front window you look out past the gold-topped Benning-

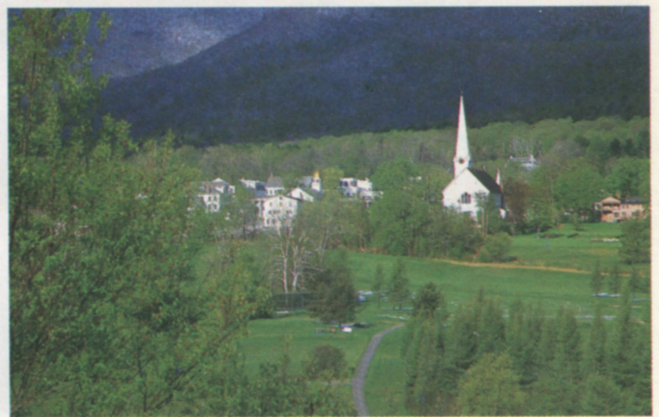
ton County Courthouse and high-spired First Congregational Church to the broad valley of the Battenkill River, renowned for its trout, and beyond to the Green Mountains. Behind the hotel is Mount Equinox, the steeply rising 3,816-foot peak of the Taconic range that gives the resort its name. The mountain is named after the day the Vermont surveyor general first scaled it—the autumnal equinox of 1823.

Once one of the most splendid resorts in New England, the Equinox was renovated and reopened last year by the Galesi Goup, an Albany-based development company, after standing dark and empty for 10 years, a victim of changing economics. But this summer the resort is alive



The white colonnades of the Equinox (above) are an invitation to enter its elegant world.

In the New England tradition, Manchester's church steeple (right) soars above the treetops, and a Green Mountain Boy (bottom right) guards the village green.



once more with the cheerful sounds of golfers returning from the links and tennis players back from the courts. It is fragrant with the smells of steaming muffins from the bakery and of mint juleps from the tavern, and in the evening the hotel is bright with the light of fires crackling on its hearths.

Appealing as the Equinox is in late summer, the resort operates year-round, and it is just as enticing as a base for viewing the fall foliage or for hitting the many ski slopes nearby. Leaf enthusiasts can take almost any road in Manchester to see the trees, with the exception of the heavily traveled Route 7 through Manchester Center. And skiers have a choice of three major areas: Magic Mountain,



Bromley and Stratton (in ascending order of skiing difficulty) are all located about 15 miles to the east.

Anytime, of course, the Equinox is flush with historical association. Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys met on the site to plot strategy against the Tories in 1777. A statue of one of them striking a Napoleonic pose on a high pedestal stands on the village green in front of the hotel. Presidents Grant, Taft, Benjamin Harrison and Theodore Roosevelt have visited the Equinox. President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated shortly before he was scheduled to stay for a few weeks in the summer of 1865.

The hotel was founded in 1853 by Franklin Orvis, who created the original Equinox House by connecting



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his father Levi's house to the general store. "L.C. Orvis—1832" is chiseled in the marble facing above the fireplace in Levi's former parlor, now the Equinox's Marsh Tavern. Franklin later bought the Taconic Hotel next door and joined it to the main structure. When the number of guests slackened in 1856, he took the unusual course of improving the hotel's quality and doubling his rates, which had the desired effect. During the 1880s countless New Yorkers boarded the *Green Mountain Flyer* for the jazzy new hotel. Some came for the lawn tennis, croquet and golf; others came for the leaves in fall or skiing in winter.

Style and comfort were trademarks then, and they are still apparent in the resurrected Equinox. You enter the

The Equinox Skyline Drive winds past green fields and all of autumn's brilliant colors (above).

The simple beauty of the First Congregational Church (opposite) is complemented by a maple's florid display.





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The famous Orvis Fly Fishing School (above) is now in its 22nd season, sending avid anglers to wade in the waters of the Battenkill (right).

Other Equinox pleasures include a round of golf (below) and a carriage ride down country lanes with a picnic lunch under the seat.



establishment through a charming parlor filled with tufted velvet chairs and satin couches of the Victorian era. The furniture is grouped in intimate clusters near the slender white columns that rise to the low ceiling. With a piano in one corner, the whole scene presents an inviting retreat, and though all the pieces look as if they belong at the hotel, none of them were actually found here. The original furniture, except for the bathroom sinks, was sold at auction to pay off creditors when the hotel went bankrupt in 1974.

From an adjoining hall, a beautiful curving staircase sweeps up to the guest rooms. There are 144 bedrooms on two floors, all of them of different sizes and shapes.



There are six suites, two of them duplexes that rise into a square cupola with fabulous views on four sides. All the bedrooms have plenty of natural light from the large windows, and the handsome knotty-pine furniture, a comfortable armchair or two and pale walls with hand-stenciling give a wonderful sense of ease and spaciousness.

Down a long interior hall overlooking the courtyard is the dining room. Painted yellow and robin's-egg blue, with a domed ceiling and a brass chandelier, it has the airiness of a conservatory. A tuxedoed pianist plays classics and show tunes on the room's baby grand. There's a good view of Mount Equinox from the large bay window. Dinners are extensive and elegant, with appetizers such as

smoked breast of duck with a raspberry dressing and entrees like grilled Black Angus entrecote with shallot sauce and noisettes of Vermont lamb sautéed in a red-wine sauce with roasted garlic. All the entrees we sampled were delightful, and there is an extensive wine list.

Breakfast is a pleasure in the light-filled dining room, and the Sunday brunch could very well take the place of three meals if you stack a plate high with selections from the buffet table: shrimp in a duck sauce, rolled lamb with cranberry chutney, baked ham, roast beef, crabmeat, poppy-seed bread, blueberry muffins, Danish, fruit salad, cold pasta salad and artichoke hearts. Your choices at lunch are lighter dishes such as shrimp remoulade and smoked-



Hallmarks of the Equinox are Vermont pine furniture in the bedrooms (left) and gorgeous views of the town and landscape (below right).

Hotel guests (near right) choose from a long list of wines to enhance their meals. General manager Thor Loberg samples the day's luscious pastries (far right) as head chef Ken Paquin (center) and an associate wait for approval.

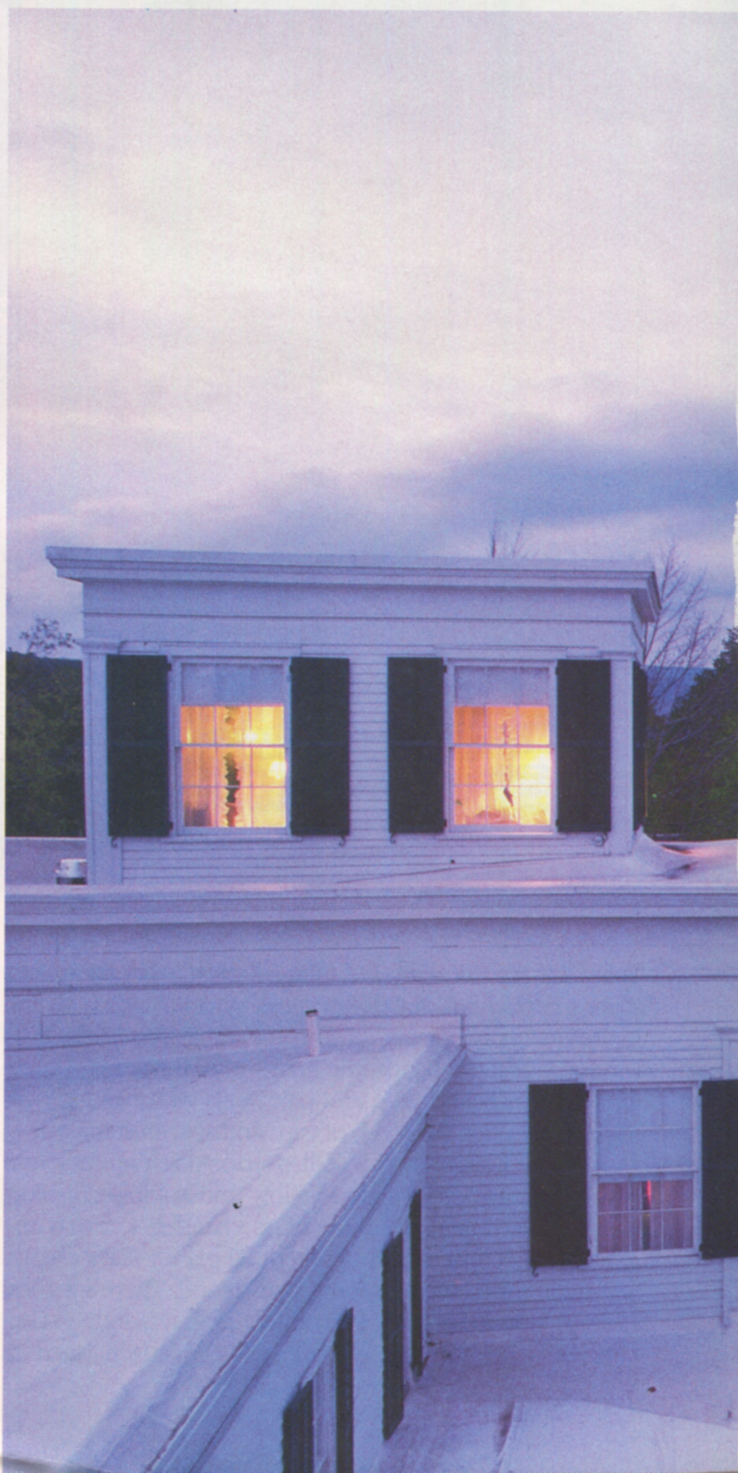
turkey club sandwiches. You can also order lunch in Marsh Tavern, a room with unusual red-plaid flannel wall covering and a fireplace. The tavern is also open for drinks from noon until 1 A.M.

The Equinox has enough sporting activities to rival a country club. It maintains an 18-hole golf course designed in 1927 by Walter Travis. Watch out for the 13th hole: regulars call it the snake pit because of one rapacious sand trap. There are also five tennis courts (three clay, two all-weather) and a swimming pool. Lunch is served in the clubhouse near the first tee. Riders can rent horses from the Windhill Farm Stable on North Road. Canoeists can try the waters of the Battenkill with canoes rented from BattenKill Canoe Limited on Route 313 off Route 7A in neighboring Arlington.

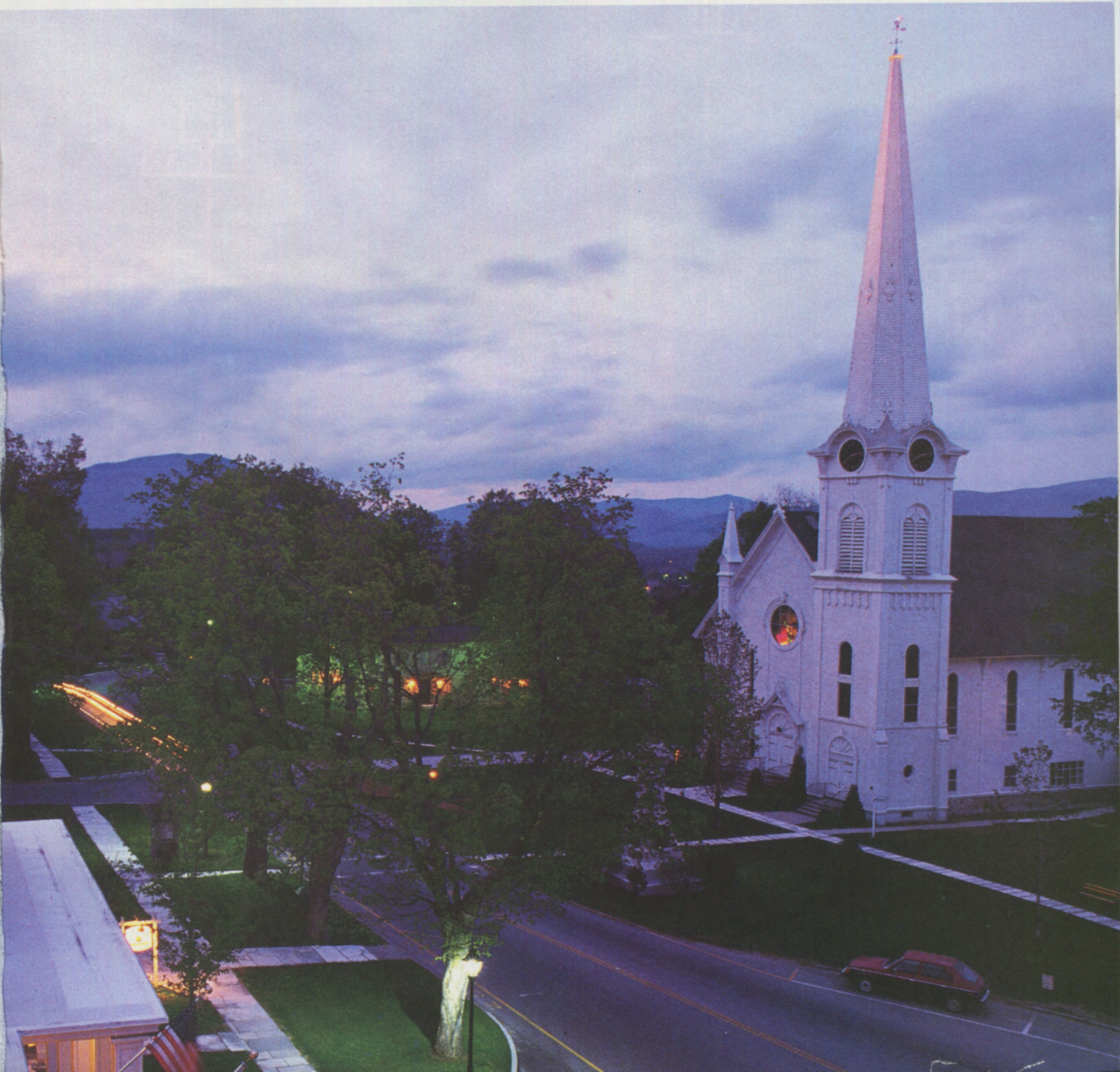
Though the Equinox is a world unto itself, guests who want to venture out on occasion will find plenty to do. The less athletic might want to tour the historic town by antique horse and buggy, courtesy of the Village Carriage Company; a top-hatted coachman will pick you up in front of the hotel. Or you might take your own car and drive a little higher to drink in the spectacular views (especially dazzling in autumn) from the Equinox Skyline Drive, a toll road (open May–October) that winds its way up Mount Equinox via Little Equinox Mountain. You can peer down at the Carthusian monastery located on the west shoulder of the mountain, examine mammoth windmills on the ridge, and dine at the Skyline Inn (362–1113) at the summit.

Directly across the street from the Equinox you'll find another immense Colonial building called Equinox Junior (formerly an annex of the hotel) that now houses a group of interesting shops: Hathaway Shirts, Country Furs and the Toy Works. You might want to browse in the various factory outlets that have taken up residence along Route 7 to the north of town. A number of reputable clothing firms are represented: Anne Klein, Ralph Lauren, Christian Dior and Bass shoes offer good selections.

The American Museum of Fly Fishing is down the road toward Manchester Center. It is organized and operated by the Orvis Company, a well-known manufacturer of fly-fishing equipment, which was started in 1856 by Franklin Orvis's younger brother, Charles F. There you can examine such treasures as the rods and reels of Ernest



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Hemingway, Winslow Homer, Dwight Eisenhower and Bing Crosby. If you want to feast your eyes on this year's models—the Boron/Graphite Powerhouse Fly Rod or the Battenkill bamboo one—drive over to the firm's showroom a half-mile down Route 7 in Manchester Center. Eager beginners or old pros who want to hone their skills might like to enroll in the Orvis Fly Fishing School. The classes generally last three days, and the Equinox offers a package that includes room, board and fishing instruction. But, of course, you don't need to be a student to match your wits against the notoriously shrewd Battenkill trout; you need only a license, and Orvis can arrange that.

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Heading out of town in the other direction, on Route 7A, you come to a magnificent estate called Hildene, once the home of Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of the president. Robert became secretary of war under James Garfield and chairman of the Pullman Palace Car Company. Robert first came to Manchester as a Harvard student to stay at the Equinox with his mother. He fell in love with the area and built this splendid Georgian Revival mansion, which has been carefully restored. Take a tour of the house and see such curiosities as the Aeolian player pipe organ (akin to a player piano) with a thousand pipes, the tiger-tail-pattern white-oak floors, and one of Abraham Lincoln's seven stovepipe hats. Outside, there are extensive lawns and gardens and a small observatory. Polo is played on the lawn in summer. Although Hildene is closed during the winter, the 400-acre estate is open for cross-country skiing.

Just to the north of the Equinox on West Road is another lovely old mansion, now the Southern Vermont Art Center, set on 375 acres at the foot of Mount Equinox. Light lunches are served in its Garden Café.

If you want to sample a variety of the local cuisine, you might have a meal at the Reluctant Panther (802-362-2568) on

Route 7A east of the Equinox. In the main dining room, a five-course dinner might include quail baked in a spiced red-wine sauce, or fresh seafood. The Reluctant Panther is an unusual place; its exterior is not quite pink—it's mauve and purple, and you might come across a life-size stuffed bear sitting in the lounge. Dinner, including wine, costs about \$65 for two.

The Black Swan (362-3807), farther down past Orvis, provides modified nouvelle cuisine in an attractive, homey setting. Dinner there will cost about \$75 for two, including a selection from the restaurant's decent wine list.

Or you could travel five miles north on Route 30 to the dining room at the Dorset Inn (867-5500). Facing Dorset's village green, this Colonial building is said to be the oldest continuously operating inn in Vermont; it dates in part from 1796. The inn serves meat and fish dishes with lively sauces—pear-and-cider cream or lime-ginger—in an old-fashioned dining room. The wine list is long and the dinner prices moderate—about \$70 for two with wine. You might consider making a full night of it and taking in a performance of the Dorset Theatre Festival at the Dorset Playhouse (867-5777).

But when staying at the Equinox, you should not feel obliged to do much of anything except ease back into a rocker on the hotel's veranda, watch the shadows lengthen across the broad street and wait for the leaves to turn color—feeling grateful that the Equinox has risen again.

How and Where

The Equinox is located on Route 7A in Manchester Village. From Boston, take Route 2 to Greenfield, then Interstate 91 north to Brattleboro. Head northwest on Route 30 until you reach the T-intersection at Manchester Center; turn left for 7A. The Equinox is one mile south on the right. Allow 3½ hours for the trip.

Prices for a double room run from \$75 to \$145, depending on the season; suites start at \$190. With two meals, prices are \$36 more per person per night. Dinner in the main dining room costs about \$95 for two with wine. For reservations or more information call 800-362-4747 or 802-362-4700 or write to the Equinox, Manchester Village, Vermont 05254. ■

John Sedgwick, a frequent contributor to Travel & Leisure, grew up in New England. His most recent book is "Rich Kids."



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