

travel



A surprising ski and dining getaway in New Jersey

Grand Cascades Lodge

By Jean-Pierre Chery

Don't tell your friends

"Oh, you're going where? New Jersey! I'm sorry."

That tends to be the general reply that I hear from people here in New York whenever I mention heading west, crossing the state line. Normally I would try to sway them from their pretentious and uninformed opinions but not this time. Because what I found on "the other side" was a place so full of charm and warmth that I vowed to return in the spring. And I'm not so sure that I want those kinds of people around to sully my great find.

Away in the countryside

Our destination is the Grand Cascades Lodge in Hamburg, N.J.—a lavish revival of a classic Adirondack-style lodge with seven golf courses, a world-class wine cellar, and two on-site spas. You'd think we'd be racing to get there, but my girlfriend and I weren't. We were only 30 minutes outside of Manhattan, and already it seemed worlds apart. The terrain was changing so rapidly that the only remarks we could make were those questioning the very existence of such a place in

such close proximity to New York City. As the elevation rose, rocky formations began to hug the road, and there wasn't a car in sight. The morning sunlight reflected through glassy forests of ice-encrusted trees. It was almost like looking through a kaleidoscope only projected through the specter of IMAX. Even in the harsh dead of winter, nature's beauty was evident here. In this relatively short drive, we wound through miles of country roads—all boasting different but equally spectacular points of view. Just as we were starting to get lost in the country's charm and beginning to forget that we even had some place to go, we arrived.

First Impressions

Seated prominently above the surrounding area and humbled only by the scale and grandeur of the Kittatinny and Hamburg mountains, the 250-room Grand Cascades Lodge is impressive. Once over the threshold, guests are greeted by a lobby that seems to project warmth on sight. Long hardwood beams, stone bricks, leather couches, and hints of copper all radiated in soft lighting that made it look like the place was lit by a fireplace alone. It was instantly comforting and had a kind of

casual decadence that really struck a cord with me.

Spacious and well decorated, the rooms were not to be outdone. Vaulted ceilings worked the open floor plan to make the room seem even larger than it actually was. Modern features met rustic detail with ease—worn cabinet doors with stainless steel hardware and stone-brick fireplaces with the convenience of electrical switch operation. The first words out my girlfriend's mouth were, "Oh my god, can we live here?" With room rates starting at \$234 a night for the one- and two-bedroom suites, I don't think so.

We met our media contact for lunch at Crystal Tavern, one of 12 dining options available at the resort. The service was friendly and laid back. While public relations representative **Natasha Wright** was telling us about the many features the resort had to offer, I couldn't help but sneak peeks at the gorgeous view just beyond the window.

Dinner that night would bring us back to Crystal Tavern, which offers upscale pub food and steaks for lunch and dinner. We pushed back in plush leather chairs and prepared to enjoy the night. When the food arrived, all it took was one glimpse

at my 12-ounce filet to know that we would not be sharing food tonight. The bloody rare filet had taken a hold of my greedy dark side.

Natasha invited us out for drinks so when the meal was finished we headed to the bar to finish off the night. Everybody let their guards down, laughed, drank and would curse themselves the next day. With each pint of Chimay that passed through my hands, my plans of attending a yoga class the next morning faded. *C'est la vie.*

Get active, but not too active

My head's pounding, and I'm not feeling entirely up to the task of snowboarding at Mountain Creek. The only saving grace was the Taylor ham (a regional specialty), egg and cheese sandwiches, that were left for us at the front desk.

We traveled the eight miles to Mountain Creek (four peaks, 45 ruins) to take advantage of the fresh powder. If anybody had actually seen us snowboarding, I doubt they would've said that we "took advantage" of anything, though we did plenty of "rolling around in it" and quite a bit of "falling down in it." Even so, we had a blast and have

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the bruises to prove it. It offers night skiing, snow tubing and a terrain park that everybody I met seemed to talk about.

Now for something completely different

Enter the resort's biosphere pool complex—10,000 square feet of tropical oasis. One can feel the change in humidity as one approaches the biosphere door. Here one can swim in the heated, free-form pool, relax in the cave-theme steam room and sauna, explore the underground aquarium or race down the 14-foot water slide. Described on their Web site as the first structure of its kind, the facility is covered with a specialty material that allows for year-round tanning.

And the biosphere is brimming with life. With realistic rock formations, lush plants and even a lemon tree in the middle of the pool, you half expect there to be wildlife lurking somewhere. Though we had mainly come to the resort for the snow boarding, we were determined to experience everything, so we ran through the steam room, water slide and pool at a rapid pace.

I realize now that our urge to snowboard had been built partially out of some masochistic desire to get all banged up so that we could REALLY enjoy the hot tub. Snowboarding had only been a vehicle to this exquisite form of relaxation.

Latour

The real highlight of this trip was dining at the restaurant Latour. So let's get down to it. If I had to describe the food here in one word, it would be "poetic." Not knowing enough about wine to make an educated decision and feeling quite intimidated by the epic two volume "wine list" that shook the table as they put it down. We ordered the chef's "Degustation," a seven-course meal paired with wine that would put head chef **Danny Besser's** and sommelier **John Osborne's** passions and expertise in a delicate dance that had everything to do with balance.

One after another, beautiful presentations of Oysters Rockefeller, Hamachi Sashimi, and Braised Veal Cheeks came to our table. Each dish contained an element of surprise that was more than just the sum of fine ingredients. It was the kind of attention to detail that only arises from when you truly love what you do. One of the first dishes that really floored me was the Pan-Seared Arctic Char paired with a 2007 Rielsing Kabinett. Unexpectedly light and crispy, the char's skin was a perfect contrast to the fish's smooth texture. Pan-Seared Hudson Valley Foie Gras, perhaps one of the best dishes I've ever eaten, was an exercise in restraint. The flavor was so savory and buttery that I almost asked for seconds. Then, there was the roasted loin of Colorado Lamb paired with a 2005 Le Cupole. I dove right into the plate, foolishly—devouring most of the lamb before I realized that the addition of the fresh lemon thyme risotto and haricots verts helped create a complex bouquet of flavor that was both uplifting and refreshing.

The balance between food and wine was harmonious. Only able to speak of taste, I can say that the wines felt more "a part of" each dish than "in addition to."

Latour showcases locally grown produce, artisan cheeses and breads, meat and fish from the Hudson and Delaware valleys. During warmer months, the restaurant manages its own garden. Only open for dinner, each table is seated once and only once a night—meaning diners can stay as long as they want, without worrying about getting the evil eye from a waiter.

Grand Cascades Lodge is only an hour from New York City and two and a half hours away from Philadelphia.

For more information, visit (973) 827-5996 or visit www.crystalgolfresort.com.

