

Hotel Test Drive: Woodstock Inn & Resort, VT

The Woodstock Inn & Resort has long been one of the top choices for visitors to New England, but the historic grand hotel is getting an infusion of new vitality and is now better than ever.

I know this because unlike most hotels I visit, scattered across the globe, the Woodstock Inn is within easy driving distance of my home, so I've stayed there, eaten there, played golf there and skied there repeatedly over the past two decades. During that time the venerable place had gotten tired, which as a local was sad to see, but the past few years have given the Inn a new shot in the arm and it turns out notable recent additions like the lavish spa and new restaurants are just part of a bigger facelift.

The Inn is unique in many ways, and was an original part of Laurance Rockefeller's Rockresorts collection. As part-time residents, the Rockefeller family had long ties to Woodstock, one of the most quintessential of the quintessentially quaint Vermont towns. So when Rockresorts was broken up and sold, the family kept this one property that was especially near and dear to them, and set up a non-profit, the Woodstock Foundation, that owns it. There are every few such arrangements in the country's hospitality industry and when the Inn makes a profit, everything above capital improvements goes to the Foundation. The Rockefellers were also instrumental in bringing Vermont's first and only National Park to Woodstock – and it is within walking distance of the Inn.



While not quite as well known, the Woodstock Inn is cut from the same classic, full-service cloth as grand resorts like the Homestead and Greenbrier. It has extensive facilities, including its own downhill ski resort, Suicide Six, a large Nordic ski area, extensive hiking and mountain biking trails, a large fitness and sports center with gym, classes, indoor and outdoor tennis and even a croquet center with first-class greenswards. Rockefeller formed a lifelong alliance with fabled golf course designer Robert Trent Jones, Sr., and Jones did the Inn's course along with his other Rockresort gems such as Hawaii's Mauna Kea. But unlike its grand hotel siblings, the Woodstock Inn has the advantage of being firmly planted in the middle of a wonderful town: it sits smack on the classic New England village green that is the center of Woodstock, flanked on its other sides by shops, eateries and art galleries, all within an easy stroll of the front door. However, this location is also a bit of a weakness as the golf course and sports center are slightly removed from the main building. For golf that is pretty typical of resorts, and the clubhouse is less than a mile away. The sports center is a bit further and this minor inconvenience makes it far less likely that a guest will go for a run on a treadmill since it means getting in the car or taking a resort shuttle. However, the upside is lots of space for golf, skiing and facilities, plus having the town at your disposal. Rockefeller even acquired the pastoral hillsides surrounding the Inn and golf course to protect the views.

The biggest recent physical improvements were the addition of a new main restaurant and very much full service spa, as good as any in Vermont, which opened nearly four years ago. Built as an extension of the main Inn building, it has full men's and women's locker facilities with steam rooms, and an outdoor courtyard with co-ed whirlpool bath and sauna. Products are first rate and the treatment menu includes seasonal specials with Vermont-centric ingredients.



The lobby and public areas recently got a quick “re-accessorizing” in advance of more profound renovations.

The main eatery, now the Red Rooster, replaced a staid and rather boring hotel-style dining room with a much livelier and more urban experience. The Red Rooster has evolved in the few years it has been open, remaining physically the same but moving towards more refined cuisine, especially at dinner. Lunch features satisfying upmarket comfort foods such as a cast iron skillet of rich lobster mac & cheese or burger of grass fed beef from a local farm, while dinner has more refined entrees, focused around proteins like veal chop, steak or fresh fish augmented with ultra-local veggies and sides. The concept is self-described as “Chef Driven, Farmland Inspired New England Cuisine.” The resort's more casual Richardson Tavern has also moved local with an emphasis on Vermont products, with a plan to source over 90% of the ingredients from the Green Mountain State.

New General Manager Gary Thulander arrived just 10 months ago, after stints at several top tier luxury resorts such as Scottsdale's legendary The Boulders and St. Lucia's stunning Jade Mountain, a rare *Forbes Hotels I Love* selection ([read about Jade Mountain here](#)). He has quickly put his imprint on the place, starting with improved service and culinary offerings, as well as new activities to give guests more choices.



The Woodstock Inn operates a large organic garden that supplies its restaurant, and also offers gardening classes and tours to guests.

“We want to be the top resort in New England, and we want to distinguish ourselves from other resorts through quality of service, food and activities,” Thulander told me. I recently stayed at the Inn again as his guest, and while subtle, the service improvements were obvious, from the now attentive front door staff through to the welcome call I got from the hotel operator just after checking in asking if my room was satisfactory and updating me on the days’ scheduled activities, including complimentary afternoon tea in the conservatory. Both the call and the tea, very popular with families thanks to fresh baked cookies, are very nice touches.

Thulander has championed the development of a large organic garden, a coupe of acres and growing, that from spring to fall supplies the Red Rooster with much of its produce, and in an era where “farm to table” is already almost a cliché they really do it right, with the chef and master gardener collaborating from before planting season on what to grow and when. The dressing on my salad, a puree of house grown sweet peas and extra virgin olive oil, was one of the best dressings I have ever tasted, and delicacies like stuffed zucchini blossoms abound. “I brought in a new F&B director who I had worked with at The Boulders,” said Thulander, and she has revamped the menus at both dining spots completely – for the better.

The garden itself is now an attraction, offering a weekly class in organic gardening, which has proven popular in its first season. Guests who book a garden package get a bouquet of fresh cut flowers from the garden in their rooms, breakfast, and the lunchtime 2-hour class. There are also tours of the garden, scheduled and self-guided, at other times. This and a new mountain biking program with a fleet of new bikes and guided or self-guided options on the resort’s trail system, for everyone from beginners to experts, were the first two new activities added. This winter will see a new snowshoeing program in conjunction with leading manufacturer Tubbs and a new cross-country ski program with Fischer. “It’s really important to me to bring in these top brands that have excellent equipment and expertise as partners.” The Inn owns a cabin on nearby Mt. Tom, a popular town park and hiking spot, and this winter will do a weekly snowshoe dinner where up to 16 guests can snowshoe a mile and a half to the cabin with a resort chef, who will then cook dinner in the cabin, and they will all return by headlamp.

The bigger picture project is a five year reworking of the resort’s entire master plan with architect and interior designer Paul Duesing, whose portfolio ranges from Four Seasons hotels to Cabo’s One & Only Palmilla and the Caribbean’s Cap Juluca. Duesing already oversaw a quick fix “re-accessorizing” of the lobby and public areas in advance of a more extensive renovation of these spaces. The large outdoor pool area also got a service upgrade and now offers poolside

cocktails and beverages, making it much more of a social center. The next big change will be the addition of an “adult game room” and sports bar to Richardson’s Tavern, complete with pool tables, table top shuffleboard, retro pinball machines and current model Wii and Xbox, along with half a dozen large flatscreen TVs and full Tavern food and beverage service. The Inn has long had its quiet niches, including the conservatory and library, but lacked any sort of energetic nightlife. The new bar will be completed in November in time for the busy holiday and ski season (in addition to its own small mountain, the Inn is less than 30 minutes from Killington, Vermont’s largest ski resort). Future plans include six new themed luxury suites and renovations of the restaurants, lobby, reception and all common areas.



A current suite at the Woodstock Inn. Upcoming plans call for the construction of 6 new luxury suites.

The best days are still ahead but changes to date have made a real difference, even though many are seemingly minor upgrades. The budget for maintenance at the golf course was increased, and while the course retains the same layout, I have played it many times over the years and can say it has never been in better shape. Likewise, the resort is expanding its terrain park at the family friendly Suicide Six ski resort for this winter, and during the week, all room rates include

free lift tickets and shuttles, a nice amenity few hotels can match. It is also refreshing that there is none of the nickel and diming often found in high-end hotels: parking is free and ultra-convenient, so is Wifi, every room has Keurig coffee makers plus a morning lobby setup, the afternoon tea and cookies are included, there are fleet of free loaner town bikes, plenty of electric outlets and no “resort fee” or other similar hidden extras. Many room packages include breakfast, which is an expansive and higher quality daily buffet on par with many hotels Sunday brunch, complete with omelet station and plenty of choices.

The Woodstock Inn & Resort is not a white glove luxury property in the style of a Peninsula or Four Seasons, and its rural character can be charming or lacking, depending on your perspective. It seemed to have a lot of new employees still learning the ropes, so to a degree your experience will be affected through luck of the draw based on who you get as waiter or front desk clerk. Room amenities are adequate rather than luxurious, with the notable exception of the thin and minuscule bath towels, more like those I’d expect in a Motel 6 than a luxury property. But overall the Inn does deliver a lot of bang for the buck, in a great setting, and from both a physical and service perspective it just keeps getting better.

PROS: Great in town location; first-rate spa; high-quality farm to table cuisine with vast chef’s garden; improved service; golf course in excellent condition; Nordic and alpine skiing; new activity programs and classes; good value.

CONS: Some key facilities, most notably the gym, are off-site; wide variety of experience among staff; low quality towels; some major enhancements still years away.