

Where Modernity Meets the Past

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by Cathleen Nine

Sitting on a velvet couch in the magnificently restored dome of the West Baden Springs Hotel, one can almost feel the presence of the past visitors, wearing their finest evening gowns and suits.

Hidden in the rolling hills of southern Indiana, the town of French Lick is home to the historic West Baden Springs Hotel, which re-opened in May 2007 after a 75-year hiatus.

West Baden, which is open year-round for guests looking for elegance, sophistication and fine dining, is unparalleled in Hoosier country for its amenities and impressive past. When walking into the hotel, visitors are greeted by a plush setting reminiscent of a glorious past.

Nothing, however, compares to the sight of the dome. On sunny days, the light streams in and creates the perfect, peaceful atmosphere, framed by various luxurious couches, inviting chairs and even chess sets to draw visitors into a game of wits. Guests can choose to stay in a balcony room that looks out over the serene lobby for the complete experience.

The hotel, with its iconic dome, opened in 1902 after a fire destroyed the first hotel. The dome, which was the largest free-standing dome in the world for 11 years, caused the hotel to be dubbed by the press as the "eighth world wonder."

The history of the area extends further with the alleged discovery of the hot springs by Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark. The hot springs, which people believed had healing powers, was a powerful incentive for people to visit as early as 1832, when the first hotel was opened in the vicinity. In its heyday, the resort attracted many famous visitors like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Al Capone and the Rockefellers, not only for the healing springs, but for the opulent setting and idyllic grounds. It is definitely not hard to see why such celebrities were drawn to West Baden Springs.

The new hotel seeks to capture its former glory. The hot springs can still be a part of a visitor's experience, the natatorium has re-opened, the hotel lobby has been restored faithfully, and the extensive gardens have been re-created to resemble the gardens of the past.

Visitors to the West Baden Springs hotel can enjoy a full spa and salon experience as well as entertainment at the nearby French Lick resort and casino. Transportation is provided between West Baden Springs and the casino.

Guests hoping to whet their appetites can do so at West Baden Springs Hotel. West Baden Springs features Sinclair's in the hotel's original dining area. Reservations are required for Sinclair's, which serves upscale Italian dining. In the morning and afternoon, Sinclair's has fare that is less fancy. Ballard's Lounge in the dome area allows visitors to enjoy cocktails and less formal food. Xanadu is the place to go when visitors have a craving for ice cream or coffee.

The hotel and nearby casino grounds are not only home to well-tended gardens, but also a world-class golf course. The Donald Ross Golf Course has quite a history, including hosting the PGA Championship in 1924. The course was opened in 1917 and has been restored to its former luster in the same spirit as the dome and grounds have been refurbished.

The course was designed by noted architect Donald Ross who included 35 bunkers and lush rolling hills into his design. The course has recently undergone a massive \$4.6 million renovation. With this new design the course now plays 7,000 yards linked together with the original par 70 course. The course also has a PGA professional on staff for guests looking to ramp up their game.

West Baden Springs Hotel is a haven for relaxation and rest. From the spectacular dome setting that will awe even the most cynical traveler to the tranquil grounds, one can find peace. All this peace comes with a price, however. The economical traveler should consider doing research on off-season rates, which are significantly lower. Prices aside, West Baden Springs Hotel is not a vacation easily forgotten.