

Green hotels offer close to a peak ecological experience

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Tourism heats up but the goal is cool carbon footprints

By Diane Foulds, Globe Correspondent | December 7, 2008

"When the well is dry, we learn the worth of water." The card, with its Benjamin Franklin aphorism, is hard to ignore in the bath of a guest room at Thistledown Inn, a bed-and-breakfast in Morrisville. To reinforce the message, it explains where the inn gets its tap water, how much fluoride, chlorine, and sodium hydroxide are added, and where it ranks on the purity scale (relatively high).

The eco-cards, as innkeeper Sheila Tymon calls them, address everything from composting to carbon dioxide emissions. In one, she offers to share recipes. Not for muffins or souffles, mind you, but for the nontoxic cleaners she uses. At breakfast, guests learn the provenance of their apple slices and egg and cheddar casserole. Occasionally she takes them to a farm, and regularly offers beekeeping lessons out back.

The challenge, Tymon says, is to offer stewardship information in "a nonpreachy way." She is more informed than most; she teaches environmental sciences at Peoples Academy, the local high school.

Such green-themed hospitality might seem unusual, but in Vermont, it is rapidly becoming the norm. As an income source, tourism is outstripping the agriculture that the state so passionately espouses. Yet with the encroachment of Wal-Marts and condominium developments, existential worries are creeping to the door of the hospitality industry. Twice since 1993 the National Trust for Historic Preservation has placed Vermont on its list of the nation's 11 Most Endangered Places. In 1998 the state struck back, launching the Green Hotels in the Green Mountain State program. So far, it has conferred green certification on 82 out of 985 establishments and designated another six as "environmental partners." Partners have met basic composting, recycling, and energy-conservation levels but have yet to draft an environmental management plan for how they will further shrink their carbon footprint.

According to Peter Crawford, one of the program's two coordinators, such plans are relatively easy for a standard B&B, but more involved for larger resorts. The Woodstocker Inn is an example of the former. Its British proprietors, David Livesley and Dora Foschi, stock their nine guest rooms with organic soaps and their breakfasts are made from organic, locally-produced ingredients. Part of the reason they chose Vermont was its green ethic, Livesley explained, "but we were going to run a green inn whether there was an organization or not." Livesley believes the state's hospitality industry is among the nation's greenest.

As for resorts, Crawford praised the Trapp Family Lodge for composting "everything that comes out of its kitchen." He also hailed the new Stowe Mountain Lodge, a sparkling 139-room luxury complex with a golf course and custom-built alpine village at the base of Mount Mansfield. The facility, disparaged by detractors as out of scale for the fragile ecosystem of Vermont's highest mountain, diverts 70 percent of its waste stream from area landfills, Crawford said, "which is incredible. The state average is about 30 percent."

Another ecological trailblazer is the newly refurbished Hermitage Inn, an 11-room spa on a secluded road in West Dover. Jim and Donna Barnes bought the property a year ago and installed a solar system that not only meets the inn's electric and hot water needs, but occasionally feeds energy back to the grid. From the dining room you can see a row of grayish, 15-foot panels stretching 144 feet across a field. Another set is on the roof.

These environmental self-starters are diverse. The green-certified list includes '50s-style motels, boxy-looking chains, and the state's best-known resorts, like the Woodstock Inn in Woodstock, and the Inn at Shelburne Farms, a conservation leader.

For most of these establishments, energy efficiency is common sense. Eli Enman, whose family took over Huntington's 877-acre Sleepy Hollow Inn ski and touring center in 1999, spent 10 months bringing it up to standard. He blanketed the drafty, oil-hungry lodge in foam insulation and converted it to wood-pellet heat. That alone saved \$2,000 in annual fuel expenses. There are recycling bins in the eight guest rooms. Drive up in a hybrid, electric, or renewable-energy vehicle, and you'll get a free day pass. Enman has a biodiesel-fueled tractor and Volkswagen, and drives an electric car. His wife, Kasie, has a hybrid that gets 70 miles per gallon on the highway. Their home is solar-paneled, which has reduced the electric bill to \$6 a month, making Enman long for the day that he can install passive solar on the lodge. For a retrofitted inn, he said, "I think this is one of the most efficient in the state."

But for sheer scale, nothing tops Chester.

All but one of the town's 15 lodgings qualify as green hotels. Though its population barely exceeds 3,300, enough visitors flow into this picturesque town from surrounding ski areas to keep occupancy high. The greening grew out of the Chester Innkeepers Association, a mostly social organization founded in 1984. Jo-Ann Jorgensen joined it in 2005 after moving from Denmark to open the Park Light Inn. She weatherized, insulated, installed low-flow toilets and showerheads, dispensed with bottled water and individually packaged toiletries, introduced a towel-reuse program, and more. One of the biggest paybacks came early: Her heating bill dropped by 40 percent, even though she had added square footage. And her enthusiasm proved infectious. Within two years, the association voted unanimously to require green hotel status as a condition for membership.

"The impact has been tremendous," Jorgensen said. "It has changed all types of things in the community." The association is setting up a cooperative to purchase Vermont-made soaps and shampoos, and establishing the Chester Green Business Alliance, the next step toward the creation of what they hope will be Vermont's first green town. Already about a quarter of Chester's businesses have adopted environmental management plans.

The state's restaurants have been slower to go green. Despite a thriving chef-farmer partnership and an active localvore movement, only two establishments are waving green banners. A deli called Think! opened this year at Burlington's ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center. Half cafe, half exhibit, it's a model of waste reduction, challenging visitors to consider every speck of trash they discard. A few blocks up the hill, the Magnolia Bistro takes a quieter approach.

Shannon Reilly, 32, who runs the brick-walled breakfast and lunch spot with his partner, July Sanders, 28, said the two didn't go environmental for marketing reasons, but because of what they witnessed during their years working restaurant jobs.

"It was a really wasteful industry," Reilly said. "We would see, like, huge containers of trash going out twice a day. We basically wanted to take how we live at home and put it into our business plan," one of fair-trade coffee and organic, heavily vegetarian dishes. "Some things cost more. But in the end, it comes back to you."

Diane Foulds can be reached at dianefoulds@burlingtontelecom.net. ■