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ON THE COVER

SHEILA C JOHNSON

US FILM PRODUCER AND OWNER OF SALAMANDER RESORT & SPA

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Johnson is reportedly one of the first African-American billionaires in the US

Mane attraction

The US Salamander Resort & Spa, owned by *The Butler* film producer Sheila C Johnson, is fuelled by a combination of equestrian passion and business ambition, but it has wellness at its heart

Tucked away in a quiet corner of America's finest horse country, Salamander Resort & Spa near Middleburg, Virginia, has an illustrious history for a new resort. In the early 60s, the small historic town was the beloved retreat of president John F Kennedy and his First Lady, who would spend hours riding on the land where the property now stands.

So when Sheila C Johnson – co-founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET) and executive producer of recent Hollywood smash-hit *The Butler* – first moved to Middleburg in 1996, she became just one in a long list of powerful people to be drawn to the area. Attracted to the rolling countryside just an hour from Washington DC by her daughter Paige's love of horses, the renowned entrepreneur bought Salamander Farms, a sprawling estate just outside

the town and transformed it into a family home-come-equestrian paradise.

Eighteen years later, the move has proved serendipitous. Paige, now an Olympic show-jumper, continues to train at the estate while Johnson uses it as a base of operations for her own personal passion: Salamander Hotels & Resorts. Salamander is a chain of luxury properties of which the Middleburg property, unveiled last August, is the fourth to open.

In 2001, the sale of BET reportedly made Johnson and her then husband Robert Johnson the country's first African-American billionaires. Since then, Johnson has divorced, remarried and invested her considerable funds and energy into a diverse range of ventures. As well as her interests in the film industry, she owns a private jet business and three professional sports teams, plus a café and high-end

market shop in Middleburg. But it's the hospitality enterprise – and in particular, the Salamander Resort & Spa – that is the heart of Johnson's empire.

ICONIC RETREAT

One of the only luxury resorts to open in the US last year, the project has been a long time in the works. It was in 2003 that a 340-acre (138-hectare) tract of land came up for sale just a few miles from Salamander Farms, and Johnson immediately knew what she had to do. "From the moment I stepped foot on this serene land over 10 years ago, I fell in love with it and envisioned creating an iconic retreat," she said at the grand opening.

From the outset, the property was always going to incorporate a world-class equestrian facility. But unlike many resorts, where the '...and spa' adjunct



Johnson is a devoted spa-goer and her daughter is an Olympic show-jumper – these passions are evident throughout the US\$130m property which was one of the only US luxury resorts to open last year



With its many outdoor spaces, the spa makes the most of the beautiful surrounding landscapes



Johnson was acutely aware that despite the abundance of wealth in the Washington DC area, there were no great spa destinations within a reasonable driving distance of the city

is exactly that, for Johnson it was the spa that was a driving force. A devoted spa-goer herself, she was acutely aware that despite the abundance of wealth in the Washington DC area, there were no great spa destinations within a reasonable driving distance of the city.

Bringing together a team of designers that included acclaimed interior designer Thomas Pheasant, WATG and Blu Spas, Johnson's vision was not simply to create a resort with a beautiful spa, but to integrate spa and wellness – a new concept at that time – into the fabric of the resort, with a strong emphasis on indoor-outdoor spaces, the natural setting and a programme of activities and events to pull it all together. “We all felt at the time that this was one of those rare projects,” says Cary Collier, principal of Blu Spas. “It had the location, people and the resources behind it to do something extraordinary.”

While Johnson's commitment to spa and wellness didn't change, the scale of the project did. It evolved from a much smaller inn-style development into a 168-bedroom resort. Inevitably, locals were worried about its impact on the community and the environment.

Then, in 2005, Johnson set up Salamander Hotels & Resorts – both to manage the Middleburg project and to seek out others – and recruited hospitality veteran Prem Devadas as president. Previously managing director of a hotel collection that included the world-renowned Sanctuary Hotel on Kiawah Island, Devadas brought to the table not only his expert knowledge of luxury resorts but also his diplomatic skills. Together, he and Johnson were able to convince community leaders that the development would be an asset to the town and wider area. Since then, 200 of the property's 340 acres have been placed in a

conservation easement and the building has been registered for LEED certification.

The next major obstacle was the global recession, which delayed construction for at least 20 months. Prior to the slowdown, however, the company had already acquired and redeveloped Innisbrook Resort in Tampa Bay, Florida. Two years ago, it then took on management contracts for two more properties: Reunion Resort and Hammock Beach Resort, also in Florida. Finally, the long-awaited Virginian flagship – reported to represent upwards of US\$130m (€93m, £78m) of investment, although the company won't confirm – opened its doors in mid 2013.

AMERICAN CLASSIC

From a commercial perspective, Salamander Resort & Spa couldn't be better positioned. In addition to being the country's unofficial equestrian capital, ▶

CELEBRITY SPA



Blu Spas was inspired by *Seabiscuit*, the film of the 1930s-era racehorse, when designing the spa. Overall, it has a luxurious yet homely feel



► Middleburg has the east coast's largest concentration of wineries. It is also just an hour's drive from DC and 35 minutes from Dulles International Airport, making it easily accessible to DC residents and foreign travellers. Thanks to a significant investment in conferencing and recreational facilities, the resort is also well set up to cater for both groups and leisure guests.

Despite its size and ambition, however, the property is neither grand nor imposing. Inspired by Johnson's renovated 19th-century home at Salamander Farms, the architecture is designed to complement the surrounding countryside, while the aged-looking interiors evoke the sense of being in somebody's home, albeit a very luxurious one. "While there's no doubt it's refined and beautiful, it's not stuffy, it's very warm and inviting," says Devadas. "That's something people are surprised by: how well it fits into this landscape and how comfortable it is."

Central to the resort's recreational offering is its full-service equestrian centre, with a 22-stall stable, riding arena and nine paddocks, plus miles of trails, riding instruction and clinics held by the area's



President Prem Devadas has worked in the US hospitality industry for 25 years

world-class riders. The passion for all things horse does not stop there, however: it's a design accent throughout the resort, from the horse cut-outs in the ironwork of every balcony to the renovation of a 150-year-old

stallion barn. In another quirky touch, the 17 suites are grouped into equestrian categories (Dressage, Blue Ribbon and Grand Prix) and individually named for Paige Johnson's favourite horses.

Given the collegiate approach to the resort's design, it's no surprise that the same principles are also in evidence in the spa, which consequently puts a strong emphasis on stone, wood and water. "We wanted it to be luxurious but not stuffy, not glitzy," says Devadas. "And we wanted something that would really sit within this equestrian vernacular."

Describing it as "the Ralph Lauren approach to spa", Collier cites the 2003 film *Seabiscuit* as an influence: "The movie showed these incredible olde-world horse barns from around the country and when I saw them, I just thought, this is it, this feels right."

One example of how this has been realised is the entrances to the male and female locker rooms: octagonal openings that immediately evoke a barn's frame. The other defining characteristic of the spa is its abundance of outdoor spaces. Half of the 14 treatment rooms have