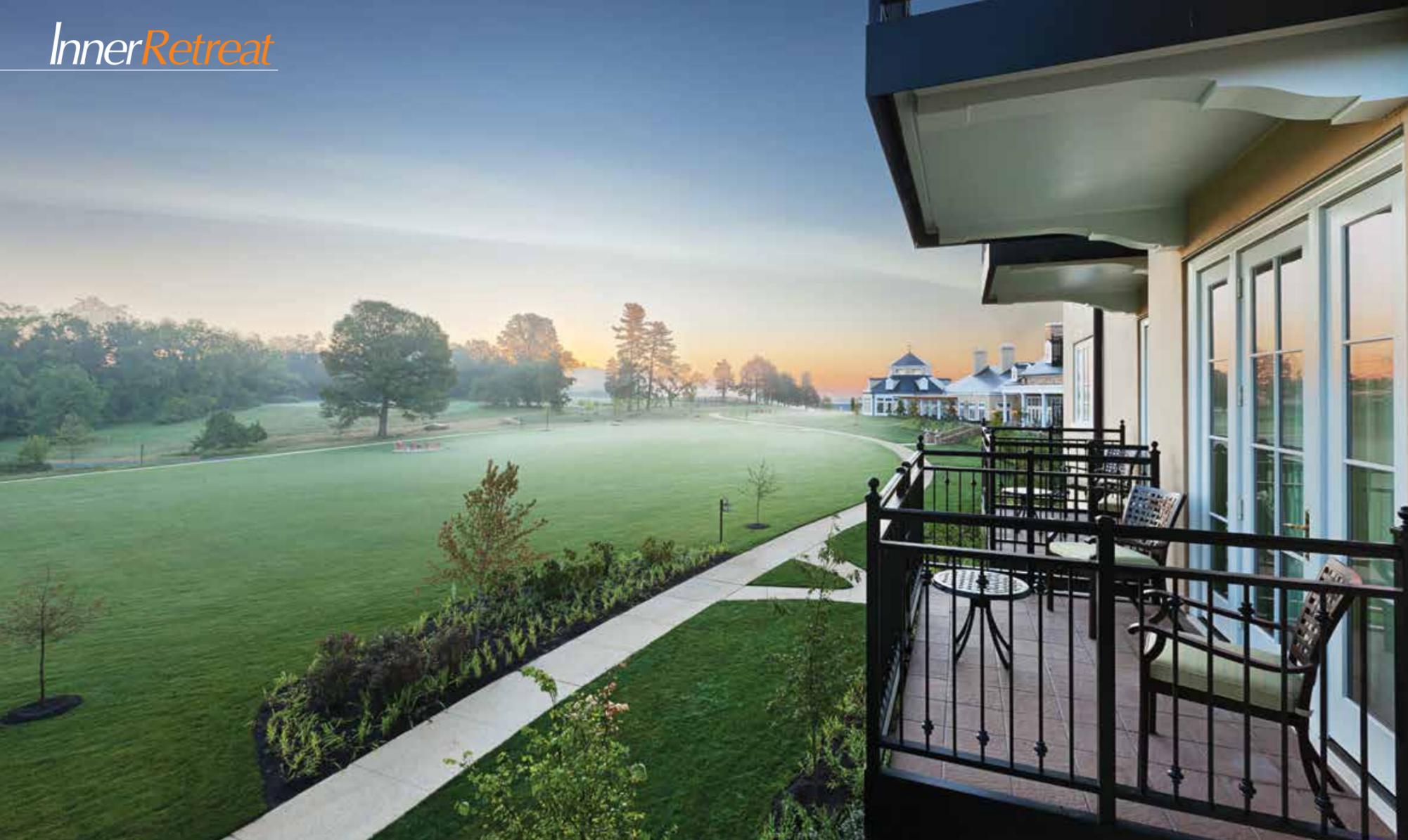


Saddle up at a Horse Country Spa

Nestled within the historic village of Middleburg in Virginia, USA, Salamander Resort & Spa is more than a peaceful destination resort. Part spa and part equestrian centre, this is the perfect place to experience what both worlds can offer together and reconnect with the land, nature, history and yourself Writer Bernard Burt



The relationships between horses, humans and nature can equip riders with life-changing leadership skills

to a midweek, four-night stay. Settling into my spacious room, I absorb the view of the meadow and nature preserve from my balcony. The sitting area is perfect for breakfast or watching TV. Accented by leather furniture, canopied beds, silk drapery and fine linen embroidered with equestrian motifs, this is country living in style. Even the bathroom is vast, with separate shower and bathtub, plus bath salts to add when you want a relaxing soak.

DAY 1

Tea is served as my programme is planned in the spa lounge. Estheticians offer custom-blended massage oil to match my mood; a menu is presented for spa lunch on the swimming pool terrace. Noting that the indoor lap pool is reserved for adults until nine in the morning, I opt for a swim, followed by the signature Salamander

massage.

Escorted to a locker room, I change into robe and slippers to relax on a heated ceramic lounge chair. There are separate but equal facilities for men and women. Each has a big whirlpool, steam sauna, showers that simulate summer mist and grooming amenities.

Botanical and organic treatments on the spa menu feature Natura Bissé from Spain, and Alchimie Forever from Switzerland. Spa Director Penny Kriel, a veteran of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel spa in Washington, tells me, "Here we are focused on proper balance of skincare for an outdoor lifestyle, as well as the stress in Washington."

On a heated massage table, I enjoy the Rider's Relief massage concentrated on muscles strained by trail rides and exercise. Other themed treatments include deep tissue Golfer's Massage, using golf balls to help align the body, and Bamboo Massage where the therapist uses warm bamboo stalks to give a deep combination of heat and pressure to release toxins from the body caused by stress.

THIS PAGE: Elegantly designed suite at Salamander Resort & Spa; outdoor loungers at the Salamander Spa. OPPOSITE PAGE: The resort wakes up to a mesmerising sight



Having communicated with horses at the Miraval resort in Arizona, I discovered a new world of equestrian adventure at the Salamander Resort & Spa in Virginia. Since my experience on horseback is limited, I am curious to see how the spa and equestrian centre enhance each other, and to enjoy the farm-fresh food and wine.

Just being here has a calming effect. Getting out of Washington, DC to horse country is an easy hour's drive, and even less if you arrive at Washington's Dulles International Airport and pre-arrange to be met by a chauffeur-driven private car.

The historic, one-stop-light village of Middleburg, Virginia, welcomes me to another century. With ancient stone buildings tucked into rolling hills and meadows, Middleburg is the heart of

Virginia horse country. There are no chain stores, no Starbucks; life revolves around horses.

Across lush green fields, I can visualise Jacqueline Kennedy riding with the Middleburg Hunt, dressed in traditional red coat and black velvet cap. On the main street, Elizabeth Taylor and her husband US Senator John Warner were often spotted in the Tap Room at the Red Fox Inn, once a stagecoach stop on the road to the western border of Virginia.

Little has changed in town. On the main drag, appropriately named Washington Street, several blocks of boutiques and art galleries cater to well-heeled tourists. But when television channel co-owner Sheila C Johnson acquired a farm near the town centre, the concept for Salamander Resort & Spa was born.

Looking like it has been there since colonial times, the resort opened in 2013. A winding driveway leads to a horseshoe-shaped courtyard where you are ushered into the main lodge. Blending past and present, it feels like visiting rich relatives in a grand manor house. Furnished in muted colours of silk and linen, accented by antiques from the Johnson collection, it is both majestic and relaxed. A wood-panelled library and cosy bar flank the chandeliered Great Room. Tall French doors open to a terrace overlooking a meadow where riders enter a network of trails. Around a corner, the mood subtly changes: water splashes in a rock-walled entry to the spa, focused on a Zen-inspired painting commissioned for the space. Instantly relaxed, I am ready to spa.

In addition to a daily programme of exercise classes, my treatments are tailored

Salamander mud detox and mineralisation treatments are unique in this region.

The Cure uses enzymatic heat to open the pores and botanical products to soothe, moisturise and revitalise the skin, creating a luminous appearance. A Moroccan-inspired Rasul chamber is steam-infused as you apply three types of mud to cleanse and detox the body. The Asian Fusion, a two-hour ritual inspired by Traditional Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda includes a massage.

Exclusive to the Salamander Spa is the Salamander Seasonal Ritual derived from native plants, flowers and essential oils,

an excursion with one of the resort's car drivers. Great to taste, relax and let him do the driving.

The Middleburg Hunt and the Gold Cup races are much-discussed. Sushi and small plates are on the bar menu, and you can have a formal afternoon tea, but I'm cooking my dinner in the culinary studio. Tutored by one of the chefs, the two-hour session features fish from nearby Atlantic waters and Chesapeake Bay. After a demonstration of how to select and fillet fish, I get to cook a delicious local rockfish.

Calories don't count here. There is no spa cuisine menu, but if you mention

THIS PAGE: Stable at the Equestrian Center. OPPOSITE PAGE: Salamander's spacious courtyard



prepared by a local alchemist. Botanical blooms and organic fruits, as well as herbs from the spa garden, are blended in this four-season treatment, lasting from 80 minutes to nearly three hours.

Afterwards, I head for the Gold Cup Wine Bar, a convivial spot for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Local residents join visitors for a game of billiard. Over a glass of sparkling wine from southern Virginia, I learn that Middleburg vintners' success at blending wines has produced a blossoming industry near the town. Advised to pack a picnic and visit the wineries, I plan

dietary restrictions to the hostess, meals will be tailored to your specifications. Join the chefs in their kitchen garden to pick vegetables and fruit. A favourite Southern specialty worth trying for breakfast is grits – a cereal derived from corn – that is cooked with butter and milk, sometimes served with boiled shrimp and gingerbread. Well, one doesn't come to loose weight!

DAY 2

Strolling to the Equestrian Center, I enter a classic wooden stable. Leather saddles (English or Western), a tack room where

riders are outfitted by the resident staff under the gaze of a dozen horses, several cats and dogs and a dozen gentle horses occupy this pristine place.

Equestrian Programme Director Sheryl Jordan explains the synergy between horses and riders. A trainer for the past 40 years, Jordan believes the relationships between horses, humans and nature can equip riders with life-changing leadership skills. Even non-riders like me are welcome to Jordan's Equa-Spective Experience.

First, we discuss protocol and how to communicate with a horse, and even



where to stand before mounting. The horses respond gently, and I offer treats in their feed box (never feed the horse directly). The full programme includes grooming and leading, instruction in the outdoor oval and optional riding bareback or with a saddle.

Salamander's equestrian programme has opened a new phase for children and their parents. So I join a group for an introduction to 'natural horsemanship', what more popular culture and movies call 'horse whispering'. We walk on foot with a horse (Patrick) in the round pen. In the span of two hours, Sheryl Jordan has taught us more about horse behaviour and using body language than I learnt in my previous

time around horses.

Jordan and her staff unite horse and rider with the ultimate goal of developing leadership expertise and self-confidence. The multi-level Equi-Spective Experience can be scheduled in four-hour or eight-hour sessions, ranging in price from US\$200 to US\$450 per person in group session, or from US\$125 for private sessions lasting one hour, tailored to your ability.

The horse's response to my body language encourages confidence. There is something calming as we bond. I'm convinced we learn more from the horses than good grooming. Perhaps I'll go on the guided trail ride tomorrow.

DAY 3

Glistening in morning sunlight, the meadow awakens. Yoga is scheduled amid the stables at the Equestrian Center, but I am not prepared for yoga on horseback.

Doing down-dog stretches, a rider calmly trots past. Yoga on horseback is part body language, part mind-body training, I'm told. The horse's body warmth adds calm support, and spotters are on each side if your balance falters.

Staying in shape with a workout on the spa's Life Fitness equipment set up my visit to town. While it's a short walk, you can ride Salamander's horse-drawn carriage to Washington Street. Shop for antiques, a



THIS PAGE: The Salamander Spa's vitality whirlpool. OPPOSITE PAGE: Swimming pool at dawn

reserve. Trained guides share insights on the local flora and fauna, as well as the geology and history of the area as we zip along at 20 miles per hour. Participants must be eight years and up and weigh between 75 to 250 pounds to join the fun.

Checking out of my room, I have the rest of the day to enjoy the spa and swimming pool. Zumba dances in the swimming pool are scheduled, or I could

The Salamander Seasonal Ritual is derived from native plants, flowers and essential oils, prepared by a local chemist

run on the meadow's paved oval, borrow a bike, or join a trail ride. Lunch is served poolside from the spa menu or Harriman's, just remember to add gratuity; prices for spa services, meals and resort activities do not include tax or tips.

For my final spa treatment, a moisturising facial is suggested. I opt for the La Alternativa treatment, which uses Natura Bissé products to target areas of the face that need special

new riding outfit, or artwork. My itinerary starts at the National Sporting Library & Museum, housed in historic homes, to learn about equestrian, fishing and field sport history. The librarian tells me that previous owners of the Salamander site, Ambassador and Mrs Averell Harriman often hosted the Middleburg Hunt. Salamander, however, was the codename used by another owner during wartime exploits with the French resistance.

At the Red Fox Inn, learn about Civil War battles in the area while enjoying fish and chips or hamburgers. Mix with locals at the Salamander Market, a showplace for food, wine and gifts for the home, where you can picnic on the porch and people-watch.

Celebrating the food and wine of Virginia's Piedmont region, my final dinner at Salamander's barn-like Harriman's restaurant features Amish chicken. Portions

are huge, made for sharing. From breakfast omelettes, sausages and eggs Benedict made with crabmeat from Chesapeake Bay, to grits, shrimp and local game, Harriman's earns four stars. Just don't expect spa cuisine.

DAY 4

For my final day, a new outing will take me whizzing through the treetops.

Reaching new heights, Salamander's treetop tour is a great way to climax your visit.

Unlike the equestrian experience, this adventure requires no training. Simply hook onto a zipline and glide through the treetops. The two-hour eco-friendly tour includes aerial walkways and intermediate viewing stations within the resort's nature



attention rather than just cleansing. The products in the Natura Bissé Inhibit Collection produce immediate results, reducing expression lines and wrinkles, leaving the face smooth and rejuvenated.

Feeling relaxed and refreshed, I stop at Salamander Market for some cheese and paté before I make my way home.

The beauty of a retreat at Salamander Resort & Spa is that nothing is required. Your programme can be as busy and challenging as you like, or simply a refreshing interlude on your way to business or a conference in Washington. An ideal place to overcome jet lag, it's also perfect for a family gathering.

Salamander is not just a destination, it is a historical landmark at the crossroads of what is emerging as a new breed of luxurious resorts that reconnect one with the land, with nature, history, local organic foods and wines, and with yourself.

Part spa, part equestrian centre, Salamander Resort is larger than the sum of its parts. Through the vision of Sheila Johnson, the parts harmonise, forming a place of natural beauty where the joy of well-being is experienced every day.

www.salamanderresort.com



THIS PAGE: Energising massage at the Salamander Spa. OPPOSITE PAGE: The resort's sophisticated interior reminds one of the colonial times

Planning a horse country holiday at Salamander Resort & Spa

Located in Northern Virginia, the Salamander Resort & Spa has sedan service from both the Dulles International Airport and Reagan National Airport. Transfers (US\$160) can be charged to your resort account or paid by credit card.

The resort's 168 spacious guest rooms are on four floors, all air conditioned. Deluxe rooms come with queen or twin beds for two to four persons, and additional beds for children can be requested, as well as connecting rooms for families.

Virginia's answer to the Kentucky Derby, the Gold Cup races take place the first Saturday in May and October (www.vagoldcup.com) at Great Meadow, a short drive from Salamander Resort & Spa. With 50,000 spectators, women show off hats and fascinators, the frilly headgear beloved by Brits, and gentlemen dress dapper in seersucker suits,

madras trousers and sport coats. Just don't wear jeans. Characterised by lavish tailgate picnic spreads, sleek thoroughbreds, exciting hoof-pounding competition and pari-mutual wagering, action starts at 10am. Ask the concierge at Salamander Resort & Spa to arrange transportation and tickets, or contact one of the companies sponsoring hospitality tents.

Still chasing foxes, Middleburg Hunt members in full regalia with yelping dogs lead the community Christmas parade, the first Saturday in December.

The hills near Salamander are alive with music, opera and ballet. Two major summer festivals are within an hour's drive: Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts, and the Castleton Festival. Also consider a matinee at the Kennedy Center in Washington, which has Broadway musicals on stage this summer.

Washington's national monuments and museums are open daily, admission free. An excursion from Salamander with driver/guide costs US\$500 for eight hours by private car. Or explore space at the Smithsonian showplace near Dulles Airport. Tickets to major sports happenings at Verizon Center and baseball at Nationals Park can be arranged by Salamander's concierge.

Polo matches at Great Meadow begin at twilight on Saturdays from May through September. Bring a blanket and picnic basket, or reserve a railside box for six. Bring the kids! They love the massive tug o' war in the arena at half-time. And 2015 marks the opening of a new events centre. You might spot movie star Robert Duvall and his wife Luciana in the crowd (check website for schedule www.greatmeadow.org).

The Salamander Equestrian Center offers scheduled trail rides as well as personal training.