

A DREAM ACCOMPLISHED

For Sheila Johnson, the one-year anniversary of Salamander Resort and Spa culminates a decade long, \$100 million journey

BY JOHN ARUNDEL

You only turn one once," says billionaire philanthropist, media entrepreneur and hotelier Sheila Johnson.

For Johnson and her team at Salamander Resort and Spa in Middleburg, Virginia September marks a special time. It not only marks the one-year anniversary of her long-anticipated destination hotel, but the culmination of a decade-long dream and a \$100 million investment outside the tony countryside village in Loudoun County.

With Middleburg long considered one of the world's horse sporting capitals — the National Sporting Library, Glenwood Park and Great Meadow Field Events Center are just down the road — incorporating the sporting life into the design aesthetic was very much part of the final plan. Horse racing oils, equestrian sculptures and Johnson's own photography grace the walls of the well-appointed rooms, spa and public areas.

"The resort is designed to feel residential in nature and it draws architectural inspiration from my very own Salamander Farm," she says. "For example, when you enter, you encounter a living room and not a front desk. I'm also proud that we were able to blend the property into the natural environment, placing nearly 200 acres into a conservation easement and planting nearly 2,000 trees."

As expected, many of the resort's guests are drawn from the Washington metropolitan area, but a surprisingly large number of people from the northeast corridor, including leisure travelers from New York City and several Fortune 500 companies, booked stays in the first year. Business and leisure travelers, she found, were often loathe to drive or fly longer



Sheila Johnson with her dog Justice
(Photo by Justin Kriel)

distances in booking a destination stay.

Quickly adding more amenities and activities — beyond the stable built for on-property rides and for equestrians looking to book an additional room for their horse — also filled a gap for families in the region looking for a closer-in resort stacked with activities for their pent-up suburban kiddies.

"We have been able to add numerous activities since opening, including a zipline course just a few months ago which has already proved incredibly popular," Johnson says.

In the early few months last fall, some press reports and hotel connoisseurs were quick to announce a few hiccups and early challenges to the resort's opening, something not uncommon for a resort of its scale. Johnson says she learned a lot from those early days, assuaging the early critics with long-term fixes to ensure a more fulfilling stay.

"The challenges we encountered at opening were due to delays in receiving appropriate permits and not having adequate time to implement our normal training program, including prep time in the kitchen," she says. "These issues were quickly resolved, however."

Johnson's devotion to philanthropy and

community civic life, including the creation of Middleburg's inaugural film festival each October, also helped. Many have said that Johnson helped bring Middleburg into its own, making the town more cosmopolitan.

First lady Michelle Obama, her daughters and an entourage of close family friends stayed at the resort in early May, folding into their visit tours of two nearby attractions, Boxwood Winery and Greenhill Winery and Estates.

"Middleburg has always had, and always will have, its own voice," Johnson says. "Yes, I've built a resort, which has generated additional opportunities for visitors and revenue for business owners, but Middleburg is just a fabulous place to visit and live in. It's filled with engaging characters, charming retailers and beautiful spaces. What's cooler than that?" **WL**



The Spa at Salamander
(Photo by Cecilie Clausen)