

Hanging out at Connecticut's coolest treehouse

By DAVID LANSELE

DO YOU remember those "Choose Your Own Adventure" books? All the rage some years back, I was surprised to find them on the bookshelf in my hotel room, considering that I was staying at a quiet resort in the Connecticut countryside.

But, there they were, right next to a fully stocked private bar: a whole sheaf of those classic, R.A. Montgomery titles.

The odd choices in reading material didn't stop there. Downstairs, on the bedside table, lay a stack of almost-erotic comic books.

A hotel in Connecticut with a sense of humor?

Hidden in the heart of the cool, green Litchfield Hills, Winvian is in many ways very un-Connecticut, even as it remains keenly aware of its surroundings.

First off, there is the matter of the accommodation itself. My "room" is actually a treehouse, up on a sturdy, 35-foot-high platform. It's one of 19 wholly unique guest quarters scattered across 113 acres of peaceful woods near Litchfield.

THE SETTING

Litchfield, population 8,300, is a town where even boors like me tend to fear that getting out of the car might lower the tone in a way that would offend the locals.

I know a thing or two about this neighborhood, having once lived in one of the region's prettiest villages, albeit as a terribly ungrateful child, then later, as an angst-ridden teen.

Coming back, I wish I'd had at least some appreciation of the fact that it wasn't going to get much better than this. Winvian, however, isn't much like the Litchfield Hills



HIGH TIMES

LOWDOWN

GO: Winvian is located in Morris, Conn., about 95 miles from Midtown Manhattan. Rates begin at \$1,450/double and include all meals and many activities.
INFO: (860) 567-9600 or visit winvian.com

NEW + NOT

I remember. It's an entirely new idea, and frankly, I find it unbelievable that the locals are standing for it.

Then again, owner Maggie Smith seems to know exactly how to bridge the divide between the two worlds: The one she has created, and the world in which she has created it.

Humor is everywhere, here. Take, for example, the "Helicopter" cottage, which features, in a hangar-like space, a decommissioned Sikorsky that now functions as a living room.

Other surprises include the Masonic-esque "Secret Society," the factory-themed "Industry," and the sticks-and-stones "Beaver Lodge."

All themes pay homage to the region in some way or another, some are less quirky than others — each is truly memorable.

UP IN THE TREES

My own temporary residence is, in my estimation, the best of the lot. Climbing the steps and entering the two-level aerie, I'm immediately drawn back to childhood. Of course, the treehouses I played in were nothing like this.

The first floor features an open-plan bedroom; the bed's a king-size, platform arrangement in the corner. Across the room, a wood fireplace is the centerpiece for a luxurious bathing area

that includes a whirlpool tub and a steam shower for two (or four, or five).

This will do most people, but Winvian isn't about knowing when enough is enough, and at \$1,950 per cottage, per night, you wouldn't expect them to keep things within reason.

Winvian's cost includes not only full bars around the property and all your meals, it also includes a handsome in-room arrangement, with top-drawer liquor, wine, champagne, mixers, your very own ice maker and an espresso maker. There's room service, if you so desire, or you can have your meals with everyone else.

SOCIAL HOUR

I would have been perfectly content to stay in the room and have whatever dinner they could provide brought over to me, but once my travel companion learned that we couldn't get the complete multi-course dinner brought up to the treehouse, I was overruled.

The restaurant is private, serving only hotel guests.

It begins on the ground floor of the property's oldest building, the Seth Bird House (1775) and extends into a newer addition, built to blend seamlessly with the classic New England home. We sat in a masculine room at the front of the Bird building and prepared to receive that night's tasting menu.

In a haze of exhaustion, after a busy week, plus plenty of wine and the cleansing heat of the woodburning fireplace, I lost track of what was happening shortly after the lobster. I do remember that all the food was simply prepared and elegant, with no surprises. (We were, after all, in Connecticut.)

WHEN IT RAINS

I needed an excuse to not get out of bed the next morning, so wet weather was a godsend. We did manage breakfast, however, notable for the excellent baked goods and lots of good tea.

With no shortage of ways to spend what remained of our stay, we opted, because we could, to do nothing except play foosball in the downstairs lounge, followed by a vigorous round of indoor shuffleboard.

I lost, adjoining to the open bar to mix myself a drink. It was, after all, nearly noon.