

Mohonk Mtn House: cycling the historic carriage trails

By Peggy Newland

If you've ever been to Acadia and cycled the carriage trails, then you need to discover the beauty zone of bicycling on the historic trails of the Mohonk Preserve in the Hudson Valley near the Catskills. Make it a mountain weekend at the Mohonk Mountain House, which sits like a Grand Dame jewel, on 40,000 protected acres of forest, overlooking a shimmering glacial lake.

"It's like a magical mirage," I tell my husband as we circle around to the entrance of this Victorian "castle" that perches on a craggy ledge. With a hand-cut stone facade, roaring fireplaces, lakeshore porches, balconies, gables, turrets, and a sky top tower on a peak—of course, it is a National Historic Landmark. Owned and operated by the Smiley Family for over 155 years, this is a landscape protected and preserved, and an elegant "homebase" for an adventure by day, relaxation by night escape. After a quick check-in, we head out on the first of three days, exploring 85 miles of empty carriage trails, accessed directly from the hotel.

We cycle toward Trapps Cliff, after taking a side trip through Humpty Dumpty rock gardens. Jagged ledges loom over top of us as the trail cuts through slabs of granite and the views over the Catskills are seemingly endless. "Summer houses," or beautifully created cupolas creatively designed, are

situated at most viewpoints and we stop at each one we come to along the way; there are 125 unique "houses" throughout the park. Deep pockets of moss and hidden dips of cavernous granite beckons for spelunking as we pass through Laurel Ledge. Swinging vines and cedar deadfall give off Grimm's Fairy Tale vibes. We stop for a scramble between hunks of water-smoothed quartz, digging our fingers deep into moss. Soon, we are on Overcliff Road, with glacial erratics reclining in sculptural formations down the slopes. Rock climbers scuttle up slick faced ravines, their ropes dangling from ridges as we hit Undercliff Road.

"This gravel is amazing," Brian says. Graded, groomed, and sloping, this is a roller coaster of cycling happiness.

After a hoof up steep Old Minnewaska Road, we are ready for a cookie and hot cider break in the lakeside lounge. We take our homemade ginger snaps, apple fritters, and berry bars to the porch and rock in Adirondacks as we snab a sugar buzz before heading over to the cocktail-making class in the Carriage Lounge.

After a quick dip in the heated pool, we dine at the Sky Founders Dining Room and start with woodfire roasted Maitake mushrooms with tahini, lemon, chives and some baked local goat cheese with rhubarb, dipping "puff" bread into both. Then we share plates of tandoori chicken with MaMaud sauce

and grilled mahimahi with cilantro. The vibe is intimate and candlelit. Especially with desserts of chocolate Cremieux and tiramisu. That night, we sit, bundled up in blankets, on our balcony, with cognacs, toasting the stars above.

The next morning is all about wellness. Mohonk Mountain House prides itself on a well-rounded nature mindfulness program, honoring the peacefulness found in the landscapes. The Spa Motion Room has windows that let the pines, the lake, and the sunshine into a rustic wood themed space. As the Director of Mindfulness, Nina Smiley, PhD, emphasizes, "Being present in the moment where you are right now is an opportunity for insight, curiosity, creativity and a new perspective." We "refresh and renew" ourselves with vinyasa yoga, sound bathing with singing bowls, Qi Gong, and some mindful stretching and then head to the buffet breakfast for made-to-order eggs benedict with salmon, fresh fruit, homemade yogurt and plenty of coffee before our late morning cycling tour.

We zip down to Glory Hill and around Duck Pond and find the steep workout of Kleine Kill Road. The Sky Top Tower is in the distance. We realize how far we need to cycle back to the resort, but we take our time over Forest and Bridge paths, which enclose us in deep crevices filled with fern and moss. We stop for a rock scramble through tumbled boulders. The Shawangunk Mountains roll in every direction, the landscape full of bogs, red maple groves, hemlock, cedar, layered formations gray shale with hardy dwarf pine growing between cracks.

A couple hikes over to us and tells us about North Lookout Trail and off we go on a ledge ride, along a maple lined path. We sit in an exceptionally picturesque "summer house" on the edge of cliff and take a snack break with views over to the Catskills.

That afternoon, we visit



other couples, families, click glasses and fill the room with laughter. We warm up with cauliflower and onion bisque, and roasted butternut squash hummus plate, accompanied by local Finger Lake wines. Brian goes for a grilled rib eye steak with Yukon gold potatoes while I try the roasted black cod with cockles and fennel. Dessert is, of course, chocolate: a Mohonk Crunch Cake with ganache, and dark chocolate flourless mousse.

We plan to explore the cycling trails again the following morning, but that night, we stroll along the lake, headlamps glowing, as the moon rises over Sky Top Tower. From a hidden "summer cottage" above the resort, we watch a band just setting up through the windows below and we decide that the last of fall is meant for dancing under the starlight.

Courtesy photos

with Jim Clark, the curator of the Mohonk Barn Museum, and we are awe-struck by his creations inspired by the surrounding forest—hand-hewn tables, and benches, made of aged deadfall, river stones, twisted branches that curve comfortably into the most beautifully rendered furniture I've ever seen. The curator for over 50 years, Jim tells us that "the trees show me what to make," and that "he never rushes nature or forces the designs." The museum is chock full of Victorian carriages, farm machinery, and houses a Model A 1929 Ford, a one-room schoolhouse, and vintage woodworking and blacksmithing tools.

We get back just in time for "cookies" and "cock-

tails" hour, and the Lakeview Room is abuzz with hikers, walkers, and cyclists, ruddy-cheeked from a day well spent in nature. We share in the revelry and then head to the spa for a dip in the pool.

The last night is a celebration in the historic main dining room. Cathedral ceilings, picture windows, antique woodwork, candlelight, and a table by the fireplace, as

if you go

Mohonk Mountain House. www.mohonk.com.

1000 Mountain Rest Road. New Paltz, NY. Come for the historic castle views over the Catskills and stay for the "nature therapy" of the extensive carriage trails and hiking adventures. Late fall, all-inclusive specials and rates.

