SPECTATOR
LIFE

A heady tour of Vermont

Vermont's Georgian architecture and Autumnal scenery make it a haven for New Yorkers in the know

I've expanded my American vernacular substantially this weekend. The first new word I've learnt in Vermont is 'crunchy.' If someone is 'crunchy' they make their own granola, support Green Peace, exist on gluten-free soda bread and carry their children in a cloth papoose. My second is 'heady.' I'm not a hundred percent sure of the difference although 'heady' seems more hemp necklace-wearing, tie-dyed T-shirt owning and, particularly in Vermont, an avid listener of the 'Grateful Dead.'

Burlington, the home of Vermont University and the first stop on our tour of the state, seemed a little bit of both. At least that's how it felt perching at the bar of the popular brunch spot, 'Monarch and the Milkweed'. The colourful variety of CBD infused chocolates next tothe pain au chocolates seemed pretty 'heady,' although the clientele tucking into 'smoked trout cake doughnuts' were perhaps more cosmopolitan 'crunchy'. The staff all had a clean-skinned, tangled hair vibe and seemed bemused by the timing of our Vermont visit. 'Wow, well it's kind of mud season,' one of the waiters said. There was some nodding amongst his colleagues. 'We have five seasons here. All the normal ones and mud season…'

Some further investigation made it clear that 'mud' season is a time when the ground in the North East de-frosts at the end of Spring, rendering all Burlington's picturesque hikes impassable. Not really fancying a hike anyway we continued our exploration unperturbed and, dodging the allure of a early-morning blast of CBD, headed towards Burlington's pedestrianised Church Street Marketplace. 'Outdoor Gear Exchange' satisfied my boyfriend's penchant for obscure outerwear whilst 'Common Deer' on College Street was packed with Vermont's finest crunchy offerings such as Johnson Woolen Mills' flannel blankets and hard-back copies of John Muir's *Wilderness Essays*.

We were staying that evening at Twin Farms, a luxurious country estate near Woodstock, but decided to break up the picturesque drive from Burlington by stopping at the Shelburne Museum on Route 7. This highly unusual museum was the brain child of the outrageously loaded Electra Havemeyer Webb who decided to display her large collection of Americana in a series of unusual buildings which she had disassembled and reconstructed in Shelburne. Impressionist paintings, Hudson River School masterpieces and American folk art are exhibited in and around a lighthouse, a jail, a covered bridge and a large steamboat incongruously nestled in a rather batty landscape complete with an heirloom, vegetable gardens and four hundred lilacs.

Another hour on the road took us to Barnard. A thick mist had settled and after a hair-raising drive down some predictably muddy country roads we arrived at a perfectly appointed 1795-era farmhouse on a three hundred acre estate. Staff magicked their way out of the reception and within minutes our bags and pick up truck were whisked away to be housed in our private cottage whilst we were given a tour of the property in a shiny SUV. This Relais Chateaux property is famous in these parts for its decadent all-inclusive 'experience' which rivals other East Coast heavy-weights such as The Point in New York State and Blackberry Farm in the Smoky Mountains.

Twin Farms is unique, however, in that guests are housed in individually designed stand-alone cottages complete with fireplaces, hot tubs and hammocks. With the staff prepared to bring you any meal you can dream up in wicker hampers it is basically the equivalent of renting a private farmhouse complete with housekeeper and chef whilst also having hotel facilities at your finger tips.

We were soon delivered to our accommodation and on arriving I realised that, not only had my dresses been hung up in the closet, but that my muddy wheelie bag had been buffed to a shine which gives you some idea of the attention to detail that Twin Farms is famed for. Totally ravenous we decided not to wait for room service and instead headed to cocktail hour at the Main Lodge. The original farmhouse was purchased by Nobel prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis for journalist Dorothy Thompson who promised to marry him if he bought her a Vermont farm with sweeping lawns and "delicious air."

On this front Lewis nailed it and we feasted on a large spread of Vermont cheeses and beers from local microbreweries whilst chatting to Chef Nathan Rich, the incredibly jovial Head Chef, whose international cheffing had lead him back to Vermont close to his home in New Hampshire. Course after course of locally-sourced delicacies arrived at our table and we soon rolled into bed full of great steak and maple butter.

The next morning I had just enough time to munch my way through a pile of 'Almond Joy Soufflé Pancakes with Vermont Yogurt' before my fly fishing course with Linda. 'Twin Farms' has a truck-load of daily activities including yoga and fully-equipped hikes and, although organised fun is not normally my thing, the idea of becoming an expert angler of a morning rather tickled me. Linda was very patient with me. She gave me a khaki Cabela vest which made my Nike sportswear look a hundred percent more legit and explained to me the "twelve o'clock, two o'clock" wrist movement that would catapult my line gracefully into Copper Pond.

I have to admit I was not a natural and spent most of my time unknotting what Linda described as a "real humdinger" of a knot. It felt good to be outside though and I imagined the whooshing sound of my line unfurling beautifully behind me in the near future when, obviously, I will have mastered this particularly outdoorsy skill.

It feels almost criminal to leave the grounds, and I'm pretty sure no-one really does, but in the spirit of exploring more of Vermont we set off again to the neighbouring town of Woodstock. A hotspot for wealthy second-home owners from Boston and New York this town is ridiculously picturesque with restored late Georgian and Federal Style houses bordering a perfectly maintained central green. The 'Vegan Kitchen' had a relaxed Vermont vibe and served an excellent fried chicken sandwich to accompany a dizzying range of local beers.

Next stop was Simon Pearce's famed glassblowing studio and destination restaurant in nearby Quechee. After a brief meander through his store's hugely overpriced glassware, however, I was ready to return to my 'Twin Farms' sanctuary. That night we lit a wood fire and requested for our last meal to be delivered to the room. This turned out to be the highlight of the trip for me as a picnic basket full of local artisan breads, salmon fillets and chocolate mousse were painstakingly set out on a linen table cloth as the fog started to settle in again. If this was the full horror of mud season in Vermont I think I can definitely brace it.