

Right place, write time

Idyllic spots for finding a chance to put your thoughts into words

By PEGGY NEWLAND
Correspondent

ONE-TANK TRIP

We all have a book inside us. Some want to write family stories of what we don't want to forget: how the grandparents lived, funny anecdotes from aunts and uncles or car vacations spent with sisters and brothers. Others have fictional tales of romance or espionage, vam-

pires or adventure.

And if you're like me, there are always excuses not to write – such as time. We have to work, take the kids to sports, go grocery shopping – the list goes on and on.

But you deserve a long weekend away to write your stories, and I've found a couple places that will give you the perfect nook to create.

As Henry David Thoreau said: "Our life is frittered away by detail ... simplify, simplify." So, get out of town and write.

Fall

I sit in a corner booth at the Wildcat Inn and Tavern in Jackson, with Buster the dog, under my feet. I feel hidden away in this WiFi corner as I write,



Courtesy photo

The Kingsleigh Inn is shown in Southwest Harbor, Maine. While not visible here, the inn is home to a flock of plastic pink flamingoes.

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Writing

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undisturbed, at midafternoon, a fresh pint of Long Trail in hand. My room upstairs is airy, with clapboard windows and floral comforters, and outside, the leaves are in early change, pale reds to brilliant yellows.

Dogs are allowed everywhere here, except in the fancy dining room, so Buster and I make our writing home in the timber-lined tavern.

This midafternoon, the tavern is quiet. A lone hiker, dressed in jeans and flannel and sporting a long, white beard, sits at the bar. I try not to guess what's inside his head as he crosses his arms and ponders the beer selections.

As afternoon turns toward evening, the families arrive, some with dogs, most with kids. A folk duo warms up on the tiny center stage. There's a buzz in the air that smells of pine, drying river mud and crushed leaves. A couple, decked out in polypropylene and hiking boots, spread a map between them, pointing out some trails.

"Did you hike?" I ask them. "Tomorrow we are," the woman tells me. "Hiking Tuckerman Trail."

They show me topographic maps with a dramatic elevation gain of more than 4,200 feet. Located in the Cutler River Drainage on the east flank of Mount Washington, the ravines are in a deep pocket of the White Mountain National Forest.

Known as a "Skiers Mecca," many make the trek up and down Tuckerman, skis, poles,

boots and many layers of clothes in tow. The steep slope is covered in snow for half a year.

"How long will it take you?" I ask. "Probably eight hours," they say nonchalantly.

"Wow," is all I say as Buster stretches himself out from under the table. "Are there any, um, easier hikes around there?"

"Just head to Ho Jo's," the woman says.

"Howard Johnson's?" I say with a laugh, imagining a deli sandwich and fries.

"Hermit Lake Shelter, otherwise known as Ho Jo's. About 2 miles up."

"We've got our plan, Buster," I tell the dog. He wags his tail.

The nice things about a notebook and pen are that they don't weigh much and you don't need batteries. You can pull them out and sit on a rock or lie on some moss and be perfectly content writing about pleasant things such as the sweat spiraling off your brow as you hike directly up what appears to be a rock cliff called Tuckerman's Ravine.

"An early morning walk is a blessing for the whole day," I quote Thoreau as Buster drinks from the portable water bowl. There are fathers with sons walking past, some with backpacks, most with walking sticks. One father cajoles a preteen to think of the stories he can tell back home in Connecticut about climbing to the top of Mount Washington. The boy appears to listen and keeps his trudge straight up the trail.

Women travel in packs of three or fours, and they chat and laugh, energized by the scenery of friendship and nature.

My notebook gets filled with

images of hikers, chattering squirrels and the curve of a ravine's wing upon granite ledge.

Winter

The wind howls outside as icy snow pelts the window. I sit by the crackling fireplace in my room at the Inn at Thorn Hill and try to write the next best-seller. However, it's only three pages and there are no vampires or car crashes.

"All endeavor calls for the ability to tramp the last mile, shape the last plan, endure the last hour's toil," I quote some Thoreau for motivation. "The fight to the finish spirit is the one ... characteristic we must possess if we are to face the future as finishers."

Because I survived the hike up and down Tuckerman's Ravine, I've decided a return to Jackson is warranted. I stay in the aptly named Tuckerman's Suite at the comfortably luxurious Inn at Thorn Hill and have a two-person Jacuzzi tub, steam shower and fireplace as companions for myself and my computer.

There's word that all power is out in southern New Hampshire, but up here, in the deep north, it's warm and cozy. The inn is hosting a Spanish wine dinner in the fireplaced dining room this evening. I hear laughter wafting upstairs like a siren call and think of Thoreau's famous quote, "Live your life, do your work, then take your hat."

It's time for some wine. The Inn at Thorn Hill is one of the Top Ten Country Inns in America and received the AAA four-diamond award in 1997. The white linen elegance combined with pine-knotted nooks and flickering candlelight makes you feel part of a celebration. The

howling wind outside makes for easy conversation.

I sit near a couple in their late 70s who tell me of their safaris in Africa, their bike rides along the canals of Amsterdam, of the hikes up all the mountains in the Presidential Range in New Hampshire. Their cheeks glow, not from the excellent Cava being poured, but because they're enjoying the recounting of their tales. They finish each other's sentences and laugh into their cupped hands as the first course of mixed field greens, Spanish brine-cured olives and Manchego cheese heads our way. A glass of Conclasse, Verdejo, Rueda (2008), is poured.

They like the fact that the highway is closed in and out of Boston, and now down to New York City. The heavy snow struck south rather than the usual north, and it's a sign that there are more adventures to be had in Jackson. They decide to back-country ski the next day.

While they talk of mountain trails they've skied, the second course of roast pork loin with toasted black walnuts, Piquillo pepper puree, sautéed white asparagus and Serrano ham is laid out in front of us. A new wine, Alto Moncayo, Garnacha, Campo De Borja (2007), is poured.

The couple and I shake our heads with unexpected pleasure. Each bite is bliss.

"We met and married at 17," the woman tells me. "And she wasn't pregnant, either," the man says with a laugh. "Soon, I was."

"And we brought all five with us on our travels." A third course of Spanish and Arab braised lamb with raisins and Navarra vegetable stew

topped with toasted Spanish almonds arrives. All courses come beautifully arranged in portions that allow for savoring, and with the pouring of a Closa Batlett, Gratallops, Priorat (2004), I feel as if I'm living inside Gourmet magazine.

After dinner, we curl up on some overstuffed chairs by the lobby fireplace. As we finish our Honeyed Muscat grapes, apples, Natilla cream and churros and swirl our Jorge Ordóñez, Muscatel (2005), we watch icicles lengthen into jagged spikes. Soon, the windows fog and we are encased in escape, protected from the outside by the laughter of memories remembered and retold.

Early summer

The fog rises in tendrils that drift across the empty town center of Southwest Harbor, Maine. The only stoplight in town is a blinking yellow one, and it sends a deep afternoon glow through the chilled air.

It's early summer, and I feel as if I'm in a Stephen King novel because there are plastic pink flamingos perched in trees next to bushes. Some are even on roofs and cars.

A couple walks past a quorum of pink flamingos wearing polka dot dresses and red rain hats. They stare at the display, and then quickly walk into a pub. In the distance, a foghorn bellows as I pull into the Kingsleigh Inn, just off Main Street.

Located on the "quiet side" of Mount Desert Island, a 20-minute drive away from the bustling summer playground of Bar Harbor, this town looks the mysterious part for a writer's retreat. The Kingsleigh offers a writing corner and cranny in

alcoved rooms, all with views of Southwest Harbor. My room, the Abbott, even has a tiny deck, perfect for keeping a bird's-eye view on those pink flamingos.

Pamela, one of the co-owners, offers me a steaming cup of tea.

"What's with the birds?" I have to ask. Those plastic pink creatures lurk and loiter just outside.

"Tomorrow is the Flamingo Festival," she tells me. "Everyone dresses up as flamingos, or else they wear as much pink as they can stand to."

"Why?" "Because it's fun." Even the fire trucks and floats will sport the plastic flamingos in various states of party in the parade.

"You know Stephen King's novel, 'Storm of the Century'?" She points outside at the barren street and walkways. "They filmed a parade for that horror film right in front of this inn."

I imagine all those plastic flamingos rising up from the yards and garages and flapping their plastic wings over Southwest Harbor. The sky is pink, the sidewalks pink, the roofs covered.

"You should go to the parade," Pamela says. "It'll be a hoot."

After tea, I head out to the rain-splattered street. Two flamingos holding an Evening Special Menu entice me inside a bistro that has a huge wooden bar. On one of the wooden pub chairs sits an oversized stuffed flamingo, sporting a red boa and wearing sparkled stilettoes.

The night is young. The candles are lit. I sit next to the pink bird and order a Fuzzy Flamingo, the drink special of the night.