

A Retreat from Stress

At Pembroke Springs, a Japanese-style country lodge just a two-hour drive from Baltimore, you can soak your cares away

By Melissa Harris
Sun Reporter
November 18, 2007
STAR TANNERY, Va.

Steam wafted off the 104-degree water. Worried that I'd be scalded, I tested it with my toes and timidly stepped into the tub.

As the water climbed up my body, the throbbing in my lower back from a morning horseback ride faded.

I lasted in the ofuro, a Japanese-style bath, at Virginia's Pembroke Springs Retreat for 13 minutes, shorter than the recommended 15- to 20-minute soaking time. When the sweat began to roll down my temples, I knew it was time to wrap myself in one of the inn's summer kimonos, called yukatas, and get a glass of water.

Pembroke Springs, a five-room, Japanese-style inn, reopened last month after a one-year renovation. The retreat is a little Tokyo in an isolated countryside about four miles from the West Virginia border and a two-hour drive from Baltimore.

Owned by Walter and Taeko Floyd and their daughter, Lisa, the inn and its two ofuros offer riveting floor-to-ceiling view of a Shenandoah Valley ridgeline. But the Floyds' guest-focused hospitality, which is customary of Japanese inns, is why I plan to return.

The Floyds have designed the inn so that guests can control how exotic their stay is.

Visitors can wear inn-supplied yukatas and hanten, sleeveless jackets, inside the 5,000-square-foot retreat, or dress in American clothes. They can change into slippers at the front door, or wear their shoes.

Guests can eat a large Japanese breakfast, including a raw egg cracked over a bowl of rice, mixed with soy sauce and wrapped in seaweed, or request American-style scrambled eggs. The eggs are collected daily from the Floyds' chicken coop.

"A truly traditional Japanese breakfast, with little fish with eyes in it and stuff, would be scary for most Americans," said Lisa Floyd, who formerly directed catering at Washington's Mayflower Hotel. "We didn't want to do it so traditional that American guests wouldn't eat it."

As Floyd handed my boyfriend, Eric, and I the key to the large "sunrise" room – decorated with tatami mats, a low wooden table, imported floor cushions and handmade shoji screens – she told us that most guests didn't lock their doors.

"We give out keys because it makes some people more comfortable, but we think of this as our home," Floyd said.

The Floyds live next door, but one of them is working at the inn at all times.

Walter Floyd, a retired foreign service officer, purchased the 175 acres at the base of the Great North Mountain nearly 40 years ago, four years before he met his future wife in Tokyo, her hometown, where she was working as a secretary for the U.S. Commerce Department.

The married in Japan and built a second home at Pembroke Springs in 1994. When Walter Floyd retired in 2000, they sold their suburban McLean, Va., home, relocated year-round to the mountains and opened the retreat a year later.

“They did it thinking it would be a hobby – that it wasn’t going to be too stressful,” Lisa Floyd said. “But they found out pretty quickly that people were really interested in staying here. My mom is unfortunately not quite retired, and my dad is approaching 70. That’s part of the reason I came when I did.”

The Floyds treat their guests as if they are family. Lisa Floyd recognized my voice on my third call to the inn.

Taeko Floyd greeted us at the front door when we arrived. As we read books on the deck and watched the setting sun paint the mountainside, she offered us tea.

When we didn’t show up for our dinner reservation on time, the restaurant called Lisa Floyd, who then called us in a panic. We had gotten lost. She was worried we had hit a deer.

As Taeko Floyd set the table later that night for Sunday breakfast, my boyfriend and I spread out on the leather couch in the great room and watched the baseball playoffs. She offered us some cheese to go with the wine we had brought from home.

She chatted about her life in Japan, how she met her husband, and where the other guests lived and worked. Two couples and two Japanese families, who had one child each, were staying at the inn with us – a full house.

The Floyds don’t advertise, but more than half of their guests are Japanese, Lisa Floyd said. The inn only recently began allowing children.

My time at Pembroke Springs was so soothing that I regretted staying only one night. In retrospect, I would have stayed two nights, canceled out other plans to remain within our \$500 budget and packed food to avoid leaving the inn.

“We’re out in the middle of nowhere,” Lisa Floyd warned me when I made the reservation.

I carelessly use that phrase to describe the suburbs, but after driving on a windy, gravel road for at least 20 minutes to reach the retreat, I realized Lisa Floyd was not exaggerating.

Although there is a bar less than five miles away from Pembroke Springs, the nearest restaurant is in Strasburg, Va., a 20-minute drive for people who know where they are going and a longer one for people who don’t. The country roads are not well-marked and change names frequently, making travel at night difficult for tourists.

On the night we stayed at the inn, the two Japanese families brought their own sushi dinners. At least one of the families had stayed at Pembroke Springs before and clearly didn’t want to trek into town.

The Floyds refrigerated their food, which didn’t need to be cooked or heated. Under Virginia law, guests can’t use the retreat’s kitchen, but the Floyds are willing to heat meals in the microwave.

The exceptional service and lack of airs make Pembroke Springs quite different from an American spa. Baths are included in the cost of the reservation and can be taken as often as guests want. Day-trippers also can reserve one of the two baths for \$25.

“We have guests who reserve the bath morning, noon and night,” Walter Floyd said.

Bathers must shower and wash off the soap before entering the 8-square-foot, gas-heated tub. The water temperature is kept at 104 degrees, the maximum allowed by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Ofuros in Japan are 10 degrees warmer. But on this budget, Pembroke Springs is as close as I’ll ever get to a weekend in Japan.

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