

hotel perks

Like airlines, grand hotels once held the promise of luxury and service that made travelers feel special. Those days may be long gone in air travel, but in North Carolina, several independent hotels still offer unique high-end experiences for business and leisure travelers.

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OPPOSITE: At The Jefferson Hotel
in Southern Pines, red tassels make
an elegant substitution for traditional
"do not disturb" signs.
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Asheville's princess

PRINCESS ANNE HOTEL, ASHEVILLE

Howard Stafford never intended to get into the hospitality business, but a growing legion of in-the-know travelers is glad he did.

Stafford moved to Asheville in 1989 as an architect specializing in renovating old buildings. At the time, he says the city had a large inventory of great structures that needed TLC, and one of them was an old shingle-style hotel he passed every day on his way to work. Built in 1924, the building had degraded into a run-down apartment building.

"It was up for sale off and on for two years," recalls Stafford. "The Maharishi in Holland owned it, and he was just incredible to deal with. He wouldn't let me see the whole building, so I made an offer on it as is."

The Maharishi was apparently insulted and came back with an even higher asking price, which kept negotiations in limbo for about 18 months. Stafford had already moved on to purchase a house in Charleston when the Maharishi finally broke down and agreed to an amount close to the initial offer.

Gradually, Stafford relocated the building's 42 tenants and renovated it back to its former splendor, even reinstating the original name. The Princess Anne Hotel (301 East Chestnut Street, Asheville; (828) 258-0986) was built for Anne O'Connell, a charismatic nurse at a nearby tuberculosis sanitarium.

Today, the 16 rooms and elegant first-floor lounge of the Princess Anne nearly match the originals, with obvious exceptions such as wireless Internet and flat-screen televisions. Stafford says guests enjoy the hotel's bed-and-breakfast-like intimacy without all the formalities. Mostly, though, they just enjoy the rooms.

"They like the size of the rooms," says Stafford. "Each one is like a mini apartment, and they feel more at home here versus at a regular hotel. Everyone feels very comfortable here." □

room of choice:

Ever dream of trading your house and all the clutter in it for a well-appointed urban apartment that blends old character with modern conveniences? Room 207 (bottom right) lets you live the fantasy.

perk:

Each room has a dish full of E cru New York soap (top right), lotion, shower gel, shampoo and conditioner, as well as a vanity kit, dental kit, and razor kit. The hotel must assume guests will take everything with them, given that there are at least two of everything. The clean and versatile scent of the E cru products makes it a wise assumption.



Southern Pines pretty

— THE JEFFERSON, SOUTHERN PINES —

Curtis Dean remembers the first time he stepped into The Jefferson (150 West New Hampshire Avenue, Southern Pines; (910) 692-9911) about two years ago.

"I was standing on the first floor getting rained on from the third-floor roof," recalls Dean. "[The hotel] was completely in shambles, and there were discussions of tearing it down."

So naturally, Dean sunk several million dollars into returning The Jefferson to what it once was. Before he closed it for renovations in 2006, it had been the oldest continually operating hotel in Southern Pines. The Jefferson was opened in 1901 by a family from Jefferson, New Hampshire, as an attachment to their vacation home there. They later bought the electric shop next door, added it to the inn, and capped the three structures with a third floor. Its recent renovation followed a similar piecemeal pattern.

"People say I must have had vision to do this renovation, but what I really was trying to do was bring it back to what it used to be," says Dean. "And along the way we saw so many ways to improve it beyond that."

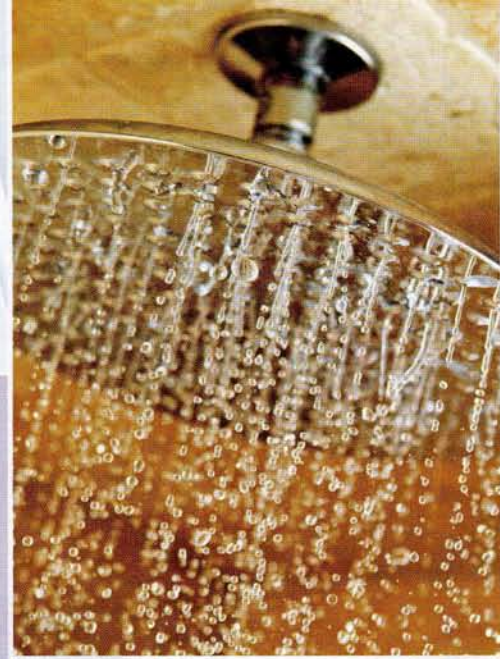
One of the first tweaks was turning the original 29 rooms into 15 larger ones. Dean also reached out to a contact in Florida about bathroom tile and wound up getting the same price for Travertine, an elegant natural stone sourced predominantly in Italy. Even the inn's unique "do not disturb" signs were a happenstance.

"How do you order 'do not disturb' signs for just 15 rooms?" asks Dean. "You can't. You have to order hundreds of them, so we decided to use tassels instead. Red means do not disturb, gold means make up the room."

Guests love those tassels as much as the rooms, which feature cottage-style furniture, high thread-count sheets, flat screen televisions, and wireless Internet access. All of those conveniences are a surprise for guests who have just checked in at the registration desk.

"The first floor really needed to look and feel like it did maybe in 1920, but I wanted guests to walk upstairs without feeling a big shock of change yet still find the same comforts of the top-end national chain hotels." □

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perk:

The showers. The Jefferson has managed to turn a practical feature into luxury by enlarging shower stalls and including two kinds of shower heads — regular and rain.

room of choice:

Room five (left) has a large bay window (below) overlooking Southern Pines' downtown. It's the room the owner always requests when he travels here from his home in Raleigh.

