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Living History at the Fairfield Inn

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Naturally, my husband tries the ham-and-bean soup.

I can't blame him: If you're going to have dinner in an inn where a famous person once famously stopped to eat, you should obviously go whole hog and partake of the same repast, no?

Obviously the Fairfield Inn thinks so. The 250-year-old hostelry makes sure that its restaurant menu tells you just what Gen. Robert E. Lee supped on when he stopped for a breather in small-town Fairfield, Pa., in July 1863, when the Confederate army was hightailing it out of Gettysburg.

Can't blame anybody for that, either: If you're going to run a 250-year-old lodging-place and eatery that's seen its share of major nation-shaping events, you should obviously play this background up as much as possible. And not just because it's good for business. But because it's good for the inn. Which is good for the guests. (Which, of course, is good for business. Shh.)

That's the thinking of Fairfield Inn owners Sal and Joan Chandon, anyway. "They really see themselves as stewards of the inn and its history," says innkeeper Andi Amin during our impromptu after-breakfast tour of the property. And plenty of history to steward there is, in every nook and cranny.

Take the main dining room. It's closed for renovations, but Amin opens it up to show us the original mid-18th-century summer kitchen, with its enormous (still working) stone fireplace and the original lock

on the door. You know the kind of lock I mean: massive black metal with a big black skeleton key on a chain, like from an English period drama. "Sal says it's the best lock in the house," says Amin, and I can believe it.

She takes us up into the 1757 suite, the oldest part of the house, named for the date it was built, and we have a look down the incredibly steep wooden staircases that make me lightheaded just thinking about going up or down them with no handrail to hang on to. We visit the Patrick Henry room, named for the revolutionary speechifier who sometimes came here to visit his aunt Isabella, wife of original owner Squire William Miller.

We check out the pretty room in the "new" part of the inn (built in 1801), where President and Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower used to like to dine when they lived in nearby Gettysburg after their White House days. And of course, we peer through the window cut into the wall on the third-floor landing to show the crawl space where runaway slaves used to hide as they fled to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

It just goes on and on, and it's just the kind of thing I like.

Of course, I knew I was going to like this place from the first glimpse of its old-timey fieldstone and white-porch facade. And from the sounds of the Irish band playing in the restaurant when we step off the sidewalk into the front hall to check in on a recent Friday night. We're right behind a couple of women hoping to score a table for dinner, but alas, the place is just too

popular. (Luckily, we have reservations.)

I like our pink-and-rose-paneled room, the Grumble Jones, named for the Confederate general who won the Battle of Fairfield, fought just outside the inn in 1863. I like the little tube of toothpaste (yes!) provided in the bathroom. True, the bedroom floor lists so much toward the rear wall that it makes me feel like a drunken sailor when I make my way to bed, but such are the charms of an old house, after all. And have I said that this house is really, really old? Considering its age, it's in remarkably wonderful shape.

I like the low-lit tavern with its dark wood, where we plop ourselves at the bar before dinner and the gruffly friendly bartender, Jim, asks where we're from and then says, "Well, you're not in D.C. now. We don't race here. Our traffic jam is eight cars." Like that, too.

My husband, for the record, likes Jim's ultra-smooth martinis, as well as the ham-and-bean soup and everything else we have for dinner. I think the food's great, too, but mostly I like sitting in the homey tavern space, listening to the familiar old Irish tunes and thinking that here I am, joining a long long line of travelers who've eaten here and bedded down here before me. Thinking how historic the place is, and that there's just one word for it: authentic.

And then thinking, now wait a minute. There's a whole list of other words for the Fairfield Inn. Such as lovely, gracious, charming, atmospheric, hospitable. . . .

It just goes on and on.