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One Town in the Poconos Uses Charm, Not Cheesiness, to Draw Visitors

By Robert DiGiacomo
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The cheese doesn't stand alone in the Poconos. It's there in abundance -- the motels with the heart-shaped tubs, flashy billboards for the area's "attractions" and the ski areas overflowing with hot-dogging teens - - all threatening to override any appreciation of the remaining unspoiled landscape. At the same time, there is another side emerging in Milford, a small town on the Delaware River in northeastern Pennsylvania that offers a more civilized Poconos experience.

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Hotel Fauchere in Milford, Pa., is a boutique hotel pairing period charm with modern-day bells and whistles. (Hotel Fauchere)

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There, a revival is in full swing that will go a long way toward making visitors forget the cheese factor.

My country weekend HQ was the Hotel Fauchere, a stately Italianate grand dame holding court on Broad Street, the town's main drag. The circa-1882 building was a wreck when entrepreneur Sean Strub acquired it in spring 2001. Five years later, the former New Yorker reopened the Fauchere as a 16-room boutique hotel, pairing its grand period charm with modern-day bells and whistles such as flat-screen TVs, marble-lined bathrooms, Frette linens and Kiehl's bath products. The property, part of the Relais & Chateaux collection, also includes a fine-dining restaurant, a lively bar, its own patisserie and an affiliated day spa.

Still, one swank hotel does not a destination make. Milford also has history on its side, as well as good shopping and easy access to the dramatic waterfalls and lush greenery of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

As the seat of Pike County, the town has long commanded a certain level of local importance. In the 19th century, its well-to-do denizens commissioned a who's who of American architects (notably Richard Morris Hunt, Calvert Vaux and McKim, Mead & White) to build their homes and major public buildings. Although local fortunes have waxed and waned since, many of the buildings are intact in Milford's nationally registered historic district, which makes for a

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Gifford Pinchot, a two-term Pennsylvania governor who palled around with Teddy Roosevelt and was the first head of the U.S. Forest Service. The property, which includes a rambling stone mansion and 102 acres, is a national historic site. Its well-maintained gardens and natural parkland are open year-round. Don't miss the Finger Bowl, an ingenious outdoor dining table designed by Pinchot's wife, Cornelia, to break the ice when entertaining dignitaries. The table is shaped like a fountain, with guests seated around the perimeter and food passed on platters floating in the water.

Advertisement But Milford's most important claim to fame can be found at the Columns, a museum operated by the Pike County Historical Society. Prominently displayed among its somewhat musty collection of old photographs and donated bric-a-brac is an American flag that was hanging in Ford's Theatre the night President Abraham Lincoln was shot in 1865.

The stage manager, Thomas Gourlay, ripped the flag from the balustrade where it was draped and used it to cushion the president's head. He passed the flag on to his daughter, Jeannie Gourlay Struthers, a performer in the fateful production of "Our American Cousin." In 1954, her son, V. Paul Struthers, donated the flag, which has been tested and declared authentic, to the historical society. Vestiges of bloodstains are still in evidence.

Feeling just a little creeped out by this "CSI" moment, my partner and I were happy to return to the sunshine and take a short drive to some of the Delaware Water Gap's waterfalls, including Dingmans and Raymondskill, each of which plunges into a ravine from a height of more than 100 feet, for an invigorating walkabout.

However, if your weekend goal is to do as little structured activity as possible, that's easily accommodated, too. Broad Street's brick-lined sidewalks, with several blocks of galleries and shops, are good for a wander. Around town, more retail awaits in the converted buildings of the Old Lumberyard and the Upper Mill -- testimony to Milford's growing appeal as a weekend retreat for New Yorkers and others. There's even an outpost of Fretta's, a century-old Italian foods specialty store that once had locations in New York's Little Italy and Brooklyn and claims to be the oldest pork store in the United States.

Ready to rest before dinner? Milford is compact enough that you'll be hard-pressed to end up more than an easy walk or a quick drive from naptime or a relaxing soak in the tub. And I can promise: It won't be heart-shaped.

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