

Healthful Hideaways

The Inn at the Rustic Gate: R&R in Balance with Nature

By Petula Brown

A restful enclave for individuals focused on reflection and renewal. A playground of natural beauty for hikers, kayakers and other travelers interested in an active, but peaceful, getaway experience. A meeting facility with a warm but sophisticated tone for hosting family reunions, educational sessions and corporate events. Since January 2004, The Inn at the Rustic Gate (<http://www.innattherusticgate.com/>) has embraced the peaceful surroundings of a former dairy farm north of Grand Rapids while introducing amenities with an emphasis on inner well being.

The Inn's focus on self development has been a constant theme based on the inspirational messages of cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien (<http://www.angelesarrien.com/>). According to co-owner Marcia Stroko, "The Inn is not intended to be like a traditional bed and breakfast." Arrien's teachings include metaphoric references to "a rustic gate to describe the life passage through which we come to terms with our creativity, generativity and legacy leaving." On the 146-acre grounds of the former Toogood Dairy Farm, Arrien's gate has manifested itself as an entranceway to an idyllic site that serves many needs in the region, but continues to stay true to its focus on health and wellness.

Integral to the Inn's focus on introspection is its natural surroundings. "The main draw is the beautiful landscape," comments Ms. Stroko. The rolling meadows and woodlands provide ample room for thoughtful walks while a pond and lake are available to persons more inspired by calming waters. Lori Fithian, a visitor from Ann Arbor who led a drum circle as part of a weekend program at the Inn, mentions "the wild view has no houses, but I have seen deer, geese and duck" in the area. Enveloped by the Manistee National Forest (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/hmnf/images/proxmap.gif>), guests may also explore the area's 13-mile trail via cross country skiing, hiking or horseback riding. Frequent visitor Jacqui Magon, M.D. from Ann Arbor (who has conducted massage therapy and yoga sessions at the Inn) comments, "I've made about six trips so far and have done kayaking and hiking. The opportunities for outside exploration are endless."

To complement the serene and pastoral character of region, the facility balances simple charm with thoughtful amenities. The 1909 American Four Square farmhouse with 7,500 square feet has been enhanced to include eight bedrooms with private baths (four in the original 1909 structure and four in an addition to the facility), a dining room that seats 30 guests, a meditation loft with expansive views of the area and a living room/library with audiovisual entertainment system as well as games. The library's collection of books on spirituality, religion and psychology combined with the availability of audio programs and yoga items in the loft provide ample resources for visitors to engage in self-directed retreats if desired.

With an emphasis on being able to accommodate unique needs, Inn renovations incorporated green building concepts to minimize allergens and two guest rooms were designed to accommodate disabled guests. In addition, to provide an intimate and styleful option for group events, one of the other farm properties was transformed into 600 square feet of conference space available for rental by families, organizations and businesses. The site also includes a covered outdoor pavilion with grills and tables for picnics or other outdoor activities.

The Inn's nods toward eclectic sophistication are also seen in the unique appointments in the guest rooms as well as the dining philosophy. Each guest accommodation has a distinct style or signature piece. One bedroom dons a Southwest theme while another has a brass bed as a centerpiece. A third bedroom's Mission style is a fitting complement to the overall simplistic, but stylish character of the Inn. "Everything is so detailed and beautifully decorated," states Ms. Fithian. The variety in accommodations dovetails nicely with the emphasis the Inn places on customized menus available to guests and visitors. Co-



The Inn at the Rustic Gate, north of Grand Rapids

owner, resident chef and former clinician Sharon Stroko provides not only flavorful breakfasts, but also prepares homemade lunch and dinner meals based on guests needs and preferences that have won rave reviews from guests as "fabulous" and "awesome."

With so much to offer visitors, it is no surprise that the guest population runs the gamut from nuns on spiritual retreats to vacationing couples to individuals. Even without an overnight stay, attendees of social business and educational events on the property have an opportunity to experience area's tranquility. So it is no wonder that during the peak seasons of summer and winter holidays, the Inn is a popular venue for reunions and holiday parties. During early fall and spring, events such as artist workshops, book club meetings and health/wellness sessions may be open to the public so visitors can enrich their minds, bodies and souls in an environment that promotes peacefulness and restoration.

As a relatively new retreat location in Michigan, the Inn continues to evolve to meet the needs of its guests. In addition to providing rental space for external groups to host activities, "the Inn plans to offer more programs with a health focus sponsored by the Inn," states Marcia Stroko (especially during the spring and fall seasons).

By embracing the inherent beauty of their surroundings while emphasizing peacefulness and renewal when crafting key design features and amenities, the Inn has become a welcomed addition to the landscape of Western Michigan as a location, "designed with a lot of love."

For more information, contact The Inn at the Rustic Gate (rusticgate@starband.net or call 800-319-5867).

Upcoming Events

February: 7-9, Dreams and Stitches Quilting and Knitting Retreat (event filled to capacity); 24-26, Soul Coaching Workshop Retreat with Minnie Kansman; April: 7-9, Rhythm and Drummunity Retreat with Lori Fithian; June: 23-25, Inkwell Works Writers Workshop; July: 17-21, Sisters in Stitches Quilting Retreat (event filled to capacity)