

SMART LIVING IN BALTIMORE

# STYLE

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## Carolina Comfort

A software executive and his wife bring hospitality the natural way to the Raleigh-Durham area.

*By Zoe Hickerson*



[editorial]



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I was musing over where to spend a little vacation time when my seemingly psychic girlfriend invited me to join her on an upcoming trip to the Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina. Now, I know what you're thinking: who celebrates anything besides [basketball](#) down there? And the only real spa destination in the area was the strangely named Umstead Hotel & Spa. (Couldn't they have tried to make it sound— oh, I don't know— a little more spa-y? Say, "Green Gables by the Meadows" or perhaps "Sweetbay Ridge"?)



We conceded that the Umstead was only five minutes from the airport, but even that began to sound like a probable downside. What spa worth its weight in aromatherapy snuggles up that close to Pratt & Whitneys revving up and down international runways? I needed a little more convincing about this Cary, N.C., hotel gig, so I loaded up the website, only to see natural stone, warm colors and woody surroundings. I decided to give it a try.

The Umstead is the brainchild of Dr. Jim Goodnight, chief executive officer of software giant SAS, and his wife, Ann. And if there isn't a saying, "Don't let the name throw you," there should be. The Umstead Hotel & Spa— named, like the adjoining State Park, after a state senator and governor— is a smart partnership of architecture and customer service that seamlessly blends nature and nurture. The exterior complements the verdant woods surrounding the property while the inside takes full use of every wall: either hosting huge plate glass windows or showcasing original artwork.

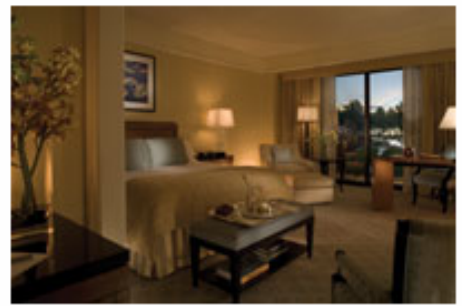


Art, like the natural stone, is pretty much everywhere here: oils, acrylics, sculpture. Locally produced works hang alongside pieces done by well-known international artists. This is art that makes you stop and look a minute, and the front desk has a booklet that will lead you on a tour of the featured creations.

The art actually continues even into the hotel gift shop. Go in to replace a forgotten nail clipper and you'll find not only the clippers, but snacks and drinks, leisure clothes, pottery and Oiva Toikka glass birds from Finland. And there were more pleasant surprises to come.

For me, a special pleasure was the Afternoon Tea, a ritual I could definitely get used to. Served Wednesday through Sunday from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m., Afternoon Tea features an array of loose leaf teas (I like to keep up my vitamin C, so I recommend the Chamomile Citron) paired with sweet and savory accompaniments. The clotted cream is delightful and suitably offered up by a dotting server. (A scone fan's tip: if you like clotted cream, tell them to triple up on the amount served, otherwise you'll be lucky to cream more than a corner of your snack.)

Full of tea and good feelings, I decided to visit the spa next. Forewarned by the website that the Umstead Spa is an “adult enclave” where swimsuits are optional, I tiptoed bashfully in, in case there was a legion of nudists. Instead, I encountered a full menu of manicures, pedicures, facials, exfoliations, body masks, massages and more. For me, a manicure is always in order because I tend to use my nails like an attached set of tools. (This makes for very scraggly nail lines and more than one suspicious query about what I use my extra-long right pinky nail for.) To take care of this, the Umstead offers an Organic Manicure replete with soothing fragrances, sea salt exfoliation and gentle moisturizing before the nails are carefully cut, shaped and polished.



And my spa experiences are never complete without a nice rubdown. Though I usually opt for a Swedish Massage, the humble Umstead Sports Massage caught my eye (as did the gorgeous greenery peeping at me from every window). As a sometimes jogger, I’ve woken up more than a few mornings aching and arrrghing. With beautiful parks and hiking opportunities so close to the Umstead, it’s no wonder there’s a rejuvenating treatment for the active available. And for the Umstead’s stressed, on-the-go business client, 25-minute To The Point massage sessions are a handy option.

But those of leisure like me have time to enjoy the finer things, like a full massage, then a segue over to Herons, the Umstead’s four-star restaurant helmed by executive chef Scott Crawford. With his dedication to including the best of local seasonal offerings, the Herons menu is always changing. As it was, the offerings were so dizzyingly diverse I didn’t know where to begin. A classic risotto or sea scallops to appetize me? I alight on the scallops and pair them with a Herons Signature Caesar (parmesan crackers, fresh anchovy and crispy poached egg)— all to warm me up for the spice-roasted venison. And dessert? A beautiful Gala apple is transformed and paired with a brown butter cake and raisin walnut ice cream. I begin to wonder if they offer gurney service back to my guest room. Not because I’m left bloated, mind you— but because the satisfaction has gone to my head. With two styles of guest rooms and six suite styles available, I expected something amazing from the rooms at the Umstead. But, alas, the room I had was just a notch above a standard Marriott room. However, the furnished outdoor veranda connected to the room saved the day.

With the Umstead’s love of art and nature (the hotel features an ongoing lecture series on precisely those things), a visit would be incomplete without a tour of— or at least a good, long gaze at— the grounds. Bring your kayak and paddle on the small lake a mile away. Enjoy a crisp walk on the bordering path, but feel free to pass on the naturalist who gives tours— (he’s exceedingly nice, but not necessarily knowledgeable). Request a terrace view at Herons and take in your meal near the fire pit as you relax, talk and enjoy looking over the pool and rear grounds.

[editorial]



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One place we definitely had to check out was Raleigh, the “Smithsonian of the South.” Dotted with museums and attractions, many of them free, visiting Raleigh is like being simultaneously pulled in 20 directions: a dog park, brewery tours, historical sites, African-American culture, art museums—even an insect museum! We finally opted for the North Carolina Museum of Art, an experience that began underwhelmingly at a parking lot that looked like part of a construction site. Seeing nothing but a rolling landscape and a path that wandered through a field, I followed a mother and pre-teen [daughter](#) who were moving purposefully along. We learned that they’d been the day before and the daughter had to come back (a decent recommendation).

I liked that the outdoors were ushered inside through the museum’s many windows. And perhaps the inviting sunshine was too big a temptation for some of the pieces, for many were presented outside, like they’d escaped. The collection was surprisingly diverse, bringing together such disparate elements as the Italian Renaissance and Egyptian funerary pieces, plus early American works and Jewish ceremonial pieces. Overall, a great way to wile away an afternoon.

Back at the hotel, I gloried in the precious final vacation hours. In life’s rare quiet moments (of which the Umstead happily provides ample supply), I like to write letters. Linger long enough and maybe you’ll be inspired to write, paint a picture or otherwise create. If it’s been a little too long since you’ve stoked your inner fires, don’t wait for the next major holiday. I like my muse in the shape of the Carolina skyline, and maybe that’s not just me.

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