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A restful getaway

By Leigh Dyer

Posted: Tuesday, Apr. 19, 2011

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Serenity is the word that springs to mind when visiting the Umstead Hotel and Spa. It's nestled on 12 lakeside acres in Cary, just off of Interstate 40 and six minutes away from the Raleigh-Durham International Airport, but the wooded lands and natural scenery make it feel like a remote retreat. The buzz of cars on the nearby interstate fades into white noise that makes the backdrop even more soothing.

It's so restful, in fact, that it's almost odd to know that it's a popular destination for meetings and conferences – the reason that drew me there on a recent weekend. Its proximity to the Triangle cities of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill – as well as Research Triangle Park, about a two-and-a-half hour drive from Charlotte – means there are plenty of reasons to visit on business. But after gathering in one of the comfortable conference rooms – equipped with the latest in technological gadgets for presentations, naturally – it's heavenly to be able to escape for a walk around the lake, a dip in the heated pool or, of course, a treatment in the 14,000-square-foot spa.

Another pleasant surprise was how family-friendly it was while visiting with my 16-month-old daughter. While it does have a "hushed" atmosphere, the gracious staff was extremely accommodating to her needs (you wouldn't want to let your little ones go tearing through the lobby unsupervised, but some happy splashing in the pool is welcomed). When I arrived for my reservation at Herons – the Umstead's award-winning restaurant focused on locally sourced, seasonal ingredients – her high chair was already set up, a coloring book and crayons were ready, and after we sat at least five members of the staff stopped by our table to make friends with her.

About that staff: Customer service is definitely one of the distinguishing features of this place. If I was uncertain about where to go, within about five steps I'd run across a staff member who was more than happy to point me in the right direction. Whether it was a cup of coffee (available complimentary to guests with pastries every morning in the lobby), a bottle of water, an extra towel or a pair of slippers, absolutely no need could possibly go unmet.

Rooms are spacious, with balcony views overlooking the lake and pool, flat-screen high-definition TV, an iPod docking station and toiletries fit for a spa (in fact, the same items are available in the spa).

The spa was ideal for a solo getaway – I met one woman who ducked in for a treatment while getting her car serviced nearby – but also works well for a couple, a mother-daughter pampering session or a group of girlfriends (three women checked in at the same time I did to celebrate one group member's birthday).

The Umstead prides itself on being eco-friendly – it has attained the Green Plus Certification by the Institute for Sustainable Development, which recognizes operations that include recycling and composting, the chef-farmer partnership in the restaurant, and the incorporation of native North Carolina botanicals and organic treatments into the spa services. Of course, with all those fresh linens and plastic water bottles, you're still leaving a sizable carbon footprint, but it's nice to know it's not as large as it would be at some other facilities.

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Another praiseworthy point: It's essentially an art gallery. The Umstead contains 95 original works of art, many by local or regional artists. They include a spectacular glass sculpture by the famed Dale Chihuly in the lobby, displays of work by traditional North Carolina potters and several paintings by Davidson resident Herb Jackson. Brochures are provided for a self-guided art tour.

Since opening in 2007, the 150-room Umstead has become the highest-rated full-service hotel in the state, with accolades including the AAA Five Diamond Award and the Forbes Five Star rating. Improvements continue – it just unveiled a renovated kitchen last fall, and an improved fitness center has just reopened. But while the staff may be working hard to make you feel at home, once you're finished with whatever business might have brought you there, you'll forget all about hard work. With pampering like this, stress becomes a distant memory.

Want to go?

The Umstead Hotel and Spa

Exit 287 off Interstate 40 in Cary

919-441-4000 or 866-877-4141

www.theumstead.com.

Room rates: \$239-\$699, based on room size and availability

Upcoming special events include:

Prices include tax and gratuity. Reservations: 919-447-4000 or guestservices@theumstead.com.

May 7, 2-4 p.m.: Chocolate + Wine, an educational tasting experience, \$45 per person.

May 8, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.: Mother's Day brunch. Buffet \$65 per person; \$18 for children 12 and under.

June 16, 6-8 p.m.: BBQ + Wine, on the outdoor terrace (weather permitting), \$45 per person.

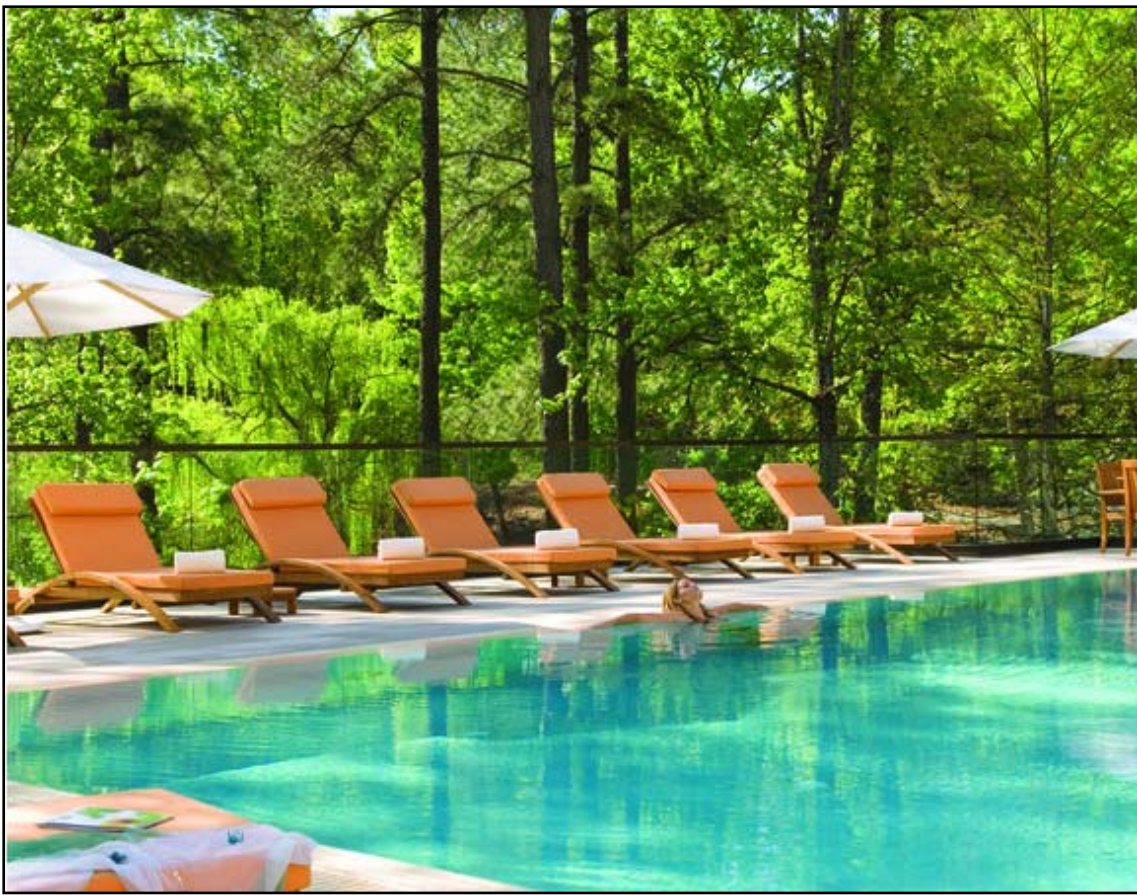
Sept. 15, 6-8 p.m.: Pizza + Wine, \$45 per person.

Dec. 17, 4-6 p.m.: Caviar + Champagne, \$65 per person.

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COURTESY OF THE UMSTEAD HOTEL AND SPA
Local Red Snapper, Succotash, Chanterelles, Okra and Smoked Ham Hock Broth at Herons restaurant.



COURTESY OF UMSTEAD HOTEL AND SPA
Butter Poached Rock Shrimp, Grits Custard, Chicken "Gravy" and Pickled Pepper Relish at Herons, the award-winning restaurant at The Umstead.

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