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THE BATHROOM RESORT

"A worker deserves not only wages, but roses as well"

- Walter J. Kohler Sr.

As we walked outside the reception area into the brisk Wisconsin chill, the doorman, in a handsome gray chesterfield tipped his hat and bid us farewell.

"We want you to drive safely so you can come back to us real soon". He said. "Please take care and know how much we appreciate your being up here with us for the past several days. We wish you and yours a wonderful holiday. May God bless you."

He reached out and grasped our hands and began to wave even before I was seated behind the wheel.

I've been fortunate enough to have checked out of some fairly decent hotels in various parts of the world But I never felt the warmth I felt this past weekend. No one said good-bye when I walked out the door of New York's Plaza Hotel. They couldn't have cared less at the Crillion in Paris. Not even a nod at the Dorchester in London.

But this is the Midwest. The heartland. And Angela and I are checking out of the only AAA "Five Diamond" resort hotel in the Midwest, the American Club, in Kohler, Wisconsin, about an hours drive north of Milwaukee.

We've spent the past two days luxuriating in a kind of hotel euphoria, a warm blanket of midwest sincerity, a small society peopled by fresh-scrubbed youngsters who want to make you wave a flag, and a cadre of older staff, many retired Kohler workers, who have a sense of pride and purpose to which many of us could aspire.

We came to see this place. We were touched, instead, by the people who live and work here. The fortunate few who have realized the dream and the reality of small-town life in a village that was built to house, in many cases, their immigrant parents and grandparents.

You may know the a portion of the Kohler story, the Austrian immigrant who built this country's premier bathroom fixture corporation in the northern wilds of Wisconsin. When it was constructed in 1918, the American Club was used as an immense rooming house for the increasing numbers of Kohler workers in the small, planned community. The Kohler family did not want these workers led astray by the presence of available liquor, women, and the general temptations that awaited the worker with a monthly paycheck in his pocket. The Club was meant to provide comfort and protection. It had its own bowling alley and a pub, the Horse and Plow. You can dine in casual surroundings at the Horse and Plow today.

When you book your room at the American Club, it is always important to inquire about the bathroom. They range in size from huge to humongous. They are all shiny white with gleaming brass and gold fittings and luxurious surprises.

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Ours had a huge heated towel rack, a double whirlpool bath, and a glass-enclosed shower where water comes out at three heights at once. This can come as a surprise to certain unsuspecting parts of your anatomy. Some of the rooms come equipped with Kohler's Habitat Masterbath which provides cycles of sun, steam, soft rain, and then, gentle breezes.

There are comforters on the bed and extra pillows. Soft pastel tones are used throughout the rooms. They are large and comfortable but never garish. The category seven suites have separate sleeping and living quarters and seem large enough to hold the entire population of Kohler.

But you don't come here to stay in your room. The red brick and slate roofed main building sits just across from the company's administrative headquarters. Wrought iron gates line the avenue just across from the American Club's main entrance, with factory operations in full force. The first time visitor is struck by the feeling that this is a "company town" that is extremely proud of both its work and its workers. So, on one side of the street sits a factory gate. On the other side sits the only five-diamond resort in the middle of the United States. There is no other place just like this.

Angela and I arrived for three days when the weather was midwest marginal. It was too cold to golf and we had picked a time to visit when the famed cooking school was not in session. We opted, instead, for a full day of spa treatments at the resorts Sports Core complex. This is a lovely private health and racquet club with an on-premises health food restaurant. The Spa facilities are formidable and the staff is trained to be thoroughly professional. I don't imagine that the Midwest friendliness and charm we experienced had to be taught. It's sort of like being surrounded by the nicest kids in your college class. Angela and I had our own schedule carefully laid out by the staff and we were gently shepherded from room to room for soothing massages, facials, manicures, body rubs, etc. As I was having a scalp massage, listening to the harp music in the background, smelling the oils and lotions that were now seeping out of my pores, I attempted, as I am wont, to interview the young lady working on me. Yes, she had graduated from Kohler High School. There were 34 students in her graduating class and all but three of the boys were named "Mike".

Out of a sense of obligation I'm going to tell you that the resort has two PGA championship Pete Dye courses with a third to come. The new course, to be called Whistling Straits. will be built along portions of Lake Michigan. It is to be a "Links" course in the tradition of St. Andrews in Scotland. There is also a 500-acre private nature preserve with 30 miles of hiking trails, canoeing, fishing, hunting, and international trap.

There is a fascinating Kohler Museum in the village and an upscale, small shopping complex. You can also take one of the highly recommended factory tours.

Finally, I must make mention of the absolutely superior dining facilities. The American Club's Executive Chef Rhys Lewis is a culinary superstar. His

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presence is felt at all levels. I enjoyed dinner in the Wisconsin room in the main building. The tables are spaced far apart in this historic room to allow for actual conversation, something that is becoming increasingly rare in our readership area. The menu features many midwest classics of interest. I was impressed with a special French menu in honor of the new Beaujolais. I had not expected to see either a traditional bouillabaisse or casoulet on the menu - but there it was, accompanied by kindness, gentle classical music in the background, and a crackling fire. It was superb.

My favorite meal at the resort was out last night when we boarded the smart little shuttle bus for the drive over to Blackwolf Run, a timbered lodge that is part of the nature reserve. On arrival, we were asked if we would prefer sitting next to a window or the fireplace. It was freezing outside so we picked the fireplace. Cornbread and preserves, corn and sausage soup, crusted salmon, and a wonderful salad made with maple syrup dressing seemed a perfect ending to our day at the spa. Around us you could here the whispers and the promises of other couples to make this their place and to come back again. Soon.

I hope you will visit the American Club soon. And when you do, please tell the gentleman who greets you at the entrance, to stay warm.

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