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The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island shows you how to decorate



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MACKINAC ISLAND, Mich. — Sunlight dances upon Lake Huron, and a bluebird sky wraps Mackinac Island and the [Grand Hotel](#) in a summer embrace.

Opened in 1887, the hotel's long white clapboard facade is an iconic photo opp for visitors approaching the island on the ferry. Ferries are the only way to get on and off the island, and guests of the Grand can take its beautifully appointed stagecoach up the hill from the ferry landing for \$5. It's your best option on this auto-free island pronounced Mac-in-AW.

The hotel's 133rd season is underway, and its world-famous porch lined with rocking chairs, potted geraniums and American flags is in constant use. The hotel sits above the town and the bustle as bicycles and horse-drawn buggies jostle with throngs of day-trippers who disembark from the ferries and flood the main street dotted with fudge shops.

Known as America's Summer Place, the hotel rents bikes to guests, who can ride a 9-mile loop around the island, passing between the rocky shoreline and the wooded hills. They can play a round of croquet on the lawn or enjoy the 18-hole Jewel Golf Course, which began with the front nine (Grand) and added the back nine (Woods) in 1994. Swimmers can take a dive into the pool where Ester Williams once dipped.

Many resorts that flourished during the Gilded Age didn't know how to survive the rising middle class. The Grand did.

"Flexibility is the key to hospitality," said Bob Tagatz, the hotel's resident historian. "Over the years we have developed to serve everybody."

Conventions are 60 percent to 70 percent of the hotel's business today. "There would be no hotel without the conventions and the package weekends that we offer."

One of the more popular package weekends is designed for decorators and lovers of interiors. Room rates for the Dorothy Draper School of Decorating start at \$1,099 per couple, \$999 single (www.grandhotel.com/packages/dorothy-draper-design-school/).

The hotel is a repository of classic Dorothy Draper design and hosts this special weekend once a year. An aristocrat from Tuxedo Park, N.Y., Mrs. Draper's design company began to really take off in 1929 when few women were decorating as a career.

"She became an icon because she created a look around color," said Carleton Varney, president of Dorothy Draper & Co. Inc. His latest book is called "Rooms To Remember," available now on Amazon.

Mr. Varney will be hosting the design school the weekend of June 21-23. He is the hotel's resident decorator and is instrumental in maintaining its unique Draper style.

"Mrs. Draper was about color, and so am I," he said. "She used to say, 'Don't show me anything that looks like gravy.'"

During these designer weekends, Mr. Varney delves into the reason for his color choices, floral patterns and accessories, many of which appear in the guest rooms and public spaces. He also discusses his own homes, including Shannon Grove in Ireland, and various projects he and his firm have developed.

Mr. Tagatz will lead a history tour of the hotel as part of the weekend package. After class, guests often enjoy the Grand's famous ice cream Brandy Alexander in the Cupola Bar with an expansive view of Lake Huron.

Mr. Varney has decorated over 400 hotel properties around the world in his career. "Not all of them have the kind of magical feeling you get at the Grand," he said.

"Julie Andrews once sang 'Brown paper packages wrapped up with string, these are a few of my favorite things.' Well, those are packages I never want to see," he joked.

Mr. Varney is an engaging storyteller who provides a bonus for design students through stories of his many famous friends. The weekend begins with a welcome cocktail party on the porch where participants can mingle with Mr. Varney.

"We feel honored Carleton Varney has been decorating Grand Hotel since 1979 when my mother and father hired Dorothy Draper & Co. to bring a new design and look to the hotel," said Dan Musser III, hotel president.

Five years ago, the Mussers decided to share Mr. Varney's expertise with guests through the special package weekend.

"It gives guests the opportunity to learn from the best and get an inside look to what makes the interior design of Grand Hotel so special."

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