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TAKE CRUISE ON DRY LAND

French Lick offers shipboard-style fun close to home

Stories by Steve Slosarek
steve.slosarek@indy.com

A recent long weekend in French Lick left me relaxed, rejuvenated, amazed, awestruck and feeling like I had just come off a cruise ship.

Having not visited since 2003, I couldn't believe how much French Lick and its sister city, West Baden, had improved.

The overall experience was that of a cruise, where daily life felt a million miles away and amenities and activities were right there at our disposal.

The cruise atmosphere, without the water, is a product of a \$500 million restoration to French Lick Resort, which owns West Baden Springs Hotel, French Lick Springs Hotel and other nearby attractions. It's also a product of good planning.

We stayed at the wonderfully refurbished French Lick Springs Hotel, where the cruise-like feeling kicked in immediately.

Some of the best features of cruises are quality kids programs, where parents can drop children off for cool activities and even meals.

As we dined in one of the two fine-dining establishments (the nicely appointed 1875: The Steakhouse), our son had a blast at KidsFest, a separate building next to the hotel's front entrance that is devoted to children. Renovation transformed the building from its former status as a golf pro shop.

For three hours, he played Wii, watched a movie and ate pizza and snacks. Hotel guests automatically receive one free hour at KidsFest per day, and there are many themed activities available.

The next evening, we tried our luck at the French Lick Casino, (casinos are cruise ship staples), which is attached to the hotel and conference center and can be accessed via an enclosed, climate-controlled walkway.



Photos provided by Indiana Landmarks

The West Baden Springs Hotel had been closed since 1932 before reopening as a luxury hotel in 2007. Until the Houston Astrodome was built in the 1960s, it was the world's largest free-span dome. Today, the hotel has six circular stories and 40 rooms that overlook the atrium.

The 51,000-square-foot, single-level gaming center boasts 27-foot ceilings and a plethora of activities, such as 1,300 slot machines, 41 table games and electronic Texas Hold 'Em poker tables. A 9,500-

square-foot nonsmoking gaming area was a plus.

All the while, our son was at a kids bowling party at the hotel's six-lane bowling alley, which also features a game arcade and billiards, not to mention a pizzeria. How cool is that?

There are many other kids programs, such as cooking adventures and scavenger hunts, plus teen activities, such as geo-caching.

Need a massage? The spa, a large 24-room area with offerings that vary from pedicures to stone massages to body wraps, is also reminiscent of a cruise offering. Or bathe in the mineral springs, for which the area is famous.

Indoor and outdoor pools (with a movie screen) and a generously sized fitness center lure lodgers. A shopping area within the hotel mixes upscale and affordable shops.

One last reminder of cruising is the colorful, four-page daily itinerary brochure slipped under the door, which highlights all the possible activities of the day, plus the weather forecast. All these assets complemented the

hotel itself, which has transformed markedly since my 2003 visit. The 443-room property, with an original east wing that was built in 1901, sparkles with a gleaming new top-to-bottom sheen, including more than 5,000 square feet of renewed gold leafing and other ornamental design features in the lobby.

The French Lick Springs Hotel isn't even the most famous of the resort's two hotels. One mile away lies the awe-inspiring West Baden Springs Hotel, in its "Eighth Wonder of the World" glory.

A bulk of the \$500 million restoration was devoted to this National Historic Landmark, built in 1902 and then closed in 1932 before reopening as a 243-room luxury hotel in 2007.

My next visit, which can't come too soon, will certainly encompass the West Baden Springs Hotel, plus all the other attractions that I didn't have time to check out this trip, including a cruise at nearby Patoka Lake.

Cruise? Did anybody say cruise? French Lick is 108 miles south of Indianapolis via Ind. 37 and U.S. 150. For more information, visit www.frenchlick.com or www.visitfrenchlickwestbaden.com.

★ Call Star reporter Steve Slosarek at (317) 444-6038.



The French Lick Springs Hotel features a spa, casino and many activities for children. A hotel has been on the site since 1845; part of this building dates to 1901.

PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword answer

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