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Long for This World Dan Neil on the extensive Grand Wagoneer L D9

OFF DUTY

Cultivate a New Look Gardening gear is crossing over to street style D3



FASHION | FOOD | DESIGN | TRAVEL | GEAR

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Saturday/Sunday, August 5 - 6, 2023 | D1

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DESIGN & DECORATING

PILGRIMAGE

A Midwestern Wonderland

A writer returns to the kaleidoscopic lakeside resort that wowed her as a child

BY NINA MOLINA

IT WAS A goofy kid of 8 when I first visited the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, a verdant, car-free isle nestled near the tip of Michigan's mitten. But even then I recognized the storied 19th-century resort was something special. Stark white and sprawled on a bluff, the Queen-Anne-style pile seemed like an apparition from a bygone era—a universe away from the drab prairie-hugging bungalows of my Chicago suburb.

Opened in 1887, the property was advertised to well-heeled denizens of Chicago, Montreal and Detroit as a genteel summer escape accessible by railroad and lake steamer. Now it endures, alongside brethren like California's Hotel del Coronado and West Virginia's Greenbrier, as one of America's last splendid, old-school retreats.

Imagine if the Mad Hatter had trained as an interior designer.

My mother had become enamored after watching the 1980 film "Somewhere in Time," a time-travel romance in which the hotel's iconic 660-foot-long, columned veranda (reputed to be the world's largest) stars alongside Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour. An overnight stay wasn't in our budget, but an afternoon wandering the riotous formal gardens—replete with over 150 varieties of flowers, from cosmos to snapdragons—set my imagination abuzz. With grounds so over-the-top, what wonders would the interior hold? I swore someday I'd return to find out.

This summer, my mother and I fi-



A room swathed in Les Fleures de Toulon, an archival Dorothy Draper print.

nally made good, handing over \$10 to ogle the décor on a self-guided tour. I was wholly unprepared for the carnival of color that greeted us. Apparently, I'm not alone. "The shock is [part of the] fun," Bob Tagatz, the hotel historian, said of slack-jawed visitors' reactions.

Had I done my homework, I might have known better: Carleton Varney, who transformed the once-staid interiors during a major makeover in 1977, was protégé to the flamboyant designer Dorothy Draper (1889-1969) and remained president of her namesake firm—and an evangelist for bold hue and pattern—until his death in 2022. It's no accident that "Live Vividly" was his mantra.

As I stepped through the grand entry into the plush parlor, wide black and white floor tiles gave way to flashy scarlet geranium-patterned carpet underfoot. Varney's son, Sebastian, said his father seized upon the cheery blooms—some 1,600 of which line the porch—during his first visit, making them the resort's unofficial calling card.

From there my eyes skipped down an esplanade of Georgian wingback chairs upholstered in raspberry velvet. Above, a phalanx of matte white chandeliers lit pastoral murals. I'd never seen so many hues—especially hot, primary ones—in a hotel before. Varney reputedly banned the use of beige in the Grand Hotel in 1979, said Tagatz. For the designer, it seems, this exuberant approach was intimately connected to hospitality. "I'm a happy person," he once told the Palm Beach Post, "and I want the world to be a friendly, colorful place."

A few more steps led to the Geranium Bar, where ruby-lacquered chaise-style chairs surrounded marble-topped cafe tables. With its bold checkerboard floor, it looked like the kind of room the Mad Hatter might conjure, had he trained as an



STRIPE RIGHT The Cupola Bar features a dramatic Murano chandelier and views of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron.

interior designer.

Next we strolled to the Cupola Bar, a two-tiered space whose waist-high trellis balcony, eaves draped in aqua-striped fabric and expansive windows make one feel aloft in a hot-air balloon's basket. A lime and magenta Murano glass chandelier sparkled like crystalline candy.

The concierge had told us the guest rooms—all 388 of which are swathed in unique combos of fabrics and furnishings, from marigold pelmets to cobalt-plaid carpets—weren't routinely open to the public, but house-sneaking might help us out. When my mom, ever the explorer, discovered some staff were fellow Filipinos, a few friendly words of Tagalog were exchanged and we were offered a peek. It didn't disappoint. "[The rooms] aren't decorated, they're gift wrapped," Tagatz said of Varney's vision.

Days later, back in my Brooklyn apartment but still giddy from the visit, I found myself idly scouting Facebook Marketplace for a cabana-striped armchair. After all, who decides what's gaudy or unruly? Recalling how Tagatz had described the Grand Hotel as "elegant without taking itself too seriously," I dropped some frilly pink carnations into an equally pink vase.

BEIGE BE GONE / FIVE EXUBERANT STYLES TO TRY



Vintage Federal Eagle Style Wall Mirror, \$2,445, Chairish.com



Artistic Scence 1 Arm, Clear Murano Glass Amber Colour Details by Multiforme, \$708, 1stDibs.com



Thurston Wing Chair in Canopy Stripe, from \$1,299, Ballard-Designs.com



Sonny Pillow in Green, \$58, Anthropologie.com



Runaway Bay Candyfloss Pink Wallpaper, \$299 for a 9-yard roll, MadcapCottage.com



GRAND HOTEL (INTERIORS); F. MARRIN; SHANNON/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; WOODWARD