

## Head for the Berkshire hills

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supplied

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As we pulled off the Mass Pike and began the slow, decompressing ride toward Lenox, my wife and I started talking about how the Berkshires had managed a mighty trick: It's an acclaimed summer tourist destination, without benefit of an ocean in sight.

With its antiques shops, art galleries, recreation, discount shopping, fine dining and world-class theater, classical music and visual arts, there was no way we were going to experience all it had to offer in just three days.

But we came close.

After checking in at Cranwell Resort, Spa & Golf Club in Lenox, a luxurious home base for our assault on the arts, it was off to Shakespeare & Company, a pleasant venue that always projects a serious-but-laid-back vibe that's a perfect fit with summertime in the mountains. John Douglas Thompson has become kind of the star of the show at Shakespeare & Company. Two summers ago, we saw him bring down the house in "Othello," a show that was such a hit it traveled to New York, and then returned to Lenox last year. This summer, he's playing the title role in "Richard III" (through Sept. 5).

And although we saw a preview performance, he was already in the fantastic form. He and director Tony Simotes have built a wonderful opening moment for Richard, a marvelously effective way to introduce the character and his deformity of body, his deformity of soul. Thompson delivers Shakespeare's delicious opening speech (beginning, famously, with, "Now is the winter of our discontent..."), as the character literally unfolds before us.

There's joy in listening to Thompson cut his way through swaths of Shakespeare. He always finds both the music and the meaning, as he plays this unrepentant evil-doer with impish glee. "Richard III" was one of the highlights of our trip.

The next morning, I teed it up at the Cranwell golf course, while my wife enjoyed a Swedish massage at Cranwell's spa. I played the front nine, an unpretentious train of holes that winds its way around the Cranwell grounds. But I've heard that Cranwell truly distinguishes itself on the back nine, a woodland course in which each hole exudes a sense of seclusion and character. I look forward to returning for that treat.

The Cranwell grounds, built around the distinctive Tudor-style mansion, quickly became a cornerstone of our visit, which coincided with the recent stifling heat wave. We were glad to get out of the city and into some fresher mountain air. But we were also happy to hear the gentle whirl of the air-conditioner in our lovely, spacious, comfortable suite — two rooms with a deck that overlooks some mountains. (Summer rates at Cranwell start at about \$345 a night.) Breakfasts were divine — piles of fresh fruit, pancakes, sausages, all perfectly prepared — and a chef at the ready to make omelets or eggs.

Cranwell even provided some entertainment: The acclaimed political comedy troupe, The Capitol Steps, is in residence at Cranwell, through Sept. 5. It's 90 minutes of breezy entertainment that can be just right for a summer night, and sometimes the titles of the songs alone can elicit a chuckle: "I'm So Indicted" and "Don't Go Fakin' You're Smart."

The following morning, we drove to North Adams to see what kind of inspired craziness is going on at MassMOCA, the contemporary art museum that's dramatically housed in a beautifully renovated former mill.

At first I was a bit irritated by Petah Coyne's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (through February 2011). It comes perilously close to slipping into the "self-indulgent" territory that's always a risk at edgy museums. Indeed, MassMOCA exhibits often seem too dependent on wandering docents to explain what you're viewing and why it's good.

But I soon warmed to many of the other exhibits, especially Tobias Putrih's "Re-projection: Hoosac, 2010" (through February 2011) — so simple, so simply stunning. MassMOCA is known for its airplane-hangar-sized galleries, and in one of them Putrih has hung strands of fishing line and illuminated them with a single light source. Sound benign? It's not. As you walk along the huge column of twine, the light moves with you within the strands of fishing line. You'll never quite catch up to it, and just when you think you're getting close, the light disappears. Putrih says he drew his inspiration from the Hoosac Tunnel, just north of North Adams, but my mind took me further afield; the ethereal exhibit had philosophical, even religious, connotations.

Picasso was certainly the innovator of his day, even as he drew plenty of inspiration from Degas. If you doubt it, stop by the Clark Museum in Williamstown — as we did the next day — to see "Picasso Looks at Degas" (through Sept. 12), a fully realized exhibit that shows the ways, both subtle and overt, Degas' work influenced Picasso. Example: Picasso's "Woman Ironing" is hung next to Degas' "Woman Ironing." Picasso's composition seems inspired by Degas' piece, but the sense of drudgery, implied in the Degas painting, goes to almost nightmare levels in Picasso's hands. The exhibit is thoroughly illuminating.

We finished our visit with a return to Shakespeare & Company to see Tina Packer perform her show, "Women of Will" ("Women of Will: The Complete Journey" runs Aug. 25-27). Packer, a Shakespeare expert, has created a show based on an intriguing premise: By tracing Shakespeare's female characters in the order in which he wrote them, we can get a sense of the development of the author, as both an artist and a man.

But the resulting piece, performed by Packer and Nigel Gore, is a somewhat clunky mix of lecture and performance. I sometimes lost the train of Packer's point, and other times, I got the uncomfortable feeling that this was a vanity project: Packer's chance to perform Shakespeare's Greatest Hits. But I was riveted by her speculation that the things going on in Shakespeare's personal life influenced the various phases of his career, and when she was able to make those connections on stage, it was quite inspiring.

We also squeezed in a lovely walk on a trail at Mountain Meadow Preserve, just north of Williamstown, and we enjoyed an elegant dinner at Firefly in downtown Lenox. It was a full schedule, but somehow still relaxing. On the drive home, however, it was easy to click off all the things that we missed — Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow, Berkshire Theatre Festival and Williamstown Theatre Festival. And we never made it to the beach. Oh, there's no oceanfront in the Berkshires? We hadn't noticed.

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