



Italian mosaic tile work in French Lick Resort hotels



Power Plant Bar & Grill

Prime rooms look into the domed atrium at the historic West Baden hotel at French Lick Resort in southern Indiana. The atrium is 100 feet tall and 200 feet across.

# Hoosier Grandeur

French Lick Resort displays style of the early 1900s

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JULIE CAMPBELL

**T**ake a scenic drive south of Anderson and less than three hours later, you'll find yourself in a magical place where time stands still. Perfectly preserved at French Lick Resort, the grandeur and elegance of the early 1900s are on full display in its two historic hotels, West Baden Springs and French Lick Springs. West Baden Springs is by far the more impressive of the two hotels, due to its stunning centerpiece, a spectacular domed atrium, 200 feet across by 100 feet tall. When it was finished in 1902, the hotel was known as the "eighth wonder of the world" because it boasted the world's largest free spanning dome (and held that title until the 1960s). The fourth and sixth floors of the hotel feature rooms

with stunning balcony views of the atrium. If they're available, it's worth the extra money to secure one. During the first three decades of the 20th century, socialites from all over the country flocked here to drink and bathe in the springs around the hotel, which were once thought to cure diseases. In keeping with this long-standing legacy, both hotels still offer a variety of spa treatments. "May was the hotel's busy month," says Indiana Landmarks tour guide Glenda Ferguson. "You would come here, and then take the derby train to Louisville for the Kentucky Derby. Take the train back and spend the whole month of May here; take the train north to the Indy 500 and then go home." Around the hotel grounds, you'll still see some of the former spring pavilions. One of the most well-preserved is the Hygeia Pavilion, where hotel guests once descended curved staircases more than 15 feet into a basin to sip bubbling mineral water at the bottom. Since the springs were prone to flooding and the water was known to contain lithium (which was deemed a controlled substance by the U.S. government in 1971), the springs were eventually capped. A few years after the stock market crash of 1929, with the era of opulence long gone, the hotel was sold for \$1 to an order of Jesuit priests who used it as a seminary for about 30 years. Sadly, the hotel fell into disrepair, changed hands several times and was even abandoned for about 13 years before it reopened in the 1990s

and was eventually restored to the original grandeur that guests enjoy today. Just a 5- to 10-minute free shuttle ride away, you'll find most of the shops, restaurants, entertainment and nightlife at French Lick Springs Hotel. One of the most popular restaurants on the property is 1875: The Steakhouse, named to commemorate the date of the first Kentucky Derby. Featuring an open kitchen and an elegant atmosphere, the restaurant overlooks the resort's scenic gardens and iconic Pluto Springs gazebo. The menu boasts premium cuts of 100 percent Midwest, corn-fed Angus beef as well as plenty of other selections. Fun fact: Tomato juice was invented right here at French Lick in 1917, and each diner can enjoy a taste of complimentary tomato juice before their meal. For a more casual dining experience, check out the Power Plant Bar & Grill, which was the former electrical switch room for French Lick Springs Hotel. The focal point of the restaurant is a wall filled with large vintage electrical switches, some over a foot tall. Labels from a bygone era still name each switch from the "main elevators" and "creek pump no. 1" to the "dairy" and the "kitchen." And don't forget to try the restaurant's famed Bourbon Butter Cake for dessert while you're there. Many guests of the resort also like to try their luck at the French Lick Casino, located in the hotel's lower level. Open round the clock, the casino boasts more than 700 slot machines and a couple dozen live dealer table games. It's the state's only fully non-smoking casino. If golf is more your style, you're in for a treat. Golfers can choose from several courses at the resort. The beautiful Pete Dye course, which hosted the Senior PGA Championship in 2015, offers stunning vistas that overlook French Lick. Senior PGA champion Colin Montgomerie called it "one of the iconic courses" in America. Whether you visit for the gambling, the golf or the grandeur, a trip to French Lick Resort should be at the top of every Hoosier's bucket list. ■