

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

AFLOAT

IN CHOCOLATE

A chocolate journey? For chocophiles, it's a fantasy come true. No matter how big and fancy the fitness center, vacationers want to indulge, and for some of us, indulgence comes in just one flavor. On Princess Cruises, award-winning chocolatier Norman Love of Norman Love Confections is the mas-

termind of "Chocolate Journeys," an onboard experience. Among the chocolate-drenched elements are 15 custom-crafted desserts, chocolate and wine pairings, chocolate dessert demonstrations, and chocolate-themed spa treatments. As splendidly decadent as his confections are, we think Love had a definite advantage in the hiring process; who better to serve as choco-

late guru of "The Love Boat" than a guy named Love? (The popular TV series, which ran from 1977-87, was set on a Princess ship.) Considered a true master of artisanal chocolate, Love has been named one of the top 10 chocolatiers in North America. www.chocolatejourneys.com

DIANE BAIR
AND PAMELA WRIGHT



Among artisan chocolatier Norman Love's creations, this chocolate praline timbale and . . .



. . . this chocolate version of tiramisu.



Chocolate hazelnut bar.



Chocolate tart with vanilla mousse and flourless chocolate cake.



Chocolate pistachio dome with almond pistachio nougatine.



Chocolate caramel tart.

Botanical Carolina

By Karen Campbell
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The reigning family in tiny Belmont, N.C., 15 miles west of Charlotte, are the Stowes. Jasper Stowe opened the county's first cotton mill in 1863, and after the turn of the century, his family and others opened additional mills, helping develop the town as a textile center nicknamed "City of Diversified Textiles."

Then the textile industry moved overseas, and most of the mills in the area were torn down or converted. So Daniel J. Stowe, a retired textile executive, decided to craft a very different kind of legacy in his quaint Southern town. He reserved 380 acres of rolling meadows and woodlands abutting Lake Wylie for a first-class botanical complex, and since 1999, the Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden has become an enticing destination for visitors. It's only a 25-minute drive from Charlotte's bustling airport, but with its year-round variety of special exhibits, events, classes, and programming, it feels a world away.

My sister and I spent some of our formative years in Belmont, and our 85-year-old father grew up there, working in the cotton mill for which my grandfather was head electrician most of his adult life. So a trip to the Garden was a homecoming of sorts. For us, the big draw was the Orchid Conservatory, the Carolinas' only glasshouse dedicated to the display of orchids. Five stories high, the Conservatory's 8,000 square feet are packed with lush foliage and brilliant blooms. Ever-changing exhibits showcase a collection of roughly 5,000 orchids in an eye-popping array of sizes, shapes, and colors. Even the mini-orchids can stop you in your tracks, exuding the most delectable scents reminiscent of vanilla, cinnamon, and ginger.

Lavish displays also incorporate a wide variety of exotic succulents, bromeliads, and air plants, which sprout improbably from trellises and archways. A relatively short, manageable pathway leads visitors around a central courtyard gazebo with a cascading fountain wall and wishing well, complete with fish swimming and lizards scurrying along stone borders. Throughout, colorful paintings adorn walls and sculptures peek out amid the greenery. For the physically compromised, the Conservatory alone is well worth the visit; Dad's bum hip was a concern, but he was so enthralled he didn't mention it once.

SHUTTERSTOCK / DENISE WEANT

Outside, we left him contentedly parked on a bench to explore on our own. The Conservatory opens onto 10 acres of distinctive, beautifully manicured garden oases with flora for every season as well as sculptures, pools, and fountains. The Four Seasons Garden produces colorful blooms and foliage throughout the year. The Cottage Garden showcases heirloom plants popular over a century ago. The Canal Garden features fountains at each end, while the Allee Garden has a tunnel fountain that's especially popular with kids. Other gardens specialize in azaleas or white flowers or conifers, and the Serpentine Garden includes a long meandering walk around circular pools rimmed with color-themed plantings. If you have the time and energy, you also can take advantage of more than three miles of hiking trails that loop around two ponds and alongside Lake Wylie.

Last October, the Garden opened a brand new garden and play area especially for children called Lost Hollow. Centered around a sunken pond, the area is designed to represent a long lost land inviting exploration and discovery. Kids can happily cavort along stone and wood paths, up to a medieval-inspired iron-railed "Balconette" and down to the "Fireplace Cave." Kids can explore the "Moon Keep," complete with flying buttresses and a moat, and play inside an "Aviary" that was once in Stowe's estate garden and is now ringed by plantings designed to attract birds. Over time, Lost Hollow will incorporate more specially chosen flora and additional structures to enhance the Garden's educational mission.

The Visitor Pavilion, with its vaulting stained glass atrium, is not just where visitors begin their tour, but also an ideal spot to end a visit. The Garden Store inside is well worth a look, offering everything from handmade crafts to live plants. (I couldn't pass up a tillandsia to take home on the plane.) If you want to find a quiet spot in one of the gardens for a picnic, the store also sells light snacks and drinks. But if you're lucky, you can grab one of the white rockers on the veranda overlooking the gardens and while away the time Southern-style, rocking gently with an iced tea, a glass of wine, or a sparkling mimosa. Indeed, a world away.

Karen Campbell can be reached at karencampbell4@rcn.com.

HERE

MAINE FAIRS FULL OF EARTH'S BOUNTY AND FUN

Learn about beekeeping, canning, and working with sheepdogs at the Common Ground Country Fair in the town of Unity, in Waldo County, Sept. 25-27. The fair, run by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, celebrates organic farming practices (207-568-4142, www.mofga.org/thefair). Don't miss a highlight of the Cumberland Country Fair Sept. 27-Oct. 3: the annual Maine State Pumpkin and Squash Weigh-In. This fair also includes professional bull riding, a demolition derby, and a children's rodeo (www.cumberlandfair.com). The Fryeburg Fair, Oct. 4-11, features a fireman's muster, a skillet throw, sheepdog trials, and a pig scramble, plus a huge midway with rides and food, and plenty of traditional fair contests and exhibitions (207-935-3268, www.fryeburgfair.org).

WOODSTOCK'S FIRST NEW INN IN DECADES

Head for the banks of Vermont's Ottauquechee River where you'll find a new 40-room boutique hotel, 506 On the River. The hotel, the first to open its doors in the historic town of Woodstock in decades,

sits on six acres, and blends modern amenities with a chic farmhouse aesthetic and decorations from around the globe (owners Aaren Macksoud, a Woodstock native, and Paulina Macksoud own properties in Germany, Zanzibar, and Kenya). It has the town's only indoor hotel pool, and offers massage treatments, Wi-Fi, complimentary country breakfasts, and lots of retro touches: an apothecary counter that now serves as the bar in the 506 Bistro, an old jukebox, arcade games, and vintage newspapers. Rates start at \$269 per night, double occupancy. 802-457-7232, www.ontheriverwoodstock.com

THERE

CALLING ALL PIE AND COOKIE LOVERS

Visit one of Montana's top luxury ranch resorts for a four-day dessert camp and learn how to make pies and cookies from renowned pastry chefs. The Resort at Paws Up in Greenough offers Upper Crust: A Sophisticated Pie and Cookie Camp,

Oct. 9-12. Kate McDermott, known as The Pie Whisperer and owner of The Art of the Pie in Seattle, will teach guests how to make pies from scratch (pictured far right), and James Beard award-winning chef Mindy Segal, owner of Mindy's Hot Chocolate in Chicago, will lead hands-on cookie and pastry workshops. Also enjoy locally inspired dinners with wine pairings. Out of the kitchen, guests go hiking, float down the Blackfoot River, or try fly-fishing, horseback riding, or an ATV tour. Rates for this all-inclusive three-night weekend start at \$809 per person per night, double occupancy, which includes accommodation in a private home, three meals daily, all workshops and activities, wine tastings, and transportation to and from Missoula International Airport. 877-588-6783, www.pawsup.com

SURF MAN-MADE WAVES IN WALES

Visit the Conwy Valley in North Wales and experience the longest man-made surfable waves on the planet. Surf Snowdonia,

the world's first-ever inland surf lagoon park, can create barreling waves that rise up to 6.5 feet high and peel for 492 feet. The park uses 100 percent rainwater from Snowdonia Mountain and generates one wave per minute at the push of a button. Up to 52 people can surf the lagoon at once. Surf Snowdonia's Surf Academy offers two-hour lessons for beginner to advanced levels, ages 5 and older. The park also has an activity lagoon featuring The Blob, a 15-foot partially inflated air bag; one person sits on The Blob and then another person jumps onto it, catapulting his or her friend through the air and into the water — endless fun. Other park activities include bodyboarding, standup paddleboarding, surf kayaking (pictured below), surf yoga, surf fitness, and swimming. www.surfsnowdonia.co.uk

EVERYWHERE

FIX A ZIPPER WHILE TRAVELING

Throw a tiny FixnZip repair tool in your bag and use it to

help fix a zipper on anything from a jacket to a tent or suitcase. The quarter-ounce tool can fix metal or plastic zippers with teeth or coils, zippers on luggage, and even invisible-watertight zippers. To use, align the metal FixnZip with one row of teeth on the broken zipper and tighten it down using a small attached screw. Then insert the zipper pin from the other row of teeth and zip up the zipper, realigning the teeth as you go. The tool can typically repair zippers with damaged and even missing teeth. The tool comes in three sizes (check the back of your zipper for a number indicating size, or measure the width of your zipper). \$9.99 for any one size; \$24.99 for a pack with small, medium, and large FixnZips. 866-817-0400, www.fixnzip.com

SEE YOUR HOME FROM AFAR

Withings' Home HD Camera helps you keep tabs on your home when you're away, providing noise and motion detection alerts, and monitoring indoor air quality (it has built-in



air quality sensors that can detect if levels of volatile organic compounds spike). The softball-size device weighs 8 ounces and is easy to set up: Use the Withings Home Security Camera app (available to Apple and Android users) to establish a Bluetooth connection with your mobile device and a Wi-Fi connection with your home network. Then choose settings for monitoring and recording information, and set up an interactive home journal. The Home HD Camera has night vision, a 5-megapixel camera for shooting stills and videos, and a 110-degree horizontal field of view. Slide the removable oak cover over the camera for privacy. It can also be used as a baby monitor, and for two-way conversations and streaming video. Captured images and videos get stored for 48 hours, or you can pay extra for long-term storage. \$189.95. Amazon.com, www.withings.com
KARI BODNARCHUK



DTL PHOTOGRAPHY