By Wm. V. Burgess, Westminster, CO

We had heard of French Lick as an old-fashioned, late 19th century or early 20th century resort that had faded into memory then was brought back into popular mention as the Southern Indiana hometown of NBA superstar Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics.

Larry Bird is still very much an icon around French Lick. His old home near the railroad track still stands (complete with basketball backboard fastened above the garage door), he is depicted in a mural on one of the downtown buildings, and his new home just outside of town is a popular photo stop for travelers.

As we discovered, however, when we checked into our RCI exchange unit at French Lick Springs Villas, there is lots more going on, both inside and outside the main part of town. The condominiums are located on a hilltop just behind the world-famous French Lick Resort Hotel and near the town center.

The Villas complex is in two sections, one built in the early 1980’s and the newer section completed in the mid-1990’s. All are two-bedroom units that can accommodate up to eight persons each.

Our master bedroom had a king-sized bed, a 19” TV, and separate bathroom shared with occupants of the second bedroom. The second bedroom had two twin beds, a mirrored dresser, and no TV. There were two sleeper sofas, one in the down-stairs living room and the other in the up-stairs loft area.

The living room was spacious. The furniture and the carpet looked new. There was a fireplace (free wood in fall and winter!), a 30” TV with cable channels, a full size sleeper sofa, coffee table, an easy chair, and a love seat with double ottoman.

A separate dining area next to the living room seats up to six persons. Three more could be seated at the breakfast bar between the dining area and the kitchen. Our unit had a full kitchen with a four-burner range, oven, microwave oven, dishwasher, garbage disposal, full size refrigerator/freezer, and a countertop built-in grill. Table service for eight was provided along with a toaster, blender, coffee maker (coffee filters, too!), electric can opener, and all pots, pans, baking sheets, mixing bowls, utensils, detergent, and paper towels. A washer and dryer were housed in a downstairs closet. A second downstairs closet held the vacuum sweeper, brooms, mops, etc.

The ne plus ultra for the unit was a sauna and a Jacuzzi tub in the downstairs bathroom. Upstairs between the two bedrooms was another full bath with shower, tub, and vanity but no hair dryer (we put that item on our suggestion list).

Also, in the upstairs loft area was full size sleeper sofa, reading lamp, and a card/game table with four chairs. Off the game area was an upstairs deck perfectly screened from the neighboring unit and covering an identically sized deck below just outside the main floor dining area.

The Villas staff was very hospitable...
and accommodating. Reception/check-in was quick and easy as Kitty went over the information binder to our unit. When we reported a problem with the bathroom sink, a maintenance man arrived in just a few minutes to fix it. When we had trouble with the electric can opener, housekeeping exchanged it instantly for a new one.

Several tour books and maps were available and on display in the office. Video rentals were $3 each. Internet service was free with a 30-minute time limit per session. Coin-operated newspaper kiosks were stationed just inside the front door. A wide variety of brochures detailing local and state-wide attractions was displayed in the office lobby.

French Lick Springs Villas provided an on-site tour director that conducted daily tours to local attractions, many of them exclusively for Villas guests. Among these tour exclusives were: (1) an all-day visit to a nearby Amish community with home visits and lunch at an Amish country inn, (2) a tour of the world’s largest underground warehouse carved out of 300 acres of limestone 200 feet below the surface, and (3) a chance to visit and possibly drive (depending on weather conditions) a private collection of antique race cars. All tours were less than an hour from French Lick and included lunch as well as time for shopping.

Other attractions nearby are Marengo Cave, a US National Landmark, offering two different cave tours, both an easy walk with several stops for tour guide recitations: the Crystal Pace tour of 40 minutes duration and the Dripstone tour lasting 70 minutes.

Near Mitchell, about 45 minutes northeast from French Lick, is the memorial to Virgil “Gus” Grissom, a local boy who became one of the original seven NASA astronauts. In the same location we found Spring Mill State Park as a counterpoint to the space program memorial. Here there is a restored pioneer village of some 20 log cabins dating back to the early 1800’s and the largest operating grist mill (three stories high) this writer has ever seen.

In the opposite direction, 25 miles southwest of French Lick, lies the town of Jasper, claiming 72.6% German-American population. The DuBois County Courthouse is an imposing structure and St. Joseph’s Catholic Church has a medieval bell tower reaching high above everything else. For those who love German food, the Schnitzelbank Restaurant is tops.

A little further south, across Interstate 64 is the quaint village (population 64) of Santa Claus, IN, which postmarks over 400,000 pieces of mail each year. Imagine!

Just west of Santa Claus is the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, a U.S. National Park Service facility featuring the Lincoln cabin site and the burial place of Abraham Lincoln’s mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln lived here for 14 years, from age 7 to age 21, his formative years, before moving to Illinois and eternal fame.

Back in French Lick, the Indiana Railway Museum offers a 1 3/4-hour train ride on the French Lick, West Baden, and Southern line as it wanders across 20 miles of forested hills and through the 2,200 foot long Burton Tunnel. The passenger cars are actual coaches, unrestored, from former railroad companies.

A short walk from the railroad depot is another French Lick home of distinction, the modest one-story cabin of former world heavyweight boxing champion, Joe Louis.

There are two real extravaganzas in French Lick. Actually,
one is in French Lick, the other is in West Baden, but the two towns are side by side so they appear as one location. The first extravaganza is the French Lick Resort Hotel, often called in days past, “America’s Grand Dame”. With 443 guest rooms, a 13,000 square foot ballroom (plus a 6,700 square foot junior ballroom) with terraces overlooking formal gardens, it is certainly one of the grand hotels of all time. There is a 27,000 square foot full service spa, salon, and health club, a six-lane bowling alley, and five restaurants. Close by is the 1920 fully restored Donald Ross golf course, a nine-hole 1907 Valley Course, and a new 18-hole golf course under construction.

Adjacent to the French Lick Resort Hotel, and connected by a retail concourse, stands the entirely new Resort Casino with 42,000 square feet of gaming floor, 1200 slot machines and 32 tables. The exterior of the casino is designed to resemble a riverboat and to comply with Indiana law, it actually sits “on a body of water”—a moat no more than a few inches deep.

Just up the street in a massive park setting is the fully restored ($385 million) West Baden Springs Resort. Originally sited to feature the therapeutic qualities of the mineral springs on the grounds, this Moorish styled structure is an architectural wonder, featuring a glass dome 160 feet high covering a circular atrium 200 feet in diameter. More than 12 million one-inch square tiles make up the floor mosaic. Room balconies from six floors up open out onto the atrium. Called the “Carlsbad of America” for its mineral waters by the founders in the mid 19th century, the West Baden Resort is also known as the “Eighth Wonder of the World” for the architectural triumph of the steel cantilevered span of the dome. It has to be seen to be believed.

Although it has been 65 years since their heydays when the French Lick and West Baden resorts were classed among the very best grand hotels in the nation, it does appear a comeback is in the making. Those glory years may yet return.

By Thomas Grames, Palos Heights, IL

The French Lick Villas are nestled in the rolling hills of southern Indiana adjacent to the French Lick Springs Hotel.

The French Lick Springs Hotel built in 1901 has recently been restored to its original grandeur. The lobby of the hotel is truly impressive, from the restored mosaic floor to the ceiling murals. All the amenities at the hotel have been updated. These include new indoor and outdoor pools, a hot tub, world class spa, several restaurants, a promenade of shops and, to top it off, a Vegas-style casino reminiscent of the roaring 20’s. For family fun Pluto’s Alley, a restored bowling alley, video arcade, and pizza parlor are located on the lower level. For the sports enthusiast an 18 hole Donald Ross golf course, a tennis center, and riding stables are all on-site.

The Villas sit on the hillside just beyond the formal gardens of the hotel. The Villas share all the amenities of the hotel. There are two different styles of Villas. Units 1 thru 95 are large two-story town homes that sleep 8. The first floor is spacious and contains a full kitchen, complete with Jenn-Air grill, dining room, living room with sofa bed and stone fireplace. The first floor bath has a large Jacuzzi, sauna, and shower. A washer /dryer are also on the first floor. The second floor contains 2 bedrooms, full bath, and loft area with a second sofa bed. Each town home has two decks from which you might see deer graze the hillside.

The only drawback to the town homes are the stairs, not only inside but many have stairs outside to reach the parking areas. If stairs are a problem you may want to consider units 96 thru 115 which are lock-out units containing an A unit and a B unit. Both A and B units are one bedroom sleep 4 and have full kitchens. The A units are first floor and most do not have any stairs to the parking areas. The A unit has a larger kitchen with Jenn-Air grill and a dishwasher. The bath in the A unit has a small jacuzzi tub which is quite good. The tub also has a steam control; I really enjoyed the steam baths.

The B unit has a smaller kitchen with no dishwasher. Set back in the corner of the bedroom of the B unit is a large Jacuzzi tub. The bath contains a standing shower. Both units have a fireplace. A washer/dryer is in the hallway downstairs for both units to share.

A retired gentleman, familiar with the history of the area, runs inexpensive bus tours to places of interest during the week. Amish Country, Patoka Lake, and Marengo Caves are just a few. For a great in-room massage be sure to call Jon. The front desk can provide you with his number. His prices are less than half of what the hotel spa is charging.

For another step into the past, be sure to visit the unbelievable West Baden Springs Hotel one mile down the road. A National Landmark, the hotel has re-opened this year after being closed as a hotel for 75 years. I had toured this hotel 20 years ago when it was just a shell of its former self. I can’t believe what they were able to do with it as it had been in a crumbling state. Be sure to go inside; the atrium is outstanding. Once called the “8th wonder of the world” for its architectural style, the restoration is considered one of the greatest saves of the century.

For good food at reasonable prices try Miguel’s Mexican Restaurant next to the Jay C’s supermarket. Another fun stop is the French Lick Winery, where you can sample wine and have a delicious lunch.

All in all, if you are looking for a place to relax, maybe take in a little history or try your luck at the new casino, French Lick is the place to go. We’ve already made our reservation for next year.