

TOWN&COUNTRY

The 138-Year Secret to Building a Perfect Summer Getaway

Two generations of vacations inspired a collaboration between a legendary lakeside retreat and America's oldest design firm.

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There's something special about a place that knows you, a place where time stands still the moment you arrive, a place where you're somehow every age you've ever been all at once. For Anne Shirley, it was Avonlea and Green Gables. For the Crawley family, Downton Abbey. For Sebastian Varney and Rudy Saunders, president and design director of storied design firm, Dorothy Draper & Company, respectively, that place has always been the exquisite Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan.

Saunders' connection to Grand Hotel started with his mother who grew up vacationing on Mackinac and later, brought her own family every year. Varney's relationship with the hotel began 45 years ago when his father, inimitable decorator and former president of Dorothy Draper & Company, Carleton Varney, entered into a partnership with the property in the late 1970s, establishing the hotel's iconic décor—itsself a draw to Grand.

As life dishes out highs and lows, change desired and forced, there's tremendous comfort in grasping hold of a summer place like Grand Hotel. It's a spot that feels like its always waiting for you to return, reserving a favorite seat on the end of the same emerald green tufted sofa you've chosen for tea since your first visit all those years ago. Yet you know there will be new magic in store, too, the surprise of larger, more vibrant geraniums on the carpet underfoot, for instance, and the anticipation of this year's story waiting to be written.



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The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan seen in a vintage postcard. The property was recently refreshed by longtime partners Dorothy Draper & Company.

According to Saunders, Carleton Varney's inspiration for Grand was always firmly rooted in a vision that he shared with the hotel's leadership—that Grand Hotel was never in the business of selling guest rooms, but rather, summer memories. For visitors to the resort, remembrances of reading newspapers on the world's longest front porch like James Earl Jones, joining family and friends in the parlor for afternoon tea, dancing and listening to music in the Terrace Room, splashing in the Esther Williams pool, or sipping daiquiris at the resort's bars a la [Eartha Kitt](#) are priceless. Varney's intent with the decoration was to "gift wrap" those memories by letting the vibrant history of the property and the natural beauty of the island—the colors of the sunrise over the Straits of Mackinac, the iconic geraniums that line the front porch--inspire the indoors. Grand and its guests were so delighted by his work that the relationship between the design firm and the hotel has lasted four and a half decades.

Recently, Grand Hotel underwent another renovation alongside Dorothy Draper & Company, this time led by Sebastian Varney, Saunders, and Grand Hotel president, David Jurcak. Jurcak's love for historic hotels, and of course, Grand Hotel, runs deep. He grew up traveling the world with his father who worked for Japan Airlines, and found that historic properties always told the best stories, a sentiment he carries into his work at Grand. The team's direction for the refreshed parlor, new Baroque Bar (formerly the Audubon Bar), and main dining room reflect their commitment to celebrating those stories—138 years of memories past and memories to come—while echoing Carleton Varney's vision to stay true to Grand Hotel's timeless identity as a historic summer cottage awash with vivid flowers in northern Michigan.



“When working on Grand Hotel, we think about the families who have been visiting for generations, so that we are continuing to welcome them with something fresh and new that still feels like the Grand Hotel they grew up loving,” Saunders said. Jurcak echoes this sentiment. “Our vision is to honor the past while thoughtfully restoring and enhancing the hotel for the next 100 years—and beyond. These restorations not only preserve the architectural integrity of Grand Hotel but also celebrate the craftsmanship and character that have defined it for generations.”

Varney and Saunders started the refresh in the parlor, brightening the room by replacing the dark green tones throughout the space with a color called “Huron Sunrise,” making a slight revision to the iconic red geranium carpet by incorporating three massive blooms at the entryway, commissioning a new mural to anchor the wall of the parlor to flow seamlessly into the historic murals on the east and west walls of the space, and refreshing the window treatments, upholstery, and lighting.



The bar in the parlor, formerly known as the Audubon Bar, was reworked and renamed Baroque Bar as a tribute to decorating icon, Dorothy Draper and her signature Modern Baroque style. The space brings to mind old New York City elegance—Draper’s hometown—with emerald greens, deep reds, blacks, golds, and intricate fretwork taking center stage. DiBlasi Painting of New York spent six weeks lacquering the bar’s paneling and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves to give them a deep green mirror-like finish. The wallcovering is also a highlight, a hand-painted Gracie chinoiserie featuring local Michigan flora and fauna—the American robin, pileated woodpecker, purple finch, and apple blossoms. A custom bar and red velvet banquet built by Kindel Grand Rapids from the Draper archive anchor the room.

The main dining room's renovations focused on color scheme, including Jonquil walls, new window treatments, and a refresh to the signature upholstery on the dining chairs to include a bouquet of yellow and pink tulips—a nod to the tulips in Grand Hotel's gardens each spring. A new carpet runner in the walkway features tulip bouquets on a summer cane pattern.

Though the 2025 renovations are complete, there's more in store for visitors in 2026 and beyond as Grand Hotel and Dorothy Draper & Company set their sights on refreshing the 388 uniquely decorated guest rooms, providing comfort, wonder, and a memorable backdrop to guests at America's Summer Place for generations to come.

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