



IN SEARCH OF SPIRITS

Leader writer recounts night spent in PT’s most haunted hotel

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I never expected to see a ghost. And, to be fair, “potential paranormal encounter” wasn’t exactly counted among the offerings in the official description of my accommodations. In fact, there is nary a mention of Manresa Castle’s supposed ghostly residents anywhere on the hotel’s website (though a paragraph in the Guest Services Directory does address the stories, in a somewhat bemused tone). However, even just a cursory Google search of the historic Port Townsend edifice reveals it to be something of a singular destination for seekers of the supernatural.

Two of the top five results alone confirm it. One is a link to www.travelchannel.com and a collection of photos from the episode of “Ghost Adventures” that saw Zak Bagans and company visit the castle and do their thing, that special (and undeniably fascinating, in it’s own way) bit of performance art that so perfectly combines “Scooby-Doo” and “WrestleMania.”

The other is a booking service, “Haunted Rooms America,” which specializes in helping would-be visitors locate and make reservations for “Ghost Hunts, Haunted Hotels, and Haunted Locations.”

Additionally, the castle was featured prominently in “Most Terrifying Places in America,” a documentary series, also from Travel Channel, which takes viewers on a tour of mysterious, infamous, and supposedly haunted places in every state.

I love ghost stories — fictional, nonfiction, good or cheesy, I can’t get enough.

I saw all the shows.

I read all the stories; even the pages of The Leader have previously recounted the reported haunted happenings at Manresa Castle.

But still, I never expected to see a ghost during my stay.

Though I’m of a Mulder mindset, my heart belongs to Scully.

I do, however, love the hunt. So my expectations were guarded when I checked in just before 5 p.m. Friday, Oct. 30, the day before Halloween in this savage year of our lord 2020; a rare month containing two full moons, one of which actually falls on All Hallow’s Eve itself. Also known as Devil’s Night, in many places an annual orgy of vandalism and arson. A night of tricks. Mischief Night. The 82nd anniversary of the infamous “War of the Worlds” broadcast by Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre.

But Welles’ tale had only the trappings of journalism, presented as it was in the style of an honest-to-goodness radio news broadcast, and I’m the real thing, thus professionally obligated to write about whatever I might experience during my stay at Port Townsend’s reputedly most haunted hotel.

ARRIVAL

Things began innocuously enough. The pleasant woman at the front desk did not ask me what brought me to town or if I was looking for ghosts.

Disappointingly, I saw no obvious ghost hunters, nobody skulking about with



The historic Manresa Castle hotel in Port Townsend is reportedly home to more than one ghostly resident and has been featured on several TV programs dedicated to the supernatural. *Leader photos by Luciano Marano*

recording equipment or peering into the more shadowy corners of the hotel grounds. In fact, the only person looking around the place with any kind of clear intent was me.

After an initial wander — the castle really is a beautiful place and a truly unique building — I again spoke with the woman at the front, who told me people often visit to conduct the sort of research I’d been expecting to see. Some film segments for YouTube channels, she said. An apparently semi-regular seance of some sort is held in one of the supposedly more haunted rooms.

The woman said she tried not to think about the castle’s reputation as she often has to work there alone. As for personal experiences, she claimed to have heard doors locking and unlocking repeatedly when nobody was inside or nearby, but again insisted she didn’t think about it much so as to not scare herself too badly. In terms of ghosts, she does not consider herself a believer.

I saw several guests arrive clad in costumes, and a few others with Halloween garb in tow. But even later, when I stopped in at the lounge for a bite and a beer, I noted nary a Ouija board and not a single tarot card. The restaurant was crowded, though, and I did overhear one employee telling a waiting party the place “is pretty popular around Halloween.”

BACKSTORY

If you were to pitch a movie with a spooky setting like Manresa Castle, Hollywood execs would likely say it was too much. This place was never not going to be haunted with the history it has.

A 2018 article in The Leader lists Port Townsend and Jefferson County’s hottest haunted spots, in addition to the castle, as the Jefferson County Historical Society’s Museum of Art and History, the Wynwoods Gallery & Bead Studio on Water Street, the Palace Hotel, the Bishop Victorian Hotel, and numerous spots around “the waterfront.”

But the castle has a particularly

irresistible backstory.

A forlorn suicide. A hanged monk. Abandoned pleasure palace of the superrich of yesteryear. And those are just the highlights, so to speak.

Famously the residence of a prominent local family, the stately abode was left abandoned after the death of patriarch Charles Eisenbeis in 1902. Later, it was first a home for nuns and then an order of Jesuit priests used it as a training college.

Finally, in 1968 the castle became a hotel, and since then it has known renovations, upgrades, four different owners and many, many ghost stories.

According to the hotel’s Guest Services Directory, “Although not substantiated with any paperwork, it is said that a young woman jumped to her death from Room 306 after learning that her fiancé had died at sea.

“It is also claimed that a monk hanged himself in the peak of the turret above Room 302.”

Of course, it’s also said by some those stories might have been the work of a loquacious and entertaining bartender who made up ghostly tales to draw customers. Sounds like my kind of hangout spot!

MIDNIGHT

I was feeling relaxed and watching “Tales from the Darkside: The Movie” on cable, getting sleepy.

Alas, I’m no longer the party animal I was in the wilder days of my youth. Potential ghosts or not, I was fading.

The castle was alive with all the noises one might expect from such an old building, but nothing particularly sinister. I heard the occasional creaks and groans from people passing in the hall, and there was an atmospheric wind howling off and on outside, but the power stayed on and my evening had been otherwise bereft of scares.

I did chance one more look around in the interest of professional thoroughness and the chance some spook seekers might have put off their hunt until nearer the witching hour.

I can’t vouch for anything that happened later, in the darker hours of the night, or what rites may have been performed, what invocations made, in the privacy of the individual rooms. At the time, though, I saw nothing out of place and can honestly say that Halloween 2020 was, perhaps true to form, not what I’d hoped for. With nearly everyone already scared of a lurking invisible threat these days, maybe that is ghostly enough for now.

I would say there’s always next year, but the way things have been going lately...

HALLOWEEN

Ghost stories have been part of human culture since time immemorial. Clearly, we need them. In his excellent book “Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places,” Colin Dickey wrote, “[Ghosts] give us hope for a life beyond death and because of this help us cope with loss and grief.”

Loss and grief we got in spades this year. But how are we fixed for ghosts?

Such stories, Dickey wrote, “mean more than we are usually prepared to admit. If you want to understand a place, ignore the boastful monuments and landmarks, and go straight to the haunted houses.”

Manresa Castle is the brick-and-mortar remnant of a bygone age of excess. Tombstone of a world so removed and different from our own as to seem like fantasy.

A hanged monk, something hopelessly wrong at the heart of faith, is a macabre bit of foreshadowing for the crises that would, a century later, rock the institutions of Christianity.

What, I thought, will the ghost stories of our era be? What tales of the present will future paranormal researchers recount to whatever their version of a reality TV audience is?

Halloween came clear, crisp and picture-perfect. After checking out and heading home, I began to examine my experience. Why, if I was not expecting to see a ghost, did I feel disappointed?

Slowly I realized it wasn’t actually the lack of ghosts that weighed on me. It was that I was apparently the only one looking for them, at least at the castle. Maybe Halloween night was busier in that regard, or maybe paranormal research is just one more thing we lost to this crazy year and people were playing it safe and staying home.

But there were no ghost hunters, not that I saw. Just as there had been no Fourth of July parade, no fireworks. No summer festivals or concerts. As there would be no trick or treating later that night. As, for many, there would be no Thanksgiving gatherings, no family dinners.

A ghost story — telling it, researching it, investigating it — is about hope. All haunted houses, every supposed poltergeist — it’s all ultimately aspirational. Like searching for Bigfoot or scanning the skies for a UFO, it makes life bigger somehow and adds an element of mystery and awe to a world that seems especially harsh of late.

What does it mean, I wonder, if we stop looking?

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