

COUNTRY ROADS ROCHELLE LASH

Posh inn remains true to its roots

Manoir Hovey offers some good deals for budget-conscious travellers

NORTH HATLEY - Manoir Hovey has evolved into a posh Relais & Châteaux hotel, but it remains true to its roots as a quaint country inn with some good deals for budget-conscious travellers.

Hovey was built in 1900 as a private home on an estate overlooking Lake Massawippi in the pastoral hill country of the Eastern Townships, a grand mansion with ivy-draped trellises, a colonnaded veranda, 26 fireplaces and a stunning lakefront location.

As an inn, it has been carefully tended for 30 years by the Stafford family, who have made major improvements while keeping the cachet of a prestigious, historic manor house. This genteel getaway virtually murmurs: "I have a pedigree." The secluded cottages where the estate's butler and gardener once slept now are plush suites with elegant decor and high-tech conveniences. Hovey's cuisine and wine cellar are among the finest in Quebec. And its setting among groves of maples, birches and fir trees is tranquil and romantic.

All remarkable, but is there anything for budget-conscious travellers? I asked general manager Jason Stafford.

"Prices start at a very reasonable \$135 per person, a good buy if you take into account the great breakfast, fabulous dinner, dining-room gratuities and all of the hotel's facilities," said Stafford. "With six categories of rooms, there are options for many different budgets."

That \$135 price tag buys a charming main-lodge guest room with handsome country furniture and pretty pastel decor trimmed in white.

If you spring for the top price of \$360 a night, per person, you will luxuriate in the splendour of the Heron Suite, which is a fully loaded, magazine-worthy contemporary apartment that shatters Hovey's tradition of English chintz and Canadian antiques. The Heron Suite is decked out with sleek furnishings, a private swimming pool and hot tub, a steam shower, a wood-burning fireplace, plasma televisions, a stainless-steel kitchen and a wall of windows with jaw-dropping views.

Hovey has one other big bargain available until high season begins June 19. With free upgrades, there is a chance of scoring the Heron Suite for less than the posted rate and the possibility of paying for an economy room and getting one with more space and a better view.

"During certain seasons, we offer room upgrades," said Stafford. "And, if we look at Relais & Châteaux, Quebec's are among the lowest-priced in the world, but we strive for international standards."

Whether they're budget-conscious travellers or big spenders, all guests enjoy the same treats. Hovey's 41 rooms

and suites have nightly turn-down service with chocolates, CD players, bathrobes and toiletries by Aveda; most have espresso machines and jet tubs. Come summer, all guests can savour the inn's gorgeous gardens, a dip in the pool, a stroll on the beach, bicycles, boats or a tennis court reservation—complete with a partner; if necessary. Happy hour on the terrace will bring everyone together over cocktails.

In spite of Manoir Hovey's vast modernization and lofty Relais & Châteaux status since 2008, its faithful patrons return year after year, and decade after decade, for the familiar. Perhaps your pleasure is sipping a rare single-

malt Scotch in the clubby Tap Room. Or taking tea and scones in the patrician library, where vintage first-edition books line the age-darkened knotty pine walls.

Arguably the most coveted perk of Hovey's "demi-pension" formula is that its sumptuous breakfast and gourmet table d'hôte dinner are the same for everyone. Mornings start with fruit, pastries and delectable dishes like French toast topped with strawberries and brie or omelettes with caramelized cashews and honey.

Executive chef Roland Ménard describes his cuisine as "contemporary Quebec with French technique." Dreamy dinners feature delicacies such as foie gras, seared scallops and oysters, followed by main courses of venison, duck, sweetbreads, organic salmon or filet mignon. On Mother's Day, May 10, a lavish buffet brunch will be offered at \$35 per person.

IF YOU GO

North Hatley is an 80-minute drive from Montreal. From the South Shore, take Highway 10 to Exit 121 and Route 55 south to Exit 29.

Manoir Hovey, 575 Hovey Rd., North Hatley. Call 800-661-2421, or visit www.manoirhovey.com. Not recommended for children under 13. Dinner for non-guests: \$65-98.

Prices: Including breakfast, dinner, meal gratuities and hotel facilities, until June 18, main lodge rooms cost \$135-\$235 per person, double occupancy per night. One-bedroom suites cost \$275 per person, double occupancy, up to \$360 per person for the Heron Suite, double occupancy. As a two-bedroom, two-bathroom suite, the Heron costs \$290 per person, quadruple occupancy. Rates are 10 per cent higher on Saturdays and 10 per cent lower if you stay more than five nights. High season (June 19-Oct. 11) costs \$160-295 per person in the main lodge; \$335-\$445 per person for suites, or \$332 per person for the two-bedroom suite. Dragonwatch, a four-bedroom cottage, is \$2,750 per week.

Extras: Lake cruises, massages, golf, spa visits, horseback riding, summer theatre, fly-fishing.

rochelleink@aol.com