

Cranwell Resort is a trip back to the Gilded Age

BY ROCHELLE LASH, FREELANCE MAY 5, 2012

When is a cottage not a cottage?

When it's a majestic mansion in the patrician town of Lenox in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts.

This New England enclave was settled during the late 1800s, the booming industrial period that Mark Twain labelled the Gilded Age for the ostentatious lifestyles of the less-than-one per cent. As American tycoons discovered the British tradition of weekending, and transportation outside of cities improved, folks from New York and Boston, such as the Morgans, the Vanderbilts, the Sloanes, the Westinghouses and the Astors, built elaborate country homes and called them "cottages."

The splendid Tudor-style Cranwell mansion dominates a picturesque hilltop spread of 380 acres, or about three-quarters of the size of Montreal's Mount Royal Park. Its impressive grounds were designed by the same prominent landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted. Today's guests can revel in the eminently walkable spaces amid towering cedars and rock gardens that were created for the bygone Gilded Age of afternoon strolls and exhilarating foxhunts.

The modern Cranwell Resort, Spa & Golf Club is a classic hotel complex with 114 rooms and suites of country elegance, three dining spaces, its own venerable, 18-hole golf course that dates from 1926 and one of the largest and most striking spas in the northeast. The ballroom still handles A-list society weddings and the gift shop carries Cranwell's private-label wines and its own line of spa and bath products.

"We're high-end, but not haughty," said Norma Probst, Cranwell's director of marketing.

"The grand, historic mansion gives us a sophisticated, distinctive air, but we have a widely varied clientele."

Choices abound. A gaggle of girlfriends on spa getaway can jump into such fitness classes as Zumba, Pilates or water cardio, and then spoil themselves with such services as the new Aromatherapy Salt Scrub or the Radiant Body Buff with Moroccan Oil. Every menu at Cranwell lists health-conscious options: the breakfast frittata in the Morning Music Room has 176 calories and four grams of fat; the grilled portabella mushroom salad at the Spa Café comes in at 475/7.

For golfers, LPGA Hall of Famer Kay McMahon recently launched clinics to allow duffers and scratch players alike to fine-tune their stances and swings. Then it's on to the 19th hole, Sloane's Tavern, for a steak sandwich or a spinach-and-bleu salad, plus 18 kinds of single-malt Scotch and tart vodka cocktails, such as the John Daly or the Lenox Lemonade.

If the kids are along, the weatherproof swimming pool is a lifesaver. The hotel offers a children's menu, plus burgers with a dozen toppings and a "personal pizza." Couples can cocoon in a plush suite and have dinner at Wyndhurst, the formal dining room, where the chef cooks up such fancy fare as stuffed quail, Kobe osso buco and grilled meat and fish.

Cranwell sounds busy, but what struck me was the peacefulness of this pastoral property, if you choose to be alone. You wake up to birds chirping, a breeze rustling through bushes and soothing mountain views.

The accommodations, in seven pavilions around the estate, all are supremely comfortable and spacious, with white porcelain bathrooms and such traditional furnishings as brass-trimmed dressers, writing desks and floral drapes. Three buildings are connected to the spa-pool complex through weatherproof, glassed-in walkways.

Another is adjacent to the first tee of the golf course. My favourites are the rooms with their own grass-level patios, because when you sit outside, you feel that the entire estate is yours.

Or, you can live like a Vanderbilt in the guest rooms of The Mansion, the historic centrepiece of Cranwell. It's a treasure of gracious and refined Victoriana with fine furniture, magnificent marble-topped fireplaces, intricate mahogany woodwork and leaded windows.

The posh Carriage House reopens in July after a fire and a total revamp based on 100-year-old architectural drawings. These brand-new rooms will have fabulous mountain views, richly textured

fabrics and spa-style bathrooms with glass fittings.

The Berkshire region is a hotbed of culture, and is particularly known for the prestigious Tanglewood Music Festival, which will hold its 75th edition June 22-Sept. 2. Cranwell also presents its own inhouse musical satire by the Capitol Steps, a troupe that will perform almost nightly, July 2-Sept. 2, to lampoon the political world from Obama to Berlusconi. The hotel organizes visits to 11 museums and historic sites, such as The Mount, the magnificent estate built by author Edith Wharton, and Ventfort Hall, The Museum of the Gilded Age.

The resort is a member of Stash Hotel Rewards, a loyalty program at unique, independent hotels. It's similar to frequent-points plans at chains, but without blackout dates (stashrewards.com).

IF YOU GO

Lenox, Mass., is a 4½ hour drive from Montreal via Highway 15 south to the U.S. border, then N.Y. Highway 87 south to Albany and Massachusetts Turnpike /Highway 90 east to Exit 2.

Cranwell Resort, Spa & Golf Club: 800-272-6935, cranwell.com; 55 Lee Rd. (Route 20), Lenox, Mass.

Price: including use of indoor and outdoor pools, whirlpools, saunas, steam rooms, fitness centre. Without meals, until June 30, \$199-\$299 U.S., per night, for two (Sun.-Thurs.) or \$349-\$449 (Fri-Sat). During July & Aug., it's \$369-\$469 (Sun.-Thurs.) or \$429-\$529 (Fri-Sat.). Internet specials on Sundays, May 13 and 20, offer 30 per cent off rooms and 20 per cent off spa treatments. Extra: tennis courts, bicycles, fitness classes.

Packages are Cranwell's best value.

Golf: All guests get 20 per cent off greens fees, incl. cart. Unlimited golf costs \$300-\$450 per night with lodging, unlimited play for two, driving range, and \$20 p.p., dining credits. For July-Aug., it's \$500-\$560, for two, per night.

Spa: Girlfriends or Mother-Daughter Packages: including unlimited fitness classes, a 10-per-cent discount and a \$125 credit on treatments, and \$25-\$70 dining credits. Until June 30, \$245 U.S. (Sun.-Thurs.) per night, p.p., double occ., or \$322 (Fri.-Sat.). For July-Aug., that's \$313/\$358.

Berkshire Region: 413-743-4500, berkshires.org.

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