

Destination of the Week

Bucolic Berkshires

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Robber barons knew a good thing when they saw it.

By the second half of the 19th century, Gilded Age industrialists were buying land and mapping out huge estates around the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts. However, it had taken a long time for the region to go from wild woods to resort destination.

The area had long been the home of the Mahican Indian tribe. After years of failed attempts at settlement, the Europeans gained a solid foothold in the Berkshires during the late 1750s. In the area around what is now Lenox, Mass., they established farms, mined iron ore (a maze of tunnels once ran beneath the town) and vigorously harvested timber. Lenox was at first named Yokuntown, after a local Indian chief, but was later dubbed for Charles Lennox, Duke of Richmond--a clerk's error is said to account for the missing "n."

The population rose and fell over the decades, at times stagnating. But by the middle of the 19th century, a few well-placed people, including British actress and writer Fanny Kemble, had started visiting. The celebrities set a trend (some things never change), and artist and intellectuals started flocking to the Berkshires.

The transition from cultural mecca to super-rich resort area came when industrialists started moving in (**Andrew Carnegie** and **George Westinghouse** had houses in the region), seeing the Berkshires as an inland alternative to Newport, R.I. By the 1880s, there reportedly were 35 grand mansions around Lenox. By 1900, there were about 75.

The estates began to go into decline after 1913, when federal income taxes put the brakes on lavish living. Though some remain in the private hands of a lucky few, many of the grand properties have been turned into museums, schools and resorts.

The best known might be the **Canyon Ranch** in Lenox. The super-expensive spa is a renowned destination for people who want to focus on healthy living in a self-contained environment.

But that would mean missing out on many of the charms of the Berkshires, from Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, to Jacob's Pillow dance festival; from classics at Clark Art Institute to contemporary art at MAS MoCA. And this doesn't take into account the antique shops, cafes and numerous other activities in the area.

Cranwell Resort, Spa and Golf Club, which is the subject of this review, offers the best of both worlds. Located minutes from the center of Lenox and designed around a historic mansion, Cranwell lets guests laze in the 35,000-square-foot spa, golf on an 18-hole course, eat in four different restaurants or simply leave to explore the surroundings.



Part of Cranwell's 380-acre property has been turned into a par-70 golf course.

Cranwell was built on land that passed through the hands of several owners and eventually came to belong to John Sloane, co-owner of furniture company W & J Sloane. In 1894, he built Wyndhurst, a brick Tudor-style "cottage" that is now the main structure at Cranwell. (William Sloane, the "W" in W & J Sloane, built his own estate nearby, which is now on the market for \$21.5 million)

Sloane constructed his mansion at the top of a hill and commissioned **Frederick Law Olmstead** to design the surrounding landscape. In the 1930s, the property was turned into the Berkshire Hunt and Country Club; it then spent decades as a private boys' school.

Today it is a year-round resort occupying about 380 acres of land and located about 150 miles from New York City and 130 miles from Boston. Cranwell offers 116 guest rooms and suites, in several buildings, among them the original mansion, decorated in 19th-century English style, the restored carriage house, with its modern country furnishings, and new townhouses. All have wireless Internet access for a small fee.



The Wyndhurst Restaurant offers fine cuisine in the original mansion.

A few of the buildings are conveniently linked to the spa by glass hallways that provide views of the elegant grounds and allow guests to travel from hot tub to guest room without braving the elements. The spa itself is clean-lined and immaculate, though not opulent. A dimly lit lounge is full of upholstered wicker chairs, magazines and light blankets. On the other side of a fireplace, the hot tub sits beneath a round skylight, with a steam room and sauna nearby. A wide range of services, from Swedish massage to seaweed wraps, is available for both men and women, in separate facilities. Spa and hotel staffers are friendly yet low-key, leaving guests feeling neither overlooked nor overburdened.

The nearby fitness center offers a full range of equipment and a daily roster of classes, including yoga, spinning and strength training. Private instruction is also available.

The grounds provide outdoor activities year-round, with four Har-Tru tennis courts, a *Golf Digest* School with a 12-acre driving range, an outdoor swimming pool and cross-country skiing trails. The golf carts at Cranwell are equipped with ParView GPS systems.

There are four restaurants, including a spa cafe that offers unexciting but entirely acceptable and healthy fare. The relaxed **Sloane's Tavern** serves heartier food in a pub atmosphere. In the main mansion, which is adorned with rich wood paneling and elaborately carved mantles, the elegant **Wyndhurst** provides the classics (rack of lamb) as well as less conventional cuisine (tahini and seaweed-wrapped tuna), while the **Music Room** serves breakfast and upscale grill food. Cranwell's desserts, which include fig and bing cherry tart and a flourless chocolate torte, are as indulgent as the spa services.

Rates range from a bargain \$175 per night for a deluxe room in the middle of the week during the low season to \$1,100 for a townhouse during the peak summer months. Spa and activity packages are also available. For more information, please visit www.cranwell.com.

Forbes Fact

Cranwell's first owner, Rev. Ward Beecher, was the brother of author Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been published just a year earlier). But they are far from the area's only literary connection. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* while staying in Lenox. Nearby sites also include Herman Melville's house, Edith Wharton's estate and the William Cullen Bryant Homestead.