

Rejuvenated Essex Inn has become a social hub

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 2, 2012 8:07 PM



At the Essex Inn, two rooms are done in rustic Adirondack decor, with nubby red wool blankets on beds that are carved out of thick pine logs.

Photograph by: Jill PiperA

Nearly new at about 200 years old, the delightful Essex Inn on the Adirondack Coast is at the heart of the revitalization of a historic town on the New York shore of Lake Champlain.

The Essex Inn opened circa 1812 when the lakefront town was a shipbuilding centre, but even with all the business traffic, the little inn likely never was as appealing as it is today. It is operated by a young couple, Gladys Archer and her husband, Josh, the chef. Enthusiastic and determined, they have a hit on their hands. The inn has a lively pub and dining room, eight handsomely decorated guest rooms in the main building and one striking three-bedroom apartment across the street, with a spectacular view of Lake Champlain.

The rejuvenation of Essex has been a team effort. Rick and Karen Dalton, summer vacationers who recently became full-time residents, have restored several buildings. It's a worthy project. The town is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, prized for its exceptional architecture, some of which dates to the late 1700s.

The Essex is a Main Street landmark, built in the stolid Federal style, that later morphed into a fine example of graceful Greek Revival when a Doric colonnade was added to the porch.

Karen Dalton and Susan Davis, a local interior designer, handled the redecorating. The walls are

mostly painted in soft earth tones that reflect the colours of the landscape – the blues, greens and greys of Lake Champlain, the Adirondack forests and the winter sky. The windows and door frames are creamy white, keeping the look fresh. The result is elegant, but unpretentious and comfortable.

The Essex also is loaded with such modern features as gas fireplaces, feather beds, iPod docking stations, flat-screen televisions and sparkling bathrooms stocked with heaps of thick white towels. Most rooms are traditional and classic, but Dalton and David chose to bedeck two in rustic Adirondack decor, with nubby red wool blankets on beds that are carved out of thick pine logs.

The most visible members of the Essex Inn team are Gladys and Josh, who have given the place the personal touch and warmth that it deserves. To start, every guest receives a welcome split of wine and scrumptious macadamia nut cookies, harbingers of the good food and drink to come.

You can start your visit in the tavern-style dining room, and it won't be long before you are on a first-name basis with both locals and visitors. A two-sided fireplace lights up the burnished wood of the Adirondack-style furnishings – tables and chairs hand-crafted from reclaimed tree trunks. The newest cocktail was named at a recent Happy Hour. It's the Sinfully Essex, mixed with Chambord, chilled vodka and a splash of cranberry juice.

Then it's on to dinner where Josh Archer's dishes include burgers, steaks, scampi, duck, lamb, crab cakes and pasta with pesto as well as surprises like lobster bisque and Welsh rarebit. For hungry and thirsty folks who like a bargain, Essex features Martini Mardi on Tuesdays (Gladys was a French teacher), Essex's e-club specials on Wednesdays, Happy Hour with cheese tastings on Thursdays, seafood on Fridays and prime rib on Saturdays. No doubt about it, the rejuvenated Essex Inn has become a social hub. The next event – Vine, Wine & Dine on Feb. 18 – will feature meals, tastings and a seminar by the sommelier of Shelburne Vineyard in Vermont.

In the morning, the dining room is full of chatter about the great outdoors. Hikers, cyclists and skiers study maps and plan their excursions while fuelling up on great blueberry pancakes, omelettes and home-baked granola bars served with yogurt.

With its lakefront location, you might think Essex is strictly a summer destination, but the region is also appealing and picturesque in winter. The Daltons have coined the playful term "Adirondack Coast" referring to the two local natural wonders, the famous Adirondack Mountains and the shore of Lake Champlain. You can still experience the vast lake because a ferry runs year-round from Essex to Charlotte, Vt., 15 miles south of Burlington.

Still, there is no reason to leave the New York side – the so-called Adirondack Coast. The Champlain Area Trails (CATS) system is a must for hikers, birders and fans of snowshoeing and back-country skiing. Meandering around the wooded hillsides of the Champlain Valley, mostly around Essex, Westport and Willsboro, the CATS system lies within the vast Adirondack Park which is home to wildlife habitats, woodlands, wetlands and farmland.

Indoors, Live Well, in another beautifully restored building on Main Street, has a workout area available to guests of Essex Inn, at no charge. With a fee, Live Well also offers yoga, tai chi, cardio classes, meditation, massages and personal training.

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IF YOU GO

Essex is a two-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 15 south to the U.S. border and then Highway 87 south to Exit 33.

Essex Inn on the Adirondack Coast: 518-963-4400, essexinnessex.com, 2297 Main St., Essex, N.Y.

Price: \$195-\$325 U.S. per night, for two, including breakfast and access to Live Well's fitness facilities; extra guest, \$50; children 12 and under stay for free. The Annex is a three-bedroom apartment, \$425 U.S., per night, maximum five people. The Romance Package includes meals and wine. Essex arranges visits to Mt. Van Hoevenberg X-C Ski Center in Lake Placid; Ausable Chasm's cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and ice-climbing; and Whiteface Mt. and Bolton Valley, Vt. for downhill.

Dinner, Tues.-Sat., from 5 p.m.: \$17-\$50 p.p.; casual menu available, \$10-\$20 p.p. Tavern Specials: Tues.-Thurs., 5 to 7 p.m. Children's menu available.

Live Well Center: 518-963-4300, livewellessexny.com, 2310 Main St., Essex, N.Y.

Champlain Area Trails: 518-962-CATS /2287, champlainareatrails.com. Guides available for year-round hiking or cross-country skiing on back-country or un-groomed trails.

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