

On Lake Champlain, a homey slice of Americana

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 2, 2012



The Cupola House on Lake Champlain in Essex, N.Y., has just two guest apartments, but “the best view in town.”

Photograph by: The Cupola House on Lake Champlain

The historic town of Essex, N.Y., is experiencing a modest revival with stylish new enterprises, but The Cupola House on Lake Champlain was there long before anything trendy.

Essex is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, a treasure of exceptional buildings, some of which date to the late 1700s. It’s one of New York State’s most architecturally historic hamlets and is a burgeoning tourist town, prized for its setting on the shore of Lake Champlain with a backdrop of the Adirondack Mountains.

The Cupola House is a pretty piece of Americana that started off as a blocky Federal-style home, but eventually evolved into Greek Revival mode with pilasters and porches front and back.

The Cupola House’s owner, Donna Lou Sonnett, calls it “a vacation rental,” which means that visitors check in to an apartment with a kitchen, rather than a guest room, making a temporary little home. There is a lawn and a garden. Sonnett grows flowers, herbs and vegetables and encourages guests to snip at will for bouquets or for cooking. And then there are those wonderful porches. From the front, you can watch the laid-back happenings along Main Street. From the back, there is the picturesque

scene of boats in the marina and the lake vista.

"I don't own lake frontage, but I do own the best view in town," said Sonnett. "We see the sunrise over Lake Champlain and the evening's alpenglow on the Green Mountains of Vermont across the lake. It's always changing and it's always serene."

The Cupola House has only two accommodations. Guests can choose a one-bedroom apartment that sleeps five people or a two-bedroom apartment that sleeps four (and a pet). Sounds backwards, I know but the bed configurations make that work.

The interiors have a traditional, early American look with lots of antique furniture and authentic features like stencilled wood floors. It's comfortable and homey, with beds covered in quilts and walls filled with folk art.

Sonnett knows her antiques. Her inn's ground floor is home to the The Cupola House Gallery & Emporium, a mini-museum, the result of her 30 years of collecting Americana of the 1900s. She showcases the paintings of local artists, hand-loomed rugs, old books, lamps, costume jewellery, hand-thrown pottery and a connoisseur's selection of Amish quilts.

In summer, life in Essex revolves around Lake Champlain, so big that it's called "the sixth Great Lake." You can arrive by boat at one of two marinas adjacent to The Cupola House. And once you are settled, Sonnett provides kayaks, canoes and bicycles. A gang of cyclists, the Saturday Morning Bikers, departs from the Essex Deli at 7:30 a.m. and rides for 25 to 45 kilometres, with stops for food.

Although Sonnett is part of Essex's establishment, some newcomers are former big-city dwellers who opted for small-town living. Deborah Schrodtt gave up Wall Street for Main Street and opened Pink Pig, a downright adorable emporium of irresistible goodies. Pink Pig has an eclectic selection of wares that mixes Adirondack country with urban chic: canvas bags from France, girly dresses, hand-crafted jewellery, cashmere sweaters and home accessories. Next door, Pink Pig Too recently opened with fresh flowers, garden furniture and such architectural accessories as statues.

Another refugee from New York City is Kristin Kimball, a writer who travelled to the countryside to interview a farmer for a story. She fell in love with the man, Mark Kimball, and the lifestyle, and tossed away her high heels, designer handbags and life of chi-chi nightclubs. Her hilarious best-selling book, *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food and Love*, chronicles her debut on the Essex Farm, driving draft horses, fertilizing with compost and raising dairy cows, pigs, beef cattle, chickens, grain and 40 kinds of vegetables.

The Dirty Life is a great warm-up read if you visit Essex, and you'll likely be nibbling on some of the Kimballs' eggs, meat and poultry if you dine around town.

A great way to experience the special charm of a small town is to join a local celebration such as the Fourth of July parade and Essex Day on Aug. 4.

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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 N.Y. Highway 87 south to Exit 33.

The Cupola House on Lake Champlain and Cupola House Gallery & Emporium: 518-963-7494, thecupolahouse.com; 2278 Main St., Essex, N.Y. 518 637-9688.

Price: Apartments cost \$185 U.S. for two, (Sun.-Thurs.) or \$195 for two (Sat.-Sun.), including continental breakfast basket, bicycles, canoes, kayaks and guided hiking; it's \$895 U.S. for seven nights; two-night minimum on weekends, June 15-Sept. 15; pets, \$25 per night. Extra guests (more than 10 years old), \$10 p.p., per night. Prices decrease Oct. 15.

Pink Pig Antiques & Cottage Decor: 518-962-8833, pinkpigwestport.com, 2750 Essex Rd.

For local information: essexnewyork.org

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