

# Serenity sells stays at Ripplecove

Eastern Townships hotel and spa has modern furnishings, old charm

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE    SEPTEMBER 7, 2012



Ripplecove's idyllic setting on Lake Massawippi is echoed by service and serenity.

**Photograph by:** Ripplecove

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The hotel formerly known as Auberge & Spa Ripplecove in the Eastern Townships has earned its five-star rating from Quebec Tourism for its upscale accommodations, splendid gardens, lakefront setting and fine cuisine. All true, plus I'm adding a high score of my own for intangibles such as its romantic appeal, refined air and attentive service.

The gorgeous butter-yellow inn is an exceptional destination during any season, but particularly now with the combination of the warmth of summer still heavy on the lake and the colourful glory of autumn's foliage season just starting.

Owned by Debra and Jeffrey Stafford (his parents founded Ripplecove during the 1940s), the hotel rolls out new features periodically, but one hopes, not too many. With its serene waterfront setting and fine food, it already is superlative. Recently, the Staffords have added room makeovers, a new back-care treatment in the Arboressence Spa and eco-conscious operating systems. Not to mention that they also changed the name from Auberge Ripplecove & Spa to simply Ripplecove.

"We're an elegant hotel with resort facilities, not an inn, and 'auberge' just didn't express it all," said Debra Stafford. "We're changing all the time, adding the most modern amenities."

Built on a peninsula that juts out into calm, clear Lake Massawippi, the inn is surrounded by water on two fronts. One side is a leisure area with a dock, small craft, a beach and a heated swimming pool,

and the other is a scenic backdrop for indulgent dining on Ripplecove's lakefront terrace. With those distinct identities, Ripplecove encourages two different lifestyles. Guests can live languidly — lounging at the pool, indulging in a massage or lunching al fresco — or they can make a day of golf, kayaking or cycling.

Ripplecove has an intimate, personal style, but it is a surprisingly large domain with accommodations for 60 to 80 people in five categories of rooms and suites, and two darling cottages.

Most have been redecorated recently with designer fabrics and all have been updated with individual climate control, flat-screen televisions, pod coffee machines and bathrobes. Debra Stafford creates the inn's decor and she walked me through her favourite accommodations.

"My taste is to combine old with new," she said. "Room No. 7 has a wonderful, modern bathroom, but it's also filled with lots of Eastern Townships antiques. Rooms 30 and 32 are recent makeovers with soft colours like sand and robins' egg blue."

Even Ripplecove's most economical accommodations are comfortable and loaded with charm. Room No. 8 is a rustic-looking hideaway with a lake view, golden pine walls and hickory furniture. And a favourite with regulars is the woodsy Appalachian log cabin, which has an unbeatably cozy setting in a thicket of maples and pines and a private beach — complete with hammock.

But an appealing resort has to have good food, too. Ripplecove's director of operations is Mamadou Soh, who was schooled in hotel arts throughout Europe. Debonair and dashing, Senegalese-born Soh has brought an international flair to the Townships. He is a passionate gastronome who can sweet-talk a guest out of a diet in no time. That's how my table of eight came to feast on a bounty of regional foods such as duck foie gras, Bay of Fundy scallops, Brome Lake duck, Sterling beef, guinea fowl from Charlevoix and smoked salmon, prepared in-house. For his tasting menu, chef Steeve Rondeau adds Quebec lamb sweetbreads and rabbit from Stanstead, and winds up with a dessert soup of Townships strawberries, and cheeses from Portneuf.

Putting together gourmet pursuits and outdoor activity, Ripplecove has developed a four-night package with its neighbour across the lake, Manoir Hovey, the renowned Relais & Châteaux in North Hatley, which is owned by another branch of the Stafford family.

You can cycle or kayak to Hovey, which is about a two-hour excursion, either paddling or pedalling, but those strenuous adventures are not for everyone. I borrowed a bicycle from Ripplecove and conquered most of a killer cycling route, except for one steep hill that I admit I had to trudge up. Of course, the easiest thing is to cheat and simply drive over to Hovey. Be prepared to be spoiled all over again.

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