

September 16, 2012

Mountains of culture

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Splendid castles. Astounding arts. the patrician New England town of Lenox, Mass., in the picturesque region of the Berkshire Mountains, is steeped in both.

Lenox is a hub for culture, surrounded by historic villages renowned for their world-class music, dance, museums and literary landmarks that are deeply rooted in Americana.

But the Berkshires are connecting to Canada in a big way this year with the largest-ever exhibit of contemporary Canadian art outside of our country. oh Canada, a multimedia extravaganza at the distinguished Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, running until April 2013, showcases the diverse works of more than 60 talented artists including several from Montreal: Gisele Amantea, Janet Werner Nicolas Baier, Luanne Martineau, Dean Baldwin, Patrick Bernatchez and Michel de Broin.

Our own stars aside, Lenox's most illustrious cultural treasure is the Mount, the grand mansion and gardens of Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Edith Wharton. Here you can have a glimpse of the privileged life that inspired such socially insightful novels as the Age of Innocence and Ethan Frome. The other marquee attraction in Lenox is tanglewood. this iconic music festival celebrated its 75th anniversary this summer with such illustrious artists as virtuoso cellist Yo-Yo Ma, pop singer- songwriter James Taylor and maestro John Williams, tanglewood's artist-in-residence and multiple winner of Academy Awards, Emmys and Grammys.

It's a short drive from Lenox to neighbouring towns and their cultural sites. Arrowhead, the home of Herman Melville during the mid-1800s when he wrote Moby Dick, is in nearby Pittsfield. Chesterwood in Stockbridge was the studio of Daniel Chester French, who sculpted the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. And the Norman Rockwell Museum, also in Stockbridge, was the home of the famed Saturday Evening Post magazine illustrator. Meet-the-Models, taking place every first Friday of the month, is a fascinating opportunity to connect with Rockwell's creative process. The now-grown-up impish boys and girls of his sketches of the 1950s to 1970s will gather to talk about their experiences.

Equally part of local history, Lenox's rare and impressive mansions started out as the extravagant country getaways of the tycoons of the Gilded Age. During approximately 1880 to 1920, vast industrial fortunes were made with little or no income tax – and the less-than-one-per-cent discovered weekend along modern roads. Author and sharp social observer Mark Twain coined the term "Gilded Age," referring to the thin veneer of prosperity obscuring the wretchedness of the underprivileged.

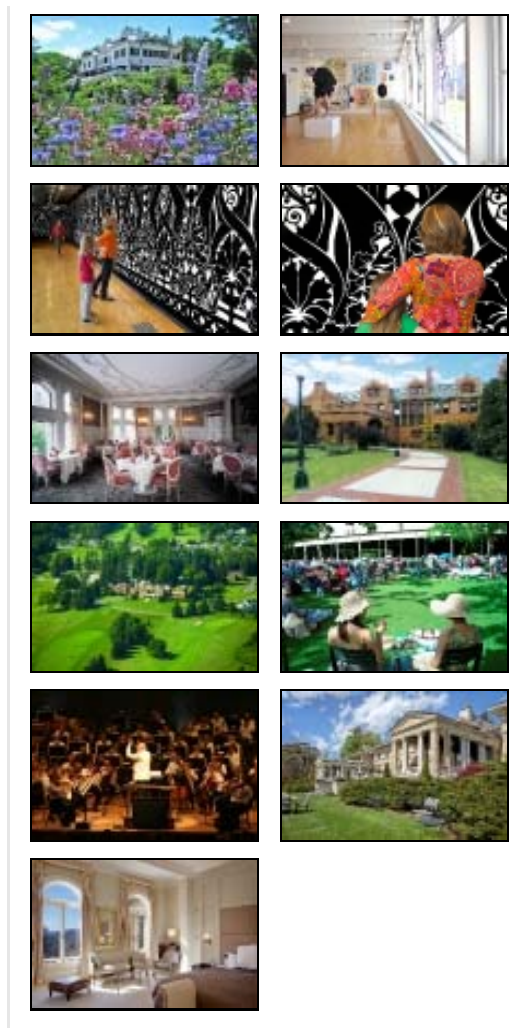
Today, several of those mansions, those fabulous architectural jewels, have been turned into luxury hotels.

Cranwell Resort, Spa & Golf Club is the go-to destination for indulgent spa life, golf on a historic course and family fun. A stunning landmark on a hilltop estate designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Cranwell is comfortable and spread out, with spacious deluxe accommodations and three restaurants.

The most exclusive of the Gilded Age mansion-hotels is Wheatleigh, an exquisite Italianate palazzo discreetly hidden in the wooded hills outside of Lenox. With 19 rooms, gastronomic dining and solicitous service, Wheatleigh is the ultimate in luxury and one of the finest small hotels in the world.

Regardless of the volatile economy, it's not the sort of place to discuss money, and if you have to ask about price, you probably can't afford this sophisticated boutique beauty.

You can both eat well and sleep well on a more moderate budget at The Birchwood Inn, an enchanting B&B owned by Ellen Gutman Chenaux with 11 appealing rooms warmed by richly patterned fabrics, lots of fireplaces and antique furniture.



A master baker and dedicated foodie, Chenux spoils her guests with bountiful breakfasts of frothy frittatas, apple pancakes with spicy chicken and basil sausages, cheese blintzes with blueberry sauce or nectarine-laced French toast.

In Birchwood's Fun for Foodies program, guests can learn to bake or indulge in epicurean tastings of wine, beer or chocolate. Save room for the inn's afternoon tea, starring Chenux's lemon squares and chocolate chip cookies. Birchwood also welcomes well-behaved canines and has a special doggie-biscuit baking class, inspired by her own beloved dogs.

For dining out, I don't think you can do better than Café Adam in Great Barrington, a hip bistro with excellent European-inspired cuisine. Chef Adam Zieminski has worked at the divine Wheatleigh and also with several culinary celebrities such as Daniel Boulud and Thomas Keller. Café Adam does a delectable brunch of truffled eggs or cider waffles with roasted apples; and artistic lunches and dinners of marinated artichokes, luscious grass-fed beef, bouillabaisse brimming with Atlantic seafood and pasta topped with hand-foraged mushrooms and piquant ramp.

After a day of library research at the Berkshire Athenaeum, former Montrealer Millie Calesky, who works as a life coach in Pittsfield, chills out with the arty crowd at funky Dottie's Coffee Lounge. There are poetry readings, knitting classes and the best perk-me-ups are the frothy lattes and the ginger-carrot juice.

Fall foliage season is a particularly attractive time to visit the Berkshires, and it is jumping with happenings such as the Pittsfield City Jazz festival, Oct. 3-14, and the North Adams Open Studio event, Oct. 15-16. You can also join one of the Housatonic Heritage Walks, a series of free family-friendly nature hikes exploring the region.

HOW TO GET THERE

The Berkshire region is a 4.5-hour ride from Montreal. Take Highway 15 south to the U.S. border, New York Highway 87 south to Albany and Massachusetts Highway 90 east to exit 2 for Lenox, Stockbridge, Great Barrington and Pittsfield. For North Adams, take Exit 6 off of N.Y. 87 and Route 7 east.

MORE INFO

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

LODGING

Cranwell Resort, Spa & Golf Club: 800-272-6935, www.cranwell.com

Wheatleigh: 413-637-0610, www.wheatleigh.com

Birchwood Inn: 800-524-1646, www.birchwood-inn.com

