

Checking In: Château Laurier blends proud past with the future

Upgrades range from rooms to menus

BY ROCHELLE LASH, THE GAZETTE MAY 16, 2013



The Fairmont Château Laurier is going through a restoration that has respected its fine heritage while adding amenities.

Photograph by: Fairmont Hotels & Resorts

Note to readers: The Country Roads column has a new name — Checking In — and a broader territory. We'll expand our look beyond country inns to include reviews of interesting accommodations in the major cities in our region — Quebec City and Ottawa — and further afield when warranted. We start today with the storied Château Laurier in Ottawa.

The illustrious Fairmont Château Laurier marked its 100th birthday in 2012 with lots of parties and a major update to back-of-the-house operating systems, but the tangible, visible news for guests is happening in 2013.

The hotel is going through a restoration that has respected its fine heritage yet added the latest amenities to almost every facet, including accommodations and cuisine.

In a giant leap into the digital world, guests are invited to virtually visit the Château's ornate ballrooms and suites on a new iPad tour, a valuable opportunity for history buffs, children included, who can view images of royal visits, wartime events and celebrity visitors. The hotel invited me to experience its

new features, from the digital tour to the updated decor.

In another modern move, the hotel has an eco-conscious Cycling in the Capital Package that includes maps, bike rentals, hotel parking for hybrid cars (a value of more than \$30 per day) and a donation to the National Geographic Society. One picturesque route is along the Rideau Canal Pathway, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The changes since the beginning have been seismic. The inaugural room rate was \$2 when Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier cut the opening ribbon, many guests had to share the loo and women had a separate entrance. But all that is so last century.

Today, rates start at \$249 and the accommodations are fully loaded with flat-screen televisions with movies and Nintendo, mini-bars, pod coffee machines and extra outlets so you can charge your laptops, smartphones and digital tablets. So far, about 80 of the 429 rooms have been redecorated with soigné linen-covered walls, sleek deco-ish furniture and beds with crisp white triple sheeting. It's all lighter, brighter and more luxurious.

The lobby, that venerable, well-trod entrance, also has been enriched. The sofas are resplendent in plush contemporary velvets and the fun high-backed winged chairs made me feel like Alice in Wonderland. I sat back and gazed at the passing parade: corporate executives, Ottawa mandarins, families, back-packers and a chic young couple on the way to the ballet.

The new executive chef, Louis Simard, is veering sharply away from stodgy hotel food and has introduced contemporary presentations and such fantastic fusions as tomato and watermelon salad with flax seed and olive dust; lamb with lima bean cassoulet, fiddleheads and mint pesto; and lobster and scallops with a white chocolate celeriac purée and brandy butter sauce.

One of the hotel's attractions is its breakfast buffet of, well, just about everything: cooked-to-order omelettes, smoked salmon, fruit, granola and roast potatoes. I dare you to try to resist the hot cinnamon brioches or the pancakes topped with a berry compote and whipped cream. But habits change, at least for some, and the Château has responded with a new Lifestyle Cuisine Menu of dishes like Irish steel-cut oatmeal with organic soy milk, a soy chocolate shake, a tofu scramble with vegetables, herbal teas, a macrobiotic miso soup and gluten-free toast.

Of course, many things are sacrosanct. The turrets and copper roofs of this landmark of the nation's capital will always be a beacon for both visitors and locals. The elaborate interiors with Tiffany-glass windows, intricate mouldings, original antiques and portraits by legendary photographer Yousuf Karsh are like a living museum. And the views of the neighbours — Parliament Hill, the Rideau Canal and the Ottawa River — are vivid reminders that this is more than a hotel. It is an attraction as well.

Afternoon tea, served in the sunroom of Zoé's Lounge (named for Mme Laurier), remains a rite of passage. The scones are divine, especially with strawberry jam and Devonshire cream. And it's the real deal, with tea from 10 countries, petit fours and little sandwiches with the crusts removed.

Opened in 1912, the Château Laurier was the vision of railway magnate Charles Melville Hays, who died on the Titanic. The tragedy delayed the hotel's opening by a few months (and affected the fortunes of many, including the fictional Lord Grantham on TV's *Downton Abbey*, who had invested his wife's money in the Grand Trunk Railway, which was largely Hays's creation and eventually suffered financial problems).

With that notorious beginning, the Château Laurier became a storied hotel where the name-dropping is nearly infinite.

It has been host to countless world leaders and generations of royals, including King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II, plus some of the most renowned people of their eras: Pope Pius XII, Albert Einstein, Marlene Dietrich, Nelson Mandela, Rudolph Nureyev, Madonna and the Rolling Stones. Here, John Lennon shook hands with Pierre Trudeau and Princess Diana lunched with the Kiwanis Club.

And Karsh brilliantly captured the intense characters of Sir Winston Churchill, cellist Pablo Casals, author Stephen Leacock and artist Jean-Paul Riopelle, whose dramatic, abstract paintings are sold in the lobby art gallery.

Rochelle@rochellelash.com Twitter: rochellelash

The writer was a guest of the hotel. The Château Laurier did not review or approve this article.

IF YOU GO

Ottawa is a two-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 40 west, which becomes Route 417 west in Ontario, and Exit 118.

Fairmont Château Laurier: 800-257-7544, 613-241-1414; www.fairmont.com/laurier; 1 Rideau St., Ottawa.

Price: Rooms from \$249, suites from \$399, per night; Gold Floor with concierge, free buffet, deluxe lounge, from \$359; Prime Minister's Suite, \$2,800; all incl. indoor salt-water swimming pool, fitness centre. Afternoon tea: \$32-\$39 or \$22 for children 12 and under. Discover Ottawa Family Package includes Children's Museum and Canadian War Museum. Prince and Princess Package features an in-room movie and milk and cookies.

Ottawa Tourism: 800-363-4465, www.ottawatourism.ca; National Capital Commission: 800-465-1867, www.canadascapital.gc.ca.