

# Checking In: No ruffin' it at pet palace

It's all top dog or cat; at L'Hôtel Balto

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE OCTOBER 11, 2013



Whippet, a Yorkshire Terrier, sports a bathrobe from the fashion line at L'Hôtel Balto in Vaudreuil-Dorion.

**Photograph by:** L'Hôtel Balto

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Fanny is done ruffin' it.

You remember Fanny? She's my hiking pal, the golden retriever with the big swishy tail, soft brown eyes and floppy ears. She bounded in the other day with that "I need a vacation" look.

Well, I wondered, where will it be this time?

I'm thinking an end-of-season splash in the lake at Domaine Summum, an outdoorsy dog destination in Mont-Tremblant. Or perhaps a schmooze at the sociable Inn by the Sea outside of Portland, Maine, a luxury boutique hotel that is so doggone pet-friendly that it has a Doggie Happy Hour in the lounge. Vermont's Green Mountains beckon in autumn, and we could chill at the fabulous, newly rebuilt Topnotch Resort in Stowe, which has gourmet dog treats and walkers.

None of the above, it turns out. Fanny wanted to get away, but no ruffin' it — and strictly solo. Her owner, Rae Turley, and I weren't welcome. And definitely no puppy-razzi.

Fanny has unleashed her inner princess.

The latest dish at the dog park is all about L'Hôtel Balto and its Salon de Beauté, a five-star establishment in Vaudreuil-Dorion with overnight rooms and suites, a boutique, daycare and a grooming centre.

This is a top-dog place. It offers limo service in a Cadillac Escalade throughout the Montreal area. Pet guests who request early check-in or late checkout can relax in VIP lounges with leather sofas and comfy plaid throws. And there are 27 well-appointed spaces for dogs and 12 for cats. Assistant manager Briana Berman runs the front desk and explains the amenities:

All of the canine guest rooms have heated floors and small, medium or large four-poster wrought iron beds with Hôtel Balto's insignia on the headboard. Each chamber has an armoire for personal effects and a flat-screen television, tuned mostly to cinematic winners of the Canine Film Festival such as *The Aristocats*, *Beethoven* and *101 Dalmatians*. Plus, there is maid service several times a day, fresh sheets when required and frequent exercise in the fenced-in yard, in a group or alone. Pet-owners bring their own food.

The bow-wow factor here is that all rooms have cameras so that Berman can monitor the goings-on constantly. And Balto supplies pet owners with Milestone software with which they can access the real-time images, too, even if they are travelling internationally.

Fanny sniffed around the hotel and, go figure, she chose the Royal Dog Suite on the penthouse floor — that's the second floor — which is extra large with lots of window exposure.

Then Berman set up appointments for Fanny's hair and nails with Amélie Méloche, Balto's expert groomer and stylist. The Salon de Beauté is equipped with all the essentials — hair dryers, nail polish and ribbons for that girlie look. Fanny opted for a basic shampoo and blow-dry and a teeny trim of a few indiscreet chin hairs. What a female has to go through to achieve radiant beauty!

While we were waiting, Alexandra Villarroel arrived with her tiny white Maltese, Coco Chanel, who travelled in a Louis Vuitton carrying bag. They had a consultation with Méloche, and decided on a short poufy cut, with no bangs and pink bows. Then Max, a 36-kilo German shepherd showed up for his first pedicure and Méloche showed no fear as she took the clippers to the big baby's nails.

Balto is not only about dogs.

The cats vacation in a separate section. Three suites for felines have televisions and seven-foot climbing posts, and large spaces for multiple cats from the same family.

There also is a cattery, with smaller cages, toy mice, a two-metre climbing post and radio as entertainment.

The tiny boutique in the entrance tipped me off that this was a swish hotel. The leashes are studded with Swarovski crystals. A dashing hound might get decked out in a yellow polo shirt. I think it was by

Ruff Lauren. And for the bitchin' babe who really wants a seductive look, there is a leopard-print bathrobe that looked like a Roberto Catalli design. In season, Balto carries everything for the well-dressed canine: raincoats, snowsuits and winter coats.

Hôtel Balto is owned by Diane Levesque, who is wild about animals and also happens to work in construction and real estate, so the Balto is top-drawer. The accommodations have windows, and floors of riverstone, marble or tile, wrought iron gates and little crystal chandeliers hanging from seven-foot ceilings. Many have windows.

Hôtel Balto also shelters animals available for adoption. When Fanny and I visited, we met Poupette the Dachshund and Zach and Zoe, brother and sister Schnauzers. Levesque also fosters about 30 dogs at her ranch.

## IF YOU GO

Vaudreuil-Dorion is 30 minutes from downtown Montreal via Highway 20 west.

L'Hôtel Balto, for cats, dogs and birds: 450-424-2258, hotelbalto.com; 18 rue St-Henri, Vaudreuil-Dorion.

**Price:** dogs, \$38-\$85 per day for private rooms or suites, including five-to-seven outings (individual or group), plus play time and movies; cats' private rooms, \$18-\$58; birds, \$10, plus \$5 for a companion bird; Owners have to provide food, medication and birdcages.

**Extras:** grooming, gourmet menu, walks on a leash and extra activities. Limo service to and from the Montreal area is available with reservations at least 10 days in advance.

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The bird know n as Bird is an occasional guest at L'Hôtel Balto in Vaudreuil-Dorion.

**Photograph by:** Lash

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