



The new Alt Ottawa hotel, near Parliament Hill, is strong on avant-garde interior design. PHOTOS: GROUPE GERMAIN HOTELS

Alt Ottawa adds frills to minimalist concept

Interactive scene introduced in lobby, while food options have expanded



ROCHELLE LASH

The Alt brand is growing up, baby steps by baby steps.

The appealing chain of no-frills boutique hotels has opened Alt Ottawa, with frills added.

The hotel is still minimalist in spirit, but now there are things to do, people to meet, art to admire and food to eat — including full meals and alcohol, in addition to the Alt brand's basic grab-and-go snacks.

Alt Ottawa is a newly built tower a few blocks from Parliament Hill and the National Arts Centre, and about 1.5 kilometres from ByWard Market.

The Alts are part of Groupe Germain Hotels — a fine pedigree, so even the lower-priced Alts have high standards in maintenance, eco-operations, guest amenities and service.

The Ottawa staff is among the best and brightest young hoteliers and hospitality school graduates recruited from across Canada. They're dynamic, well informed, helpful and mostly bilingual.

The look: Alt Ottawa is fresh and bright, a delightful example of contemporary design conceived by Lemay Michaud Architec-

ture Design and the Ottawa firm Chmiel.

The Alt has resurrected the concept of the lobby as the nerve centre of a hotel, an idea that most boutique hotels have phased out. Here, the space is called Altcetara, and it's a lobby reimagined.

Guests are part of an interactive scene as soon as they check in. The reception desk is framed by a dazzling art installation, Altexpo, a mural composed of 9,000 miniature photos, mostly taken by Jean-François Frenette. Guests can add their own images to a live LCD feed by posting on Instagram using the hashtag #altexpo.

From there, you are invited to mingle, take a meeting or simply hang out. Different textures and materials define different lounging spaces: wood panels, silvery mesh curtains, a glass staircase and black acrylic walls, all offset by industrial lighting and a polished black concrete floor.

Need to keep busy? You'll have a pool table, a guest computer and two TVs.

Each chair, table and light fixture is a design showpiece, created by top designers including Kenneth Cobonpue of Asia and New York, Paola Navone and Gervasoni of Italy, and Bruck Lighting of California.

At the centre of Altcetara is a captivating bar that offers breakfast, lunch, supper and drinks. **The new idea:** Alt hotels typically



The 148 rooms at the Alt Ottawa have minimalist, design-centric decor and flat-screen TVs.

offer a boutique choice of light bites — espresso, juices, yogurt, fruit, crudités, cheese, hummus, chocolate and panini. But Ottawa's Altcetara Café is going bigger.

A serve-yourself breakfast features croissants, gluten-free muffins, cereal, cappuccino and egg sandwiches.

For later in the day, caterer Epicuria supplies pre-prepared meals to be reheated in a convection oven, including butter chicken, lamb, curried chicken and salmon, with such sides as polenta or jasmine rice.

During Alt Hour (around 4 or 5 p.m.), guests and friends can nibble on cheese and charcuterie and sample specials on wine, cocktails and organic beer from the Dominion City Brewing Co. in the Ottawa Valley.

The rooms: Alt Ottawa has 132 single-queen bedrooms and 16 larger double queens. Both op-

tions are nicely laid out, simply decorated in neutrals of slate, wood and white and equipped with pod coffee makers, goose-down duvets, work desks and flat-screen TVs.

The bathrooms are pristine white with ultra-modern oval sinks, top-drawer fixtures, aromatherapy bath products by Bella Pella of Montreal, and glass showers, or bath-showers in the larger rooms. Some of the rooms overlook an industrial ledge and will be brightened with art installations in the windows, all to be done by the Montreal design studio Daily tous les jours.

Foodie neighbours: I visited Alt Ottawa before its cuisine launched, so I dashed around the corner for lunch at Clover Food and Drink, a rustic little bistro.

Clover chef-owner West de Castro calls her cuisine "simple and humble." It's also progressive, tasty and cooked with fresh,

local ingredients from Mariposa Farm, Seed to Sausage General Store, Apiary613, Ålska Farm and Enright Cattle Co.

Lunch might be a burger of grass-fed beef, Moroccan-spiced chicken or a navy-bean sandwich with goat cheese. The evening menu adds steak with chimichurri butter and organic chicken.

For dinner, I was wowed at Beckta, arguably Ottawa's No. 1 dining spot and the flagship of the Beckta dining group, which includes Gezellig and Play.

Operating in an aristocratic heritage house, Beckta's dining room serves refined, modern dishes such as miso-marinated hamachi, foie gras, Fogo Island cod, Ontario beef, Nova Scotia scallops and duck magret, and creative extras such as white root vegetable purée and chili and tamarind roasted squash.

Beckta's Wine Bar, for sipping and supper, is a relaxed space with bare brick walls and burnished leather seating. It offers steak tartare, tagliatelle with confit chicken, risotto with mushrooms and peas, Peking-style glazed pork belly, and my choice: steelhead trout with barley and bok choy.

The servers suggest great wines throughout, even by the glass, and there is a display of bottles enjoyed by celebs including the Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell, Carrie Underwood, Michael Douglas, Chris Hadfield, Malcolm Gladwell and a dashing young politico named Justin Trudeau.

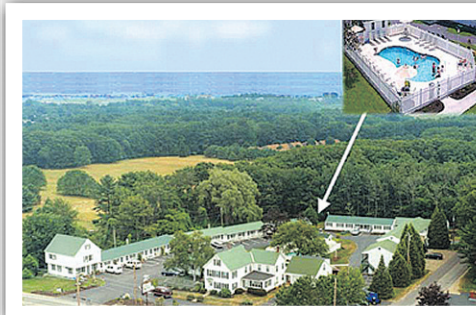
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