

National Post

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Puppy love

Rochelle Lash, Postmedia News · Mar. 5, 2011 | Last Updated: Mar. 5, 2011 6:11 AM ET

Tibetan terriers. German shepherds. Irish wolfhounds. Magnificent mutts. And especially British bulldogs. ... The red carpet is out for dogs at the luxurious Phineas Swann Bed and Breakfast Inn in Northern Vermont, and the swag includes welcome gifts such as rawhide bones and personal blankets.

When my ski pal Fanny, a golden retriever, got hip to the dog-friendly digs, she swished her tail madly and rolled over. Really, Fanny loses all dignity when it comes to checking out new country destinations. This SPCA alumna was drooling -literally -at the prospect of walking in the snowy woods and visiting a doggie "spaw" where she would be coiffed and manicured and then paraded around town to show off her new look.

Fanny, her owner Rae Turley and I loaded the car and headed to the Vermont border. The nice U.S. customs agent gave us the once-over, checked passports and rabies vaccination papers, and waved us through.

We were on our way to Phineas Swann, a converted 1880s farmhouse that is the centrepiece of the tiny village of Montgomery Center, Vt. This upscale inn is owned by two former Manhattan residents, Jay Kerch, an interior designer and antiques dealer, and John Perkins, a former banker and corporate consultant.

A whippet-grey cottage on the quiet main street, Phineas Swann has three plush rooms in the Main Inn and six deluxe suites in its Carriage House and River House. The living and dining rooms are richly decorated with a fabulous frenzy of curios, handsome fabrics and fine antiques. More than 4,000 amusing dog figurines crowd atop valuable rococo sideboards, Empire chests and claw-footed Louis XVI tables.

Phineas is much more elaborate than a typical B&B. The hosts do not skimp on anything. Every bedroom has its own high-definition, flat-screen television, a pod machine for espresso and daily baskets of freshly baked cookies, brownies and granola bars, all complimentary. The inn is wired for high-speed Internet, and guests are not charged for calls throughout the U.S. and Canada.

The accommodations are refined, elegant and lighthearted, adding up to one of the fanciest B&Bs in the Northeast.

With pristine white cotton bedspreads, deep carpeting, uncountable collectibles and dogs permitted in many guest rooms, Phineas's housekeeping is a challenge that would rattle even Martha Stewart.

"We have four housekeepers for nine guest units and our common rooms," Kerch says. "And I have white gloves for inspection."

Fanny did not care about perfect table settings, precious Ming vases or 600-threadcount sheets. Sure, Phineas's afternoon snacks are served on Spode English china, and breakfast features banana walnut pancakes and cheddar-cheese omelettes. But those are people perks. Each lucky dog guest gets his or her own porcelain food and water bowls, a fleece doggie sofa and a canister of Milk-Bones. Kerch and Perkins have also organized grooming packages to keep furry friends amused while the owners go skiing or out to dinner.

"We focus on pet owners," Kerch says. "Our typical guests bring two dogs, but we have had four Chihuahuas in one suite and three spaniels in another. Dogs are part of our guests' families, so they are very welcome."

No surprise, Perkins and Kerch have three dogs of their own. But even with all the fourlegged friends in other suites, life at Phineas is remarkably peaceful. No dogs are permitted in the main inn, so afternoon tea and meals are animal-free.

Phineas's guests also get discounts at local dining spots like Bernie's Restaurant, a friendly bistro. Perkins steps in as dinner chef on Friday and Saturday nights. The menu features comfort food like beef stroganoff, honey-mustard chicken, risotto, meat loaf or pasta, followed by chocolate cake or apple pie. But this home cooking is not for everyone. Fanny loved the rawhide bones and Puppermint Patties.

IF YOU GO

Phineas Swann Bed and Breakfast Inn 802-326-4306, phineasswann.com Prices B&B rates vary: main Inn rooms (no dogs) are US\$109-\$399 for two people.

Carriage House and River House (dogs permitted): US\$189-\$399 for studio suites; US\$189-\$499 for one-and two-bedroom suites for two to four people. Free pet services include dog beds, food bowls, dog-walking, towels and treats. Owners bring their own pet food.

Ski packages Pet Perfect Ski Package: US\$699, two nights for two, with breakfast, Jay Peak tickets for one day and dog-walking.

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