

Checking In: Winter comes to life in Vermont

Essex resort and spa is more than just a place to relax

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 13, 2013



The Essex Resort and Spa looks and feels like a country inn, but it is a 120-room hotel with two restaurants and a pool.

Photograph by: Essex Resort & Spa

When I think of Vermont's wintry wonderland, I imagine mountains, forests and mounds of snow for sliding sports. But there is more to life than skiing, or so they tell me.

The Essex Resort and Spa, a comfortable getaway just north of Burlington, pops with alternative activities: epicurean pursuits, including courses at its Cook Academy, spa life with an indoor pool and super shopping. The pièce de résistance this winter will be an exclusive Downton Abbey avant-première extravaganza that calls for guests to be costumed in tea gowns, tuxedos and tiaras.

The Essex and Vermont Public Television (VPT), broadcasters of beloved Masterpiece Theater, will orchestrate a marvellous Downton Abbey event, Jan. 4 to 5. It will be an exceptional opportunity to view the fourth season opener on the Saturday, one day before it is broadcast in more than 40 countries around the world.

Hurry, please, Bates. I am on the edge of my Victorian settee. Matthew is dead. Lady Mary has a newborn son. Downton's debts loom. What's next for the noble Grantham family: turmoil, scandal, poverty or romance?

It will be the Essex's second-annual Downton gala and it's a fundraiser for VPT, which thrives on the

largesse of about 23,000 donors. A big surprise for me is that one-quarter of the donors to our “local” PBS affiliate are Canadian, from greater Montreal and the Eastern Townships, and their support is so strong that VPT has a second board of directors raising funds in Quebec.

The Essex’s delightful Downton weekend will start at 2 p.m. with cocktails and the 3:30 p.m. screening at Essex Cinema across the street from the hotel, shown on a whopping 18-metre T-Rex screen. Downton fans can also upgrade their tickets to attend a rollicking 1920s-themed party from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., with food stations, a whisky tasting, dancing to the Vermont Jazz Ensemble and an etiquette challenge with Anna Post of the Emily Post Institute.

Party patrons with top-level “diamond” tickets will move on at 7 p.m. to an exclusive six-course feast inspired by Downton. The gala will be costume-friendly, so flapper dresses, evening gowns, scads of pearls and long gloves à la Lady Grantham will be de rigueur for the women, and dinner jackets, top hats, hunting pinks and kilts are encouraged for would-be lords of the manor. “Diamond” tickets include an overnight stay at the Essex, where the revelry will continue with a fulsome Sunday brunch, cooking and flower demonstrations, and another whisky tasting.

“The event is brimming with so much food, fine wines and spirits and so many activities,” said Chuck Bongiorno, gifts director of VPT. “The Downton fans who came last year said the première and the gala evening were great value.”

With its 120 rooms and suites, well-equipped spa, indoor pool, two restaurants and banquet spaces, the Essex is a sizable hotel and the only AAA four-diamond property in the Burlington area. The accommodations all have 300-channel cable TV service, pod-coffee machines and i-Home audio systems.

Still, it looks and feels like a country inn. The rooms are individually decorated with warmth, charm and quiet elegance, done in pastels like apricot, lavender and lime, with handsome brass or wooden beds. The fancy suites have whirlpool tubs and electric fireplaces. Here’s a fabulous fact: All of the rooms are blessed with luxurious cotton sheets by Anichini of Italy.

Apart from the Downton event, The Essex is best known for its culinary pursuits and uses vegetables from its own garden, plus other meat and produce from 15 regional farms. The bright, lively Tavern offers Vermont microbrews and pub fare such as wagyu beef sliders, corn chowder, clam fritters, burgers and truffle fries. Amuse, the dining room, features a more sophisticated menu of lobster pot pie, marinated quail, short rib ragu, plus delectable salmon, steak, veal and poultry. The Essex’s signature Inner Chef package is a two-day deal with a cooking class, and the Gourmet-Spa Getaway adds wellness services.

The Essex’s other claim to fame is its shopping potential. Its owners also operate the Essex Outlets, which include Van Heusen, Brooks Brothers, the new Pendleton and BCBGMAXAZARIA, spelled with all-capital letters to highlight the young, stylish line.

Plus, the hotel’s Spa & Shop Holiday weekend will run Dec. 6-8, and cost \$550 p.p., double

occupancy, for two nights. It's without meals, but it is loaded with perks: makeup consultations, \$300 worth of spa services, shopping discounts, a shuttle to Burlington's Church St. Marketplace and a Cook Academy class on winter hors d'oeuvres.

I don't usually think of the Essex as a ski lodge, but if some guests want to bail out on shopping or Sunday brunch, they can escape to Bolton Valley, an inviting, family-friendly downhill and cross-country centre that is a half-hour drive away.

IF YOU GO

Essex, Vt., is a 90-minute drive from Montreal via Highway 10 east, Routes 35 and 133 south to the U.S. border and Highway 89 south to Exit 17.

The Essex Resort & Spa: 800-727-4295, 802-878-1100, www.EssexResortSpa.com; Essex, Vt. Price: \$159-\$359 U.S., for two, incl. Wi-Fi, coffee corner, indoor pool, spa facilities, fitness centre, snowshoes and a small trail. Extras: meals, two-bedroom suite, spa treatments. Prices are higher on weekends and will increase in mid-December for the holidays.

Dining: The Tavern: children's menu available; open for lunch, afternoon fare and dinner daily, except for Sunday lunch.

Amuse: Breakfast on Mon-Sat., plus Sun. brunch and dinner Mon.-Sun.

Downton Abbey gala: 802- 654-3663, www.vpt.org/downton; five levels of tickets; the basic \$150 buys two tickets for afternoon cocktails and screening; at the top end, the \$850 Diamond tickets for two add one-night lodging, full evening gala, Sunday brunch and activities.

Cook Academy: Classes, \$60-\$149 p.p. Inner Chef Package, starts at \$619, including two nights lodging, breakfast, a cooking class, plus one dinner for two at Amuse (that's about \$155 p.p., per night). Prices increase in mid-December.

Upcoming: The Essex is remarkably pet-friendly at any time, but watch for the next Top Dog Weekend in spring with a reception for owners and dogs, a doggie-treats cooking class, off-leash playtime and doggie grooming.

There also are hot-air ballooning excursions (weather dependant) and tennis and golf in summer.

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Photograph by: Jeff Strain / Vermont Public Television

