

CHECKING IN

Shaw Festival: Two ways, two budgets



ROCHELLE LASH

The curtain will rise next month on the Shaw Festival, one of Canada's most prestigious theatre groups and the nucleus of tourism in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The picturesque town 20 minutes from Niagara Falls is at the top of its game during the nearly eight-month Shaw season.

Niagara-on-the-Lake is an intimate, historic and walkable community. In Old Town, Queen St. comes alive with a quaint buzz of cute shops and casual bistros. The Niagara Parkway, along the banks of the Niagara River, is busy with cyclists and strollers. And the harbour, where the river meets Lake Ontario, buzzes with watercraft of all shapes and sizes, from thrilling jet-boats to romantic dinner cruise ships.

Shaw-time also sparkles with wining at Niagara's bounteous vineyards and dining at the cornucopia of farm-to-table restaurants, especially the 17 Signature Kitchens. Virtually all of the 200 lodging establishments around Niagara-on-the-Lake organize packages, especially for theatre tickets.

"The important thing is that Shaw-goers can tailor visits to every budget," said Janice Thomson, executive director of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber of Commerce. "With more affordable prices in early and late season, theatre-goers can stay longer to experience other attractions."

ON STAGE

The Shaw Festival encompasses a seven-month season showcasing plays by George Bernard Shaw and other illustrious playwrights that reflect his spirit. The 2015 season will feature approximately 725 performances in four theatres, with audiences totalling about 250,000 people.

Here's a sprinkling: The season opener will be Peter and the Starcatcher (a prequel to Peter Pan, April 8 to Nov. 1) and other hot tickets include Sweet Charity (by Neil Simon, original staging by Bob Fosse, April 17 to Oct. 31); Pygmalion (by Shaw, May 31 to



A clock tower and a horse-drawn carriage are among the reasons Queen Street in Niagara-on-the-Lake is regarded as historic and charming. *THE BACKROOM/TOURISM NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE*



Harbour House is one of the most posh hotels in Niagara-on-the-Lake. It was named one of the best establishments in Eastern Canada by Condé Nast Traveler. *HARBOUR HOUSE/NIAGARA'S FINEST*

Oct. 24); and The Divine, A Play for Sarah Bernhardt (by Quebec-born Michel Marc Bouchard, with translation by Linda Gabouriau, July 5 to Oct. 11).

THEATRE & THRIFT

Budget-conscious theatre-lovers have options. The Shaw Festival offers price breaks for seniors, students and the under-30 set, as well as lower-priced performances on Sundays. If you buy a Triple Play Pass

or a 2015 season's pass before April 30, there are savings, as well. Plus, The Shaw has a full program of affordable activities, including popular backstage tours.

On the lodging front, such quaint, historic B&Bs as Merlot House or Stewart House start at about \$145 for two people in April.

The Moffat Inn is good value, with such amenities as hair dryers and free local calls. A member

of Vintage Hotels, it is a quaint stucco cottage with 24 pretty rooms done in pastels and plaids. Rooms start at \$129 in April and \$179 in June, and the \$16 fish 'n' chips is tops at the British-style Coach & Horses Pub.

What to do for free — or almost? Several vineyards, including the Pillitteri Estates Winery, run free tours with tastings for as little as \$2. And a sweet treat at Maple Leaf Fudge — perhaps cashew brittle or icewine chocolate — won't break the bank.

Yes, there are free samples.

Culture abounds, and the price is right. Gallery-hopping along Queen St. is on the house and at the RiverBrink Art Museum, \$5 buys entrance to a fine Canadian collection of the likes of Emily Carr and the Group of Seven.

IN THE LOGES

If you are in the market for a hotel splurge, consider Harbour House, a member of the prestigious Niagara's Finest Hotels and the one that was named one of the best establishments in Eastern Canada by Condé Nast Traveler.

Filled with antiques and fireplaces, this refined getaway overlooks Niagara-on-the-Lake's impressive marina. Harbour House's 31 deeply comfy rooms start at \$209 in April and \$266

IF YOU GO

Niagara-on-the-Lake is 670 kilometres from Montreal, or about 130 km from Toronto.

Tourism Niagara-on-the-Lake: 888-619-5984, niagaraonthelake.com; Ontario Tourism, live chats at: ontariotravel.net; Shaw Festival: 800-511-7429, shawfest.com; RiverBrink Art Museum: 905-262-4510, riverbrink.org; Jackson Triggs Winery: 866-589-4637, jacksontriggswinery.com.

Lodging: B&B Concierge, 866-805-9188, bbstay.ca; Moffat Inn/Prince of Wales Hotel/Vintage Hotels: 888-669-5566, vintage-hotels.com; Harbour House/The Charles Hotel/Niagara's Finest: 800-474-0632, niagarasfinest.com.

in June and feature such luxuries such as Egyptian cotton sheets, Frette of Italy bathrobes, pillow-top mattresses and Judith Jackson toiletries, plus modern amenities including iPod docks and flat-screens. More perks are included: A gourmet European-style breakfast is served in The Conservatory and an afternoon wine and cheese reception — Niagara wine and cheese, that is — brings guests together in The Library.

The formal Hob Knob at The Charles Hotel, another of Niagara's Finest Hotels, is dressed for dining, with white tablecloths and crystal stemware. The chef goes country gourmet at noon with shepherd's pie and duck confit. For dinner, the cuisine is fancier, featuring pan-seared scallops, foie gras, Lake Erie pickerel and duck breast.

Tradition and refinement rule many of Niagara-on-the-Lake's pastimes. There are gifts galore at The Shawp at the Festival Theatre, which sells vintage scripts, stationery, crafts, unique theatre treasures and fine books such as the Pictorial Webster's Dictionary or The Letters of Noël Coward.

The landmark Prince of Wales Hotel serves authentic English tea in the splendour of an ornate Victorian drawing room. You'll have a pot of masala chai, Earl Grey or Darjeeling, with finger sandwiches, pastries and scones with Devonshire cream (from \$34 per person).

Pop culture rocks, too. Concerts at the Jackson Triggs Amphitheatre Series features such artists as the Sam Roberts Band and Chantal Kreviazuk. Tickets cost \$45 to \$85.

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