

CHECKING IN

OTTAWA'S LORD ELGIN TURNS 75 IN STYLE



ROCHELLE LASH

The stately Lord Elgin Hotel in Ottawa is giving itself a 75th-anniversary gift, and its guests will reap the rewards.

The historic establishment has been a landmark of Ottawa since 1941. It was built as one of the first major hotels in an underdeveloped capital city, and has been part of the growth and action ever since.

The hotel is refurbishing its 355 guest rooms, suites and corridors, spending more than \$13 million, or around \$28,000 to \$35,000 per room.

The scene: The Lord Elgin is a full-scale hotel with a popular dining room and bar called Grill 41, a shop, a Starbucks, a business centre, an indoor pool, fitness centre and spa.

My visit started in the busy lobby lounge, in view of the busts of Lord Elgin, the governor general of British North America in the mid-1800s, and his wife, Lady Elgin. Generations later, today's Lord Elgin visits the hotel regularly.

The scene reminded me of a 2016 Ottawa version of Downtown Abbey, with Georgian-style furniture, potted ferns and wood panelling surrounding a fireplace. No one in the lounge was having tea or sherry, but everyone was tapping an iPad.

The update: The renovation work is underway a few floors at a time, and it's being carefully executed so there is little or no disruption to guests. The redecoration will end by December.

About 25 per cent of the rooms have already been refitted in an updated traditional look, with silvery taupe, satin-striped wallpaper, custom-made-in-Canada dark wood furniture and fainting couches. The luxurious beds are layered in thick duvets, soft pillows and white cotton sheeting.

New conveniences include charging outlets, iHome docking stations, in-room safes and mini-fridges. The bathrooms have had total makeovers, with new tiling, vanities and showers.

Upgraded Elgin Class rooms feature extra perks, such as Nespresso machines, pillow menus and bathrobes.



The Ceremonial Guard of the Canadian Forces passes the Lord Elgin en route to Parliament Hill every morning until Aug. 20. LORD ELGIN HOTEL

Food and drink: With good food and relatively moderate prices for a downtown hotel, Grill 41 Restaurant and Bar is busy-busy.

Executive chef Brian Vallipuram is a hidden treasure. Grill 41's interesting, tasty dishes are inspired by his experiences in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, and the presentations are beautiful.

For breakfast, you could do eggs and bacon from the buffet, mouth-watering blueberry pancakes or a perfect granola parfait with fresh berries and almonds. But consider something different: a latke-style taro cake or mandarin-pumpkin muffins. And if you book directly with the hotel, by phone or online, you will score a free breakfast. (Note: Special offers sometimes have restrictions.)

The top sellers at lunch are the superlative rich and creamy chowder of Maritime seafood and the niçoise salad with ahi tuna or scallops. Dinner features steaks, chops, pasta, chicken and ribs. But there are also eastern delicacies such as Thai shrimp cakes, Asian duck with kimchee, scallops in black bean sauce, ghee-braised squash, udon noodle cakes and Indian butter chicken.

Royal location: The Lord Elgin thrives as an independent property — there are no chain-hotel banners — because of its pivotal location.

It is across the street from the Rideau Canal and the National Arts Centre, and within blocks of Parliament Hill, the National Gallery of Canada, ByWard Market and the National War Memorial.

It faces Confederation Park, which is the site of the Ottawa Jazz Festival in summer and Winterlude in winter. The Lord Elgin's guests also have front-row seats to the march of the Ceremonial Guard heading for Parliament Hill (until Aug. 20). Canada's 2017 celebrations, marking 150 years since Confederation, will be outside the front door, too.

The Lord Elgin is an easy place to name-drop, politically speaking. Mackenzie King was its first guest in 1941, and Justin Trudeau has been a patron. It is so close to city hall that Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson pops in to pick up his morning newspaper. Senators, members of Parliament and judges all are regulars.

Ottawa journalist Randy Boswell has written a commemorative book about the Lord Elgin's

75 years, and every guest room has a copy. Boswell quotes a report of opening day:

"The building's great scale, handsome stone-covered walls and chateau-style roof not only conformed to (Mackenzie) King's expectations of grandeur, but also seemed to declare Ottawa's coming-of-age as a city of consequence and ambition."

That's still true.

Around town: The Lord Elgin is at the heart of the action. The new Rideau Canal Cruises take passengers on 75-minute electric-boat excursions through Ontario's only UNESCO World Heritage Site. The view includes embassies, beautiful houses, the University of Ottawa and Lansdowne Park.

The Ultimate Dinosaurs Exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Nature focuses on such creatures as the Giganotosaurus (until Sept. 5; nature.ca).

RentABike is marking 40 years this year. It rents road bikes, mountain bikes, tandems, trailers and kids' bikes for cruising the Rideau Canal path, which links to 300 kilometres of trails (613-241-4140; rentabike.ca).

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IF YOU GO

Lord Elgin Hotel: 800-267-4298, lordelginhotel.ca; 100 Elgin St., Ottawa.

Price: Prices fluctuate and are approximate. Current high-season rates are from \$159 (Elgin Class rooms and suites are more expensive), including Wi-Fi, local calls, business centre, indoor pool, fitness centre, sauna, whirlpool. Prices decrease after early December. Valet parking (the only option), \$30.

Grill 41 Restaurant and Bar: 613-569-2126.

Ottawa Tourism: 800-363-4465, ottawatourism.ca; National Capital Commission, 800-465-1867, ncc-ccn.gc.ca.

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