



The Clay Brook condo-hotel at the base of the Sugarbush Resort features rural Vermont architecture and deluxe interiors. PHOTOS: SUGARBUSH RESORT

A Sugarbush vacation can be fancy or folksy

Resort boasts cushy conveniences like artisan chefs, but stays off the beaten path



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

Sugarbush Resort, a superlative mountain development in Vermont, is home to experiences that range from simple to sophisticated.

The centrepiece of the Mad River Valley, Sugarbush is marking its 60th year. It's a big dual-mountain getaway that embraces superlative skiing and riding on Lincoln Peak and Mt. Ellen, with thrilling variations like terrain parks, glades, cat skiing, backcountry, uphill skinning and creative children's programs.

SKI Magazine's influential 2017-2018 readers' poll rated Sugarbush the second best resort in the East, with Smuggler's Notch, Vt., coming in first and Tremblant fourth. Sugarbush scored particularly high for dining, lodging and customer service.

No argument there. You can be pampered if you want to be, with on-slope ambassadors, ski concierges and artisan chefs. And, to make winter downright cushy, Sugarbush has a heated stone pathway leading to a year-

round outdoor pool, indoor valet parking and a handy shuttle bus to nearby stops.

Weatherproof indoor attractions include the popular Kids Adventure Zone, which has a bungee trampoline, an inflatable bounce room and sports; and the Sugarbush Health & Recreation Center, with a pool and hot tub, saunas, tennis and extensive fitness facilities.

Although it is an upscale destination built around Clay Brook, a deluxe condo-hotel, Sugarbush Resort still has price-conscious breaks at certain times, including a third night free at the home-spun Sugarbush Inn or US\$30 skiing on Thursdays at Mt. Ellen.

Even with all its action, Sugarbush is a little off the beaten path, and embodies the winter beauty and tranquillity of Vermont's forests and mountains.

"Our strength is that we are independent and family-owned and we have maintained a personal touch and a quintessentially Vermont ambience," said Win Smith, Sugarbush's president and former chairman of Merrill Lynch International. His dedicated, hands-on style includes skiing between 100 and 130 days each season.

"Our individualism sets us apart in this era of mega-companies," said Smith, referring to Vail Resorts, whose 14 areas include Stowe, Vt. and Whistler

Blackcomb, B.C.; and Alterra Mountain Company, which owns 12 areas, including Tremblant and Squaw Valley, Calif.

Clay Brook is an impressive resort hotel built to look like a Vermont barn, with rugged accents of stone and timber and grand guest suites high atop a silo-like structure. This is slope-side living at its finest.

The interiors are inspired by country cottages — supremely luxurious country cottages, that is. The 60 units — hotel rooms, studios and spacious one-to-five-bedroom condos — are decked out in traditional decor and soothing tones of cream, caramel and antique blue. There is warmth in the textures — sisal carpets, leather sofas, slate floors — and such rich fabrics as silk, tweed and chenille. In-room perks include gas fireplaces,



The suites at the Clay Brook are fully equipped and luxurious with warm, traditional decor.

flat-screen TVs and posh Molton Brown toiletries.

Sugarbush dining is full of surprises. Walt's at The Glen House is a charming winter stop mid-slope at Mt. Ellen. You'll have fabulous views, and chef Todd Dibkey's progressive menu of gourmet grilled cheese and grain bowls with braised rib or Ahi tuna. The evening Tour de Moon is more challenging: it's an exhilarating group trek uphill to Walt's by snowshoe or skin-ski (Feb. 3).

If you're a party of 12 or more, you can organize a spectacular dinner at Allyn's Lodge, mid-mountain on Lincoln Peak. Diners hike up or board a snowcat and, after the feast, they ski down by torchlight.

For dinner, Rumble's Kitchen in the Clay Brook hotel aces dinners of chicken, filet mignon and fish, plus pork and lamb raised especially for Sugarbush, as well as burgers, lobster mac 'n' cheese, and tasty, tangy vegetables dishes like roasted cauliflower and brussels sprouts salad.

Après-ski action rocks on Saturdays at Castlerock Pub and on Thursdays at Mt. Ellen, and the latest local micro-brew is Sip of Sunshine, a double IPA from Lawson's Finest Liquids.

A favourite for exotic cuisine is the exciting Fit to be Thai'd in the Sugarbush Inn where spicy curries, crispy duck, tom yum soup and pad Thai warm you after a bracing day outdoors. rochelle@rochellelash.com twitter.com/rochellelash

IF YOU GO

Warren, Vt., is a two-hour, 45-minute drive from Montreal.

Sugarbush Resort: 800-53-SUGAR (800-537-8427), sugarbush.com. Children six and under ski free; lift discounts include 20 to 50 per cent off with advance online purchases; mid-week passes; US\$30 Thursdays at Mt. Ellen; the Boomer season pass; or the passes of Mountain Collective, which groups 16 areas including Banff-Sunshine and Lake Louise. Statistics: 111 trails, 234 hectares/578 acres of terrain, 16 lifts, a 793-metre vertical drop, four terrain parks.

Clay Brook: Prices fluctuate and are approximate. Ski-and-stay packages available online. Hotel rooms start at US\$354 for two; studios start at US\$422 for two; a one-bedroom suite for up to two adults and two juniors 18 and under, starts at US\$522. Larger units available for up to 10 people. Rates include outdoor heated pool/hot tub, valet parking for hotel rooms, indoor valet parking for suites, ski and boot concierges, fitness room (in hotel), in-room coffee for suites, Sugarbush Health & Recreation Center. Extra: lift tickets, tennis courts, rock-climbing wall, massage.

Sugarbush Inn: about US\$139-\$170, including shuttle to lifts, continental breakfast, fireplace lounge, pool table, Sugarbush Health & Recreation Center. Children three and under stay for free.

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