

Topnotch Resort in Stowe adds value deals



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

It is renewed, and always improving. Topnotch Resort in Stowe, Vt., one of the finest luxury getaways in the northeast, continues to evolve with creative experiences and added value.

Topnotch is an all-encompassing stop for superb tennis, unparalleled pool and spa life, plus an equestrian centre, a landscaped wedding meadow and nifty sports boutiques, all topped off by a cool bar scene and farm-to-table cuisine. That's a multi-tasking challenge with gravitas, yet this hospitality leader is stylish and fresh, with non-stop energy and a penchant for staying young and casually chic.

Owned for decades by a Montreal family, the resort still is hot with the hometown crowd. I chatted with Joyce Fellner, whose husband, George Azimov, proposed here nearly 20 years ago (and they're still Topnotchers, with their three children); and Topnotch Club member Marion Hecht, a former Montrealer who is a Stowe ski instructor, co-founder of the Women of Winter program and a WCVT radio host under the handle of Marion Carol.

The hotel was rebuilt two years ago, emerging with an attractive lobby lounge called The Roost and a contemporary, sleek look, all in a picturesque setting of forests and mountains. The 68 spacious guest rooms have been reimagined with simple, contemporary decor in soothing naturals, with a sprinkling of country touches such as plaid headboards.

Gemstone Hotels and Resorts took over this year, so Topnotch is a tighter ship, with attentive staff and entertaining programs. It's pricey, but guests are spoiled with superlative facilities and attractive deals that make this glamorous enclave just a little more accessible.

Summer 2015 has introduced free kids' activities, Girls' Night Out with appetizers and wine, and the Boys Will Be Boys package — yes, beer is involved. Paddle-board fitness and cardio Pilates are among several progressive exercise classes, Tennis Tech covers the sport's basics, and the lawn is alive with



Topnotch Resort at Stowe, Vt., is a deluxe, contemporary getaway with a full calendar of new activities. The hotel was rebuilt two years ago, emerging with an attractive lobby lounge called The Roost. PHOTOS: TOPNOTCH RESORT



One of the three swimming pools is reserved for adults.

children playing volleyball and badminton.

"Our goal is to balance life for both couples and families," said Topnotch's general manager Bob Sassani. "With fine food, deluxe rooms, an adults-only pool and a comprehensive spa program with 30 treatment rooms, the resort is a sophisticated destination, an attractive retreat for adults and honeymoon heaven. We have romance, Vermont-inspired gastronomy and tranquility, if you want it.

"But we also have exceptional facilities for children, and a fun new activity calendar with supervision, so parents can have free time for the pool or spa."

The kids' program is tailored to two age groups, five-and-over or six-to-14, and features nature walks, horseback riding and how-to sessions in hair braiding, nutrition or art. Spa Newbies

pampers the under-16 crowd with mani-pedis and facials, and the Junior Tennis Academy trains future champions.

For grown-ups, Topnotch has a happening every night at either The Roost or Flannel. The gourmet meal-for-a steal costs \$45 on Mondays and Tuesdays; \$10 beer tasting on Tuesdays; \$10 burger-and-beer on Wednesdays; patio hors d'oeuvres on Thursdays; live music on Fridays and Saturdays; brunch on Sundays with a \$10 Bloody Mary bar. Or, you can chill with such unique programs as the Zen Master, which includes meditation, tai chi, spa treatments, forest walking and healthy gourmet meals.

There is value in lodging, too. The Boys Will Be Boys "mancation" starts at about \$279 US p.p., per night, for a two-night stay, and includes a \$100 resort credit. The Play Your Way tennis

deal starts at \$300 p.p. per night, for a two-night stay, and includes breakfast, some court time and savings on Adidas apparel. There is a fourth night free with the Linger Longer package and additional weekday nights start at \$250, at certain times. Plus, Topnotch has a best-rate guarantee.

A member of the Vermont Fresh Network and Vermont Cheese Council, Topnotch's hotel is a cut above. Among dinner highlights at Flannel are crab cakes with yuzu aioli, chilled asparagus soup, scallops with Udon noodles and yakitori sauce and the juicy rib-eye steak. Poolside lunches include a BLT summer roll, barbecue pork flatbread and the classic grilled salmon salad.

At The Roost, fine cheeses and artisan charcuterie rule, along with comfort dishes such as pork-belly tacos and homemade veggie burgers. With modern rustic decor, The Roost is a darling of locals for après-everything because of its Industry night on Mondays, the large-screen TVs tuned to sports and live music on weekends.

Guests can hop a hotel van to take a foodie or brewery tour or head to the Stowe Mountain Resort for zip-lining, the Alpine Slide, golf, hiking, the Gondola Skyride or the Spruce Peak Performing Arts Center. The Stowe Recreation Path, a picturesque, meandering trail for cyclists and strollers, starts at Topnotch and winds up about eight kilometres away in the heart of the historic village.

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IF YOU GO

Topnotch Resort: 802-253-8585, topnotchresort.com; 4000 Mountain Rd. (Route 108), Stowe, Vt. Pet-friendly, no charge. Topnotch is a Gemstone resort, which also runs The Essex near Burlington, Vt., and BeachWalk Resort, a new condo-hotel in Hallendale, Fla. gemstoneresorts.com

Price: Rates fluctuate, but rooms and suites cost approximately \$275-\$325 U.S., on Sun.-Thurs., or \$325-\$375 on Fri.-Sat.; two- and three-bedroom townhouses, \$750-\$1,000 for four to eight people. Watch for special packages

Rates: Including shuttle (to skiing and most local venues), indoor-outdoor pools with steam, sauna, whirlpools, fitness centre, baby gear, electronic game room, lawn games, firepits, pet amenities, morning stretch class. Evening turndown on request. CAA discount of 10 per cent.

The Spa at Topnotch (beauty salon, body treatments, classes): 802-253-6463; spa baths included with treatments; or \$25 for hotel guests, \$50 for non-guests; 80-minute Swedish massage costs \$155, Mon.-Thurs., incl. tip, or \$170, Fri.-Sun.; most fitness classes, \$15.

Local info: gostowe.com and stowe.com.

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