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SLEEPOVER

THE JUNIPER, BANFF

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

BANFF -- Banff is a spot steeped in Canadian history -- the place where dramatic scenery, a natural hot spring and the transcontinental railway intersected to give us the perfect site for Canada's first national park.

It's also a place where rustic lodges and mountains define the tourist experience, where fieldstone fireplaces and log timbers rule the architectural aesthetic.

But for more recent history buffs -- say the stylish, mid-century modern types -- there's a newly renovated hotel, renamed The Juniper, in Banff, offering what might be dubbed a "Rocky Mountain retro" experience.

Design

If there's a hip boutique hotel in Banff, this is it. It's rustic and minimalist at the same time -- a renovation that has taken a 50-year-old local hotel (formerly known as the Timberline Inn) into the 21st-century by taking out everything extraneous and leaving the mid-century bones of the building intact. With walls of stacked, gunmetal grey rundle stone, burnished redwood details and muted natural colours, it's a stylish retrofit that gives the place a casual Zen vibe.

Peter Poole, one of the forward-thinking partners of the Juniper hotel project, is a big proponent of sustainable development, so there was a fair bit of recycling and reclamation done here too. The slabs of slate incised with each room number are made from old roof tiles (salvaged from the Banff Springs Hotel) and the reno included low-flow toilets, and a "green" roof of native plants and reclaimed wood.

Ambience

The small, 52-room hotel was built in 1955 and retains that era's ranch-style sprawl, tiered down a steep slope at the base of Mount Norquay, across the Trans-Canada Highway from the town of Banff. That means it's quiet in the sense that it's far from the Banff shopping strip, but that the drone of traffic isn't completely obscured.

That said, the walls of windows that offer 180-degree mountain views (arguably the best in Banff) are well-glazed and fairly soundproof. And if you head out behind the hotel, along the wildlife corridor that branches into the woods from here, you are truly away from it all.

Clientele

As the Timberline Inn, this hotel was a local haunt -- the place for weddings on the big patio and for after-work drinks far from the tourist crowds in the town. Now, as the Juniper, it has become a bit of a hideaway for couples looking for an intimate retreat away from busy Banff Avenue,

although it's still a popular venue for mountain nuptials.

Rooms

The look is a pared-down, modern take on the usual mountain style with furnishings including a sleek, burnt-orange, ultra-suede sofa and tactile side tables, hewn from massive recycled wooden beams. The rooms on the west-facing side have huge windows and wide terraces, and there are two private cabins on the property.

As for the chic suites here, with massive rundle stone fireplaces angling artfully across an entire wall, granite-topped wet bars, a 42-inch TV, rain showers and big soaking tubs, they're the kind of cool cocoon you're in no hurry to leave.

Service

The mood as you enter the lobby is spa-like: Have a glass of fresh fruit juice from the pitcher on the front desk while you sign in, or admire the over-sized black-and-white mountain photos snapped decades ago by legendary local mountaineer Bruno Engler. Staff are helpful.

Food and drink

While the Mukamuk Bistro and Lounge (the word means "food and feasting" in the Chinook dialect) has won rave reviews from critics, the menu seems to be in a constant state of flux as chefs come and go.

We enjoyed a delicious panko-crusting portobello burger and molten chocolate soufflé for lunch, but a new chef will be updating the offerings this spring, celebrating the area's ancient aboriginal history with indigenous ingredients such as bison, rocky mountain white fish and juniper berries.

An earthen oven, modelled after those used by the Shuswap people who historically travelled through this area, will be used on the patio this summer.

Meanwhile, don't miss the chance to peruse the circa 1955 menu displayed along the hotel's "heritage hall." Back in the day, the fanciest meal here would set you back just over 10 bucks -- including mock turtle soup, chateaubriand, baked Alaska for two and imported cheeses.

The lounge, with its wall of windows and massive fireplace, reflects the rocks of Mount Rundle -- truly the best place to enjoy a cocktail and watch the light play across this definitive local peak.

Things to do

The Juniper sits on a wildlife corridor and a 4,000-year-old archeological site. The remains of pit dwellings, once occupied by early Shuswap people, can be found on the hotel property and the new owners plan to work with Parks Canada to preserve the area and create an interpretive centre here.

Several motion-sensitive cameras have been installed on trails behind the hotel to document the movements of wildlife, and the images of animals traversing the property will be part of ongoing interpretive displays at the hotel. Interpretive trails meandering behind the hotel on Mount Norquay are also in the planning stages.

Bottom line

This hip reno manages to offer big city boutique style in the relaxed, natural environment of the Rocky Mountains.

Hotel vitals**THE JUNIPER**

Essentials: 1 Juniper Way; 1-877-762-2281; <http://www.decorehotels.com/juniper>.

Rates and rooms: The 52 rooms here include three luxury suites, a three-bedroom penthouse and two two-bedroom chalets. Rooms start at \$145; suites from \$230; the penthouse from \$495; and chalets from \$286. B&B and ski/sleep packages are offered. Pet-friendly -- add \$25.

Top draws: A small, boutique-style hotel in a secluded mountain setting.

Needs work: The food service here is in flux -- it can be rather hard to find a waiter.

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