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World's Fare Feature Package

L'Auberge De Sedona, Into the Woods in Arizona's Red Rock Country

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services, World's Fare Posted 06/01/2009 at 6:57 pm EST

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SEDONA, AZ -- For L'Auberge de Sedona, a luxury lodge with secluded guest cabins on the banks of Oak Creek, the 2009 recession couldn't have come at a more convenient time. Despite the slowdown in travel and tourism, the 25-year-old inn, nestled on secluded acreage property in the heart of Sedona, has pressed ahead with a planned \$25 million expansion and renovation, a long-overdue project that, in better times, would have forced the inn to turn away paying guests.

Instead, L'Auberge, now with a new owner, has stayed open for business, completing the renovation in stages and putting guests who do decide to travel as far from the sounds of hammers and saws as possible. To ease the pain -- if there is any -- the 52-room inn is advertising discounted rates until the project is complete, set for early October 2009. For travelers who've always wanted to stay at L'Auberge, in central Arizona's red rock country, the offer is as tempting as the timing is right.

"Our 'expansion' package is a real money saver," said General Manager Joe Mottershead, on site daily to make sure guests aren't inconvenienced. "We're not changing the size of the cottages," he said, showing us one of the nearly-finished cabins, done except for new carpets and linens. "But we've enlarged the front deck and replaced the window with glass doors. Before you couldn't really see the river. Now you can enjoy the view from the sofa."

The newly raised ceiling, he pointed out, makes the cottages feel larger and airier. A surprise bonus, the outdoor shower, installed in a wood enclosure in the back garden, is open to the sky. "You can take a shower and look at the stars at the same time," he said, a reference to Sedona's famously dark nights.

Once a top-ranked hotel here in Sedona, L'Auberge's rooms have looked dated of late, noted on several Internet sites by more than one irate guest. The current project, going far beyond mere renovations, should put that complaint to rest. Thirty-one more cottages are going up on the site, along with a brand-new, ultra-deluxe spa, an event and meetings center and a parking structure. A new approach road and check-in area will solve the problem of the present driveway, a steep, narrow, poorly-marked road on what looks like an easement.

To veterans of the see-America-by-car era, L'Auberge's log-sided cabins have long been a familiar sight. A throwback to the 1950s, they seem to belong to the days when rustic cabins were commonplace in the West, usually marketed as motels. Instead, these are picturesque hideaways, tastefully decorated and warmly welcoming, an ideal retreat for a romantic honeymoon, anniversary or quiet getaway.

Built not in the '50s, but in 1984, by chef and hotelier Jean Rocchi, L'Auberge, they reflected his sense of country French hospitality, a mix of charm, casual comfort and fine dining.

For 25 years, it's been a winning recipe. Sedona's old-town shopping streets are next door. The site is tree-shaded and quiet. The creek, clean enough to swim in, gurgles gently as it winds past.

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The restaurant, overlooking the creek, serves award-winning French and continental cuisine in a half-bistro, half formal setting, or on the creek-side patio. (Note to prospective guests: make reservations in advance). The cottages, scattered two- and three-deep near the river bank, nestle among terraced lawns and rock gardens, separated by gravel and flagstone walks.

Nineteen guest rooms are in the main lodge across the parking lot, on two stories around an airy, high-ceilinged atrium. Guests register in the front lobby, a clubby room with wood floors, paneling, a high ceiling and tall rock fireplace. This is also where the staff lays out complimentary morning coffee and scones, and from 5 to 6 p.m., a daily, cocktail-hour wine-and-cheese buffet, with guitar and songs from local amateurs.

The newly-renovated cottages sport flat-screen LCD television, wireless Internet access, rock fireplaces, king beds, armchairs and sofas, recessed lighting, bedside tables and lamps. A mini-fridge is handy for storing your cold drinks; the bathrooms have hairdryers and the usual amenities. The best touch, I think, is the front porch furniture, a lovely place to sit, watch the light fade and listen to the sound of a free-flowing stream.

REPORT CARD:

BIGGEST SURPRISE: No in-town traffic noise.

MEMORABLE MOMENT: Candlelit dinner in the restaurant.

BEST BUY: No charge for parking.

PRIMITIVE PLEASURE: Silvery cobwebs in the grass.

FORGETTABLE: Cocktail hour's amateur singer.

DON'T MISS: Evening on the front porch.

INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE:

Sedona is 30 miles south of Flagstaff, on Highway 89A, and 200 miles north of Phoenix, via I-17, Highway 179 and Highway 89A.

Two "Expansion packages," are available, with a night for two and a voucher, either for a Jeep trip, or for a spa treatment. The Jeep package is \$375 per night, with a \$150 voucher. The Spa package is \$350 per night with a \$200 voucher. Standard rates, without package extras, for two sharing a room in mid-July start at \$195 for a lodge room, \$235 for a garden cottage and \$325 for a creek-side cottage. All prices include a \$25 service fee for tips, maid service and valet.

Reserve at www.lauberge.com, or call 800-420-1693.

(Anne Z. Cooke relives her travels at home in Venice, Calif.)

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