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TRAVEL

HELP IN THE HOTEL HUNT

Hotelwatchdog search engine rounds up hotel deals

Airfarewatchdog.com, the source for hot airfare deals, has expanded into the hotel market with Hotelwatchdog, airfarewatchdog.com/hotels. It's a hotel search engine that gives you a Top 20 list of hotels based on price, TripAdvisor ratings, and key attractions, restaurants and night life.

You'll love the Top 20 approach to search results. The prices are clear, and you don't have to click through to a

second page to see photos of the hotel. You also can click through to see the complete list of hotels.

Even better, the search remains deal-focused; beneath each hotel name you'll see stats such as, "This hotel's price is 64 per cent less than rates at other nearby, similar hotels" or "This hotel's price is 21 per cent off its 45-day historic average."
Los Angeles Times



Vidler's, the largest five and dime in the world, with more than 75,000 items in four adjoining 19th century buildings.

PHOTOS BY ANNE BOKMA

Christmas goes big in Buffalo

Make over-the-top Salvatore's your first stop on a holiday excursion across the border to western New York

ANNE BOKMA

I'm all for peace, joy and goodwill this time of year, but am also fond of the holiday directive to eat, drink and be merry.

For almost 50 years those in search of yuletide excess have been making the annual December trek to Salvatore's Italian Gardens in Buffalo to indulge in classic fare such as osso bucco, puttanesca, lobster bisque, rack of lamb, and filet mignon — pairing these delectable dishes with one of the 550 vintages from an 18-page wine menu.

But Salvatore's award-winning food isn't the main feature that attracts patrons this time of year. It's the over-the-top Christmas décor, flamboyant as Liberace's boudoir, that's the main attraction.

A team of 20 spends two weeks decking every inch of the 300-seat restaurant and banquet centre with several truckloads of tinsel, sparkling lights, gold garlands and shiny red globes. It's about as subtle as a Vegas showgirl, but you can't help admire the glamour.

Judging by the number of north-of-the-border license plates in the packed parking lot, Canadians are drawn to the place like wise men to Bethlehem.

Paula Salvatore, the matriarch of the clan, chooses a different holiday theme



Salvatore's frosted nutcracker is an example of the over-the-top take the popular restaurant has on Christmas.

each season and this year it's based on the movie "Frozen."

Life-size animated mechanical figures of sisters Anna and Elsa, as well as the peasant Kristoff and his reindeer Sven, greet us in the grand lobby. The snowman Olaf is part of the scene too, basking under a bright umbrella next to a Christmas tree festooned with

sand buckets.

Nutcrackers stand at attention throughout the restaurant, sparkly penguins are arranged in a grouping of silver trees, Santa hats hang from expansive chandeliers, and a bearded St. Nick seems to peek around every corner. Dozens of Christmas trees, heavy laden with whimsical oversize orna-

ments, blaze bright as paparazzi flashbulbs on the red carpet.

A 15-foot high gingerbread façade covers the gift shop, topped by Santa waving from the chimney. There's even a big metal mailbox promising direct delivery to the North Pole.

It's a kids' Christmas paradise, except there's barely a child to be seen among the well dressed crowd. Salvatore's specializes in happy meals for adults and works hard to ignite a sense of wonder in even the most jaded of grownups.

As befits its Italian heritage, Salvatore's injects a bit of Catholic sentiment into the secular spangle. Angels are everywhere. A traditional crèche is outfitted with twinkling lights. The piece de resistance greets us as we make our way to our table — a kneeling Santa, his hands clasped in prayer above the babe in the manger — a godly and gaudy pairing that seems as apt as surf and turf in these extravagant surroundings.

The food is as fine as you'd expect — the melt-in-your mouth Oxtail ragout appetizer a stand out. Servings are as bountiful as the décor and leave us too stuffed for dessert. After our meal we sit for a family photo with Santa and Mrs. Claus (none other than the gracious Mrs. Salvatore herself).

As we leave to catch the complimentary shuttle bus back to Salvatore's companion hotel up the road, someone somewhere pushes a button and snow drifts down on us from the lobby ceiling, baptizing us with artificial magic. It seems a fitting parting.

Buffalo continues // G12



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TRAVEL



PHOTO BY ANNE BOKMA

The (716) bar and eatery that's part of the new HarbourCenter, a \$170-million two-storey complex along the waterfront financed by Buffalo Sabres' owner Terry Pegula.

BUFFALO CHRISTMAS

CONTINUED FROM // G10

While Salvatore's offers Buffalo's most elaborate Christmas décor, there are plenty of other winter-themed attractions worth checking out.

East Aurora offers a unique holiday shopping experience at Viddler's, the largest five and dime in the world, with more than 75,000 items in four adjoining 19th century buildings.

The cozy Firefly Cupcakes next door is gussied up in a Grinch theme complete with a topsy-turvy Christmas tree and a Grinch cupcake decorated with a pile of

green icing topped by a bright red candy heart.

Across the street, the Aurora movie theatre is showing free classic Christmas flicks every Saturday morning leading up to Christmas.

For history buffs, there are yuletide tours at Graycliff, the lakeside home that's the counterpart to the famous Darwin Martin House Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Buffalo executive in 1926, and at the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Historical site, one of the only places outside of Washington, D.C. where a U.S. president took the oath of office.

Sports fans will want to head over to the (716) bar and eatery that's part of the new HarbourCenter, a \$170-million two-storey complex along the waterfront financed by Buffalo Sabres' owner

Terry Pegula. A 40-foot long bar top is lit with blue light to replicate a hockey rink and TV screens are everywhere — there's a 38-foot feature screen above the bar and more than 70 additional screens, including a few embedded in the bathroom mirrors so you won't miss a minute of the big game.

Just up the street a new 35,000 sq. ft. outdoor skating rink is scheduled to open Dec. 18.

The area also boasts a new Tim Hortons featuring memorabilia that pays tribute to the NHL defenseman who signed with the Sabres in 1972.

Across the street from the coffee shop the hockey great is immortalized in a bronze statue. It's enough to make a Canadian feel right at home.

Anne Bokma is a travel writer based in Hamilton.

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Hamilton



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