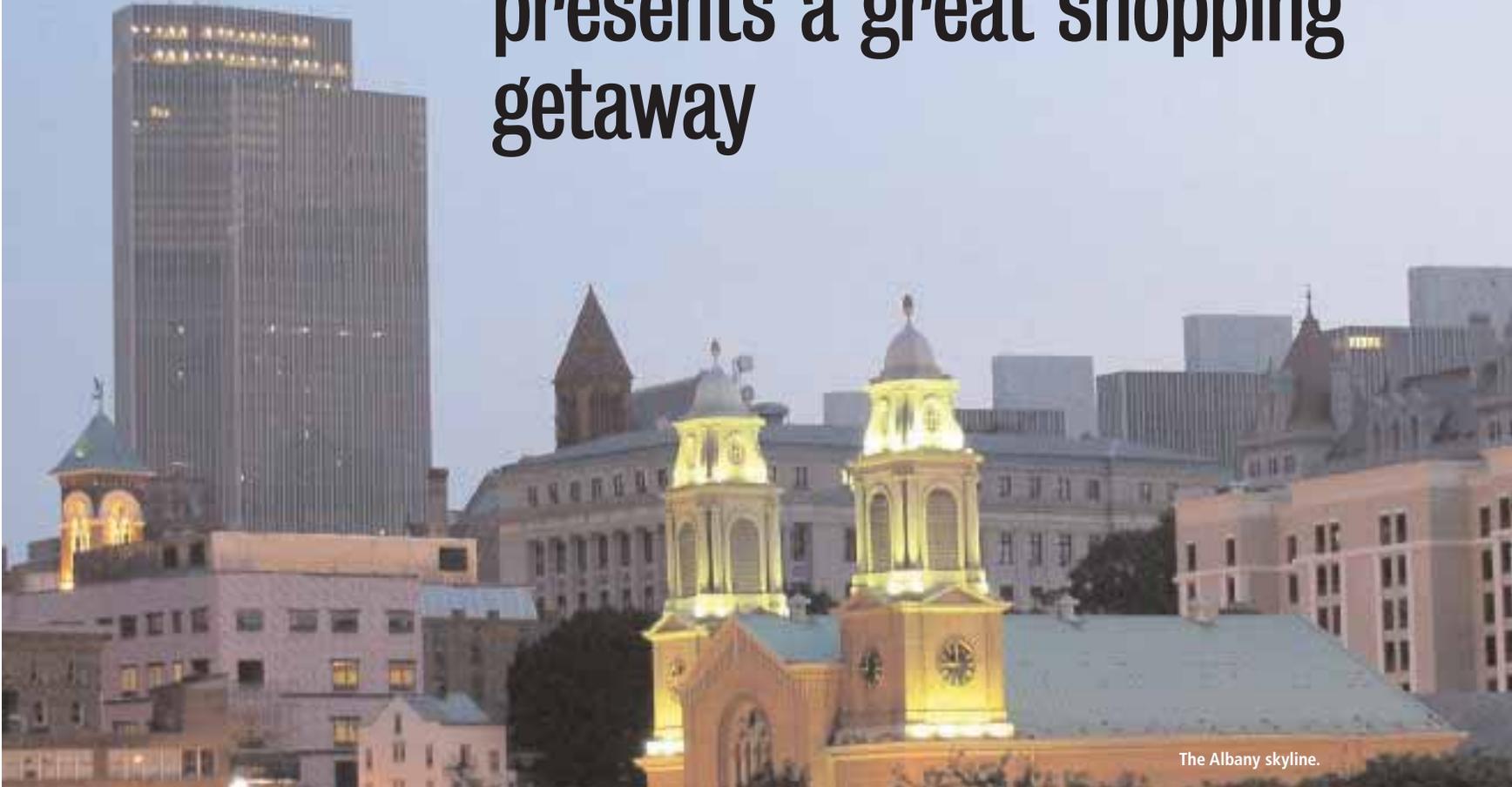


New York capital of Albany presents a great shopping getaway



The Albany skyline.

By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

Shopping in the United States has always been a delight for my family, especially with our dollar at par with the American greenback. Albany, the capital of the State of New York, is just under four hours from Montreal by car and the home of the large Crossgates Mall and the smaller, but equally impressive Colonie Center.

We recently spent four days in Albany during the Christmas holiday period. With a great place to stay, excellent restaurants to choose from and, of course, the endless shopping experience, it proved to be the perfect mid-winter getaway.

Albany has attracted visitors for 400 years with historic sites, fabulous attractions, family-friendly amenities, and entertaining events. World-class museums, unique galleries, stunning architecture, those enticing restaurants, and welcoming accommodations can indeed keep you busy for days. Enjoy everything from boating to skiing and biking to snow-shoeing. Albany lies at the foot of the Adirondacks and Catskill Mountains and is at the tip of the historic Hudson Valley Region. Within a short ride are neighboring Cooperstown and Saratoga Springs.

Be sure to check out the Million Dollar Staircase, the awe inspiring "Egg" at the Empire State Plaza and many diverse examples of historic house sites and public spaces such as the Pruyn House and the first Shaker Meeting House. You can visit the magnificent Gothic structure, now the Administrative Center of the State University of New York, the Delaware and Hudson, and the Albany Evening Journal Buildings, located at the base of State Street.



The Cresthill Suites units are spacious and include all of the comforts of home.

There is an abundance of professional theatre, music, dance, sports, and a backyard full of recreational splendors. As the crossroads of the northeast, Albany is easily accessible by car, train, and plane and is located less than three hours from New York and Boston.

The Crossgates Mall is home to 250 stores, restaurants and kiosks, including big box tenants Macys, Sears, Dick's Sporting Goods and JC Penny (now called JCP).

The Dave and Buster's restaurant and games

and arcade chain will open its first Albany location at the Mall soon. We spent nearly seven straight hours there on a first day and went back for another three the following afternoon.

Where to Stay

When in Albany we enjoy staying at the Cresthill Suites (www.cresthillsuites.com), an extended stay hotel located at 1415 Washington Avenue. It turned out to be most convenient for us. There were large Hannaford's and Price



The Desmond has nice places to dine.

Chopper grocery stores nearby, as well as plenty of restaurants, the Crossgates Mall, the Colonie Center and two movie theatre complexes. Cresthill is in fact part of a small chain, with other locales in Syracuse, NY and Wichita, Kansas.

I would strongly recommend this place for families. Our spacious two bedroom suite had all of the comforts of home, including a fully equipped kitchen with a fridge and appliances and free wireless internet. We had a comfortable living room, with a couch, chair, table and chairs, three flat screen TVs and plenty of cupboard space. Whether you're staying for a night or a month in any one of these suites, the hotel offers an array of services to accommodate your travel needs. In the morning, you can enjoy a complimentary breakfast, and in the evening, a light fare reception and social hour is available every Monday through Thursday. There is daily housekeeping, same-day valet service, a grocery shopping service, free guest laundry, a fully equipped fitness center and a seasonal courtyard with a pool, patio and grills. General Manager Lisa Druckreier notes that the 10 year old property has a regular clientele who stay there for long periods of time, be it people working on big projects in town and in construction, those relocating, fire victims and of course vacationers who want to enjoy all of the comforts of home. The hotel has a number of handicapped accessible rooms and handicapped parking spots at the front door. There is elevator access to each floor and level crossings in the hallways.

The hotel is currently replacing sofas, chairs,

ottomans and carpets in all rooms.

I found the staff at the front desk exceptionally helpful. While the room was very comfy, I also enjoyed spending time in the large lobby area and sinking into the big sofa in front of a TV. A self service coffee, tea and hot chocolate is available 24 hours a day. For more information call 1.888.723.1655 or email info@cresthillsuites.com. You can also register online.

Dining Out

We had a marvelous meal at Simpson's Grille, where five chefs have shared 83 years of experience to create menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner to tantalize even the most discriminating taste buds. This is the type of place where sole Françoise and grilled Atlantic salmon meet New York sirloin and filet mignon. The restaurant is located at The Desmond Hotel & Conference Center, a magnificent facility at 660 Albany Shaker Road. The Desmond is also home to the AAA four diamond-rated Scrimshaw Restaurant and The Tavern, an English style pub. There is free parking.

I started off with a warm bowl of New England clam chowder. For the main course, we selected three different items: the seafood penne alfredo, a combination of Alaskan crabmeat, jumbo gulf shrimp and Georges Bank sea scallops tossed in a garlic cream sauce; pesto herb sea scallops, coated with basil pesto and fresh herbs, broiled and finished with tomato vinaigrette; and a char grilled ribeye, 14 ounces, well marbled and full of flavor.

All main courses come with a signature house or Caesar salad, choice of potato or rice pilaf and the chef's fresh vegetable of the day.

The menu also includes chicken, different fish entrees, prime rib of beef, filet mignon and veal piccata.

The hotel entrance is perfectly wheelchair accessible and so is the entire restaurant, located right by the front desk. This is a pretty venue, featuring booths and tables, and popular with tourists and locales.

Not only can you log on to the restaurant's website (<http://www.desmondhotelsalbany.com/wine-and-dine/simpsons-restaurant.html>) to download the menu, but you can also book your table here, which is very convenient. Simpson's Grille is open Monday to Fridays from 6:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. On weekends they are open from 6:30 a.m. straight through 10 p.m.

The Tavern is cozy, warm, inviting and considered "a place to relax and unwind." Here folks tend to sink into one of the leather sofas by the fireplace or root for their favorite team while watching the big screen televisions. Cocktails, cordials and an endless line of beer taps accompany a lite fare menu of appetizers, salads, sandwiches and burgers.

Scrimshaw at The Desmond is the only AAA Four Diamond Award winning restaurant for three consecutive years in the Capital Region. It recently introduced a newly renovated fine dining room and exquisite new menu. New Chef de Cuisine Stephen Fratianni and Director of Restaurants Frank Rivera have teamed up to combine classic favorites with unique new menu offerings, including market fresh seafood options which change monthly and select table-side preparation to create a truly memorable and one of a kind fine dining experience.

At The Movies

The Albany area has some wonderful movie theatre complexes, each operated by the Regal Entertainment Group (www.regalmovies.com). We have a particular fondness towards the Regal Colonie Center Stadium 13. This four year old movie complex encompasses around 64,000 square feet, with more than 2,800 seats in a total of 13 auditoriums. It is right next to two of my favorite restaurants, PF Chang's China Bistro and the Cheesecake Factory and a huge Barnes & Noble, great to know when you are planning an outing. The seats at this theatre are very comfortable as they swivel. We actually stopped by the evening before our show to pick up tickets in advance. You can also purchase them online at fandango.com.

Once in the theatre we were entertained by a feature called First Look, which included previews of upcoming film and DVD releases and a series of very amusing commercials. You can also log on to www.fandango.com and purchase your tickets online.

Hearing impaired devices are available upon request and the complex is very wheelchair friendly, with elevators at every level, ramps in each theatre and handicapped seating.