

Buhl Mansion in Sharon is a plush place to be pampered

By China Millman
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

SHARON—With Valentine's Day just around the corner, many couples might be looking for a romantic getaway.

Warmer locales and exotic destinations are tempting, but those luckier in love than in the lottery may want to look closer to home for a spot that offers a lot of romance for a more reasonable price tag.

Just 60 miles from Downtown Pittsburgh, the Buhl Mansion Guesthouse & Spa in Mercer County has received awards and acclaim for its well-appointed rooms, luxurious spa and service-oriented style. Last year the Web site iloveinns.com, the Web companion of American Historic Inns Inc., named the Buhl Mansion Guesthouse & Spa

one of the top 10 romantic inns of 2008.

So off my husband and I went, on one of the coldest days of the year, to see for ourselves whether this old-fashioned inn is truly a haven for rest, relaxation and romance.

The Buhl Mansion prides itself on its service, and staff are ready to care for visitors from the minute they arrive. Unfortunately, my husband and I hindered them a bit by parking our own car (a space is designated for each room by name) and carrying our own bags to the entrance. But from that point onward it was easy to let the staff at Buhl pamper us.

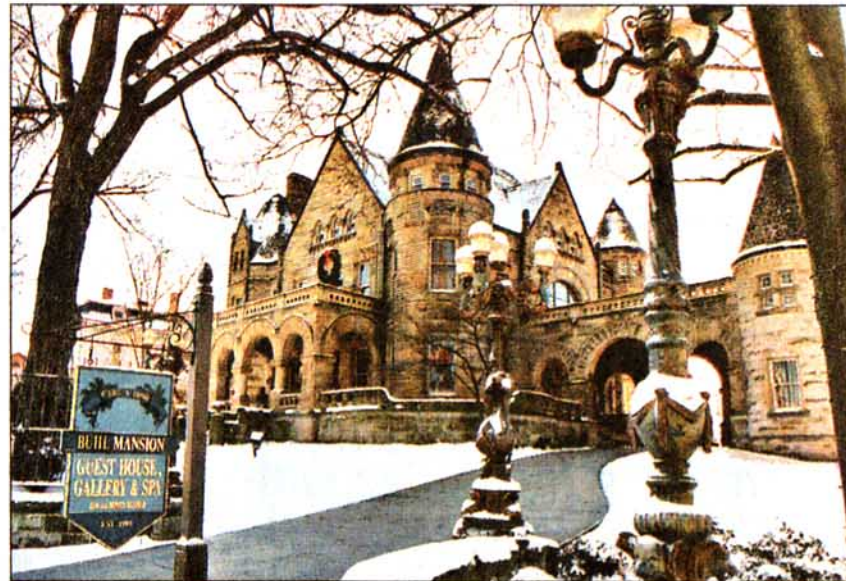
Our room — the Artist's Loft on the third floor of the house — was impressively large, comfortable and welcoming. Unlike so many hotels where rooms look smaller and dingier than in the

pictures, this room was more pleasant upon arrival. Each room has a gas fireplace. The mattress and pillows were extremely comfortable, and the room was pleasantly warm.

The large bathroom was a bit chillier, but a space heater already was warming the room from an out-of-the-way corner. All bathrooms have Jacuzzi tubs big enough for two people, separate showers and lots of fluffy towels.

The fireplaces and Jacuzzis are especially enjoyable during a winter visit, but there are other reasons to go off season. From December to April, when the mansion is open only Friday through Sunday nights, there are discounts for Friday night visits. The Web site adver-

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The Buhl Mansion Guesthouse & Spa was chosen as one of the Top 10 romantic inns of 2008 by the Web site iloveinns.com.

TRAVEL

Buhl Mansion gives impressive pampering

BUHL, FROM PAGE E-1

tised \$50 off a room for a Friday night stay or a \$100 gift certificate to the spa. But it turned out that the rooms were \$100 off, so our standard \$350 room cost \$250, which includes many amenities beyond the hotel room.

The hotel adds a 15 percent service charge to the bill that covers all gratuities. This might seem like a large amount, but it does make tipping unnecessary so there's no awkward fumbling for correct change. And many of the services performed by Buhl staff are unobserved.

While guests are at dinner, beds are turned down, robes are moved to the bed, towels are placed on the floor at each side of the bed, and a small tray is left with a few chocolates, a small vase of flowers and a personal, handwritten greeting from the inn staff.

Select your breakfast choices from a menu also left in the room, slip it under the door, and it will be gone soon after. During the evening of our stay, we played chess in the library. Although it was obvious the staff was collecting guests' breakfast selections and going about their duties, the inn was so quiet we felt like we had the house to ourselves.

Those who enjoy old houses and the stories they inspire should ask for a tour. The mansion was built by steel baron Frank L. Buhl for his wife, Julia Forker, as a wedding gift and the project was completed by 1896. Unfortunately, after they passed away, the house passed through many hands and uses. It had been a beauty school, a fine dining French restaurant and an apartment building, until finally it was essentially uninhabitable. It was purchased by Jim and Donna Winner in 1996 and reopened as a guesthouse in 1997.

Our guide pointed out a mantel original to the house over the library fireplace, which read "Good Friends, Good Fire, Good Cheer." The furniture in the private dining room, which used to be Frank Buhl's study, is from the right period but isn't original to the house. The table is set for an elaborate dinner party with pieces from the Winners' antique collection.

The art in the house is particularly interesting. The Winners had commissioned more than 100 museum-quality replicas of oil paintings and statues by masters of traditional Western art, including Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Degas and Picasso. While we thought this might be a little cheesy, the art actually is beautiful, and it's worth spending a few minutes to enjoy it.

Among the amenities, guests are welcomed upon arrival in each room with trays of cheese, crackers, fruit and the house champagne, chilled in an ice bucket. The concept was nicer in theory because the tray included only two packages of crackers, two of Babybel cheese (the round cheese wrapped in red wax), a package of Planters peanuts, some grapes, an apple



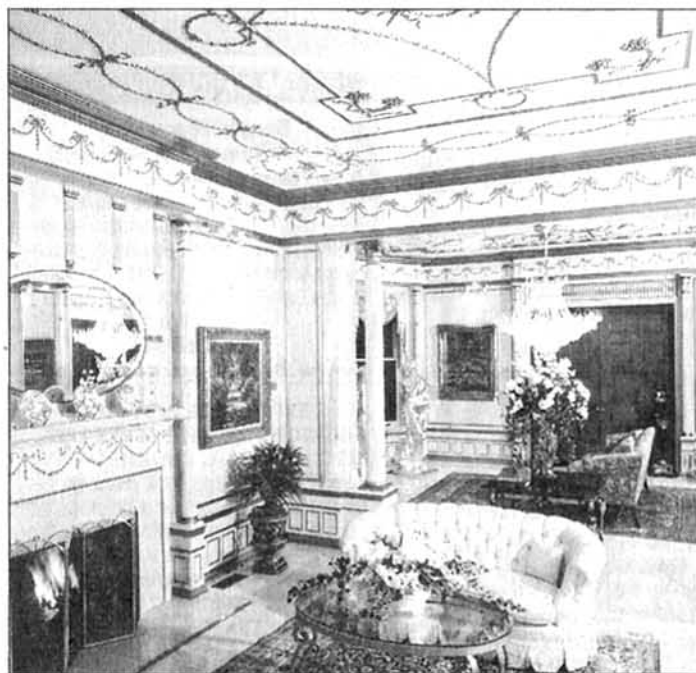
An office in the Buhl Mansion represents the look of steel baron Frank L. Buhl's time.



and an orange.

Afternoon tea is served from 3 to 5 p.m. daily, and on Fridays and Saturdays there's an evening champagne reception where guests can gather, eat a few hors d'oeuvres and sip more champagne. Staff were extremely generous with the champagne, constantly offering to fill up glasses and open another bottle. But the house "champagne" is actually sparkling wine from New York. The name of champagne should be reserved for wine from the Champagne region in France. The food at afternoon tea and during the evening reception wasn't much more impressive than the selection of sparkling wine.

Since Sharon is much smaller than Pittsburgh, with fewer dining options, most guests opt to eat at the hotel's sister property, Tara, an inn about seven miles away. The design for Tara was inspired by Margaret Mitchell's



A parlor in the front of the Buhl Mansion is off the foyer.

"Gone With the Wind" and is decorated in the style of a Civil War-era plantation. Staff members wear costumes — our hostess and server appeared to be dressed as a servant in a long gingham-checked dress — and the inn houses a number of "Gone With the Wind" artifacts. Guests of the Buhl Mansion receive 25 percent off at both of Tara's dining rooms, and a limousine shuttle is provided.

We ate in Tara's more casual dining room, Stonewall's Tavern. The menu consists mostly of standards such as shrimp cock-

tail (\$10.95), fried zucchini (\$8.95), prime rib (ladies' portion, \$19.95, gentleman's portion, \$22.95) and veal marsala (\$22.95). There were some disappointments that probably should have been anticipated, such as shrimp cocktail that was simply badly defrosted, previously cooked shrimp. But for the most part, the food was fine, and the prices were quite reasonable, especially after the discount. Suffice it to say, food is not the Buhl Mansion's big draw.

The spa, however, is quite impressive. There many services available, as well as many pam-

if you go

Buhl Mansion Guesthouse & Spa

724-346-3046
422 E. State St., Sharon,
PA 16146
www.buhlman.com

Tara — A Country Inn

2844 Lake Road, Clark, PA
16113
724-962-3535
www.tara-inn.com

While in Sharon, check out Daffin's Candies, the "world's largest candy store" at 20,000 square feet, next door to the Buhl Mansion at 496 E. State St. (1-877-323-3465). The store houses the Daffin's Chocolate Kingdom, which has large chocolate animals, two large castles, miniature houses and railroad. You also can take a tour of the Daffin's candy factory at 7 Spearman Ave. in nearby Farrell (1-877-323-3467). Find all details at www.daffins.com.

pering packages. Many sounded appealing, such as the winter warm-up package, which lasts 4½ hours and costs \$330 and includes a hot stone massage, a desert heat body wrap, desert heat deluxe hand and foot treatments, and a spa cuisine luncheon and mug of spiked hot cider. Or perhaps the Sweetheart Massage package for \$275, which includes side-by-side 50-minute hot stone massages, a bottle of champagne, a half-dozen roses and chocolate-covered strawberries. If you're forgoing the treatments because of cost, the co-ed steam room and sauna and two private monsoon showers are available to all hotel guests as part of the amenities.

Breakfast, which guests can eat downstairs or have delivered to their rooms, was better than the other food provided by the inn. Eggs were properly poached; strawberries and blackberries in a fruit salad were surprisingly good for being out of season, and there was a wide range of choices.

Food aside, we left the inn feeling relaxed, happy and looking forward to the rest of the weekend.

Sadly, those feelings didn't last long. We got a flat tire on the turnpike on the way back to Pittsburgh and later that evening a pipe burst in our basement, leaving us with no running water.

We did, manage to deal with a long wait for a tow truck and a very messy kitchen without fighting; and while I'd like to say it was all due to our even tempers and perfect relationship, I think we probably owe a little of our equanimity to our relaxing, romantic night in Sharon.

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