

History and Wellness Meet: Victoria's Fairmont Empress Hotel and the Willow Stream Spa

No matter the far corner of the world in which I may be traveling, when I say I live in Victoria, British Columbia, fellow travelers invariably smile knowingly, "Ah yes," they say, "Butchart Gardens and afternoon tea at the Empress Hotel." Indeed, the 105-year-old granddame of Victoria's almost-circular inner harbor continues to capture the imagination of visitors from far and near, whether they stay at this large property steeped in British colonial history or sample an Indian curry buffet in the Edwardian-style Bengal Lounge or take afternoon tea in the hotel's elegant tea lobby accompanied by the harmonious strains of a musician at the grand piano.



While the tea service is offered year round, in summer the Fairmont Empress Hotel (fairmont.com/empress-victoria) welcomes more Afternoon Tea guests than most hotels in London, England, with an average of 800 people per day enjoying a tradition begun when the hotel opened on January 20, 1908. Before sitting down to tea (as satisfying and abundant as any meal!), why not take a history tour with Walkabout Tours (walkabout.ca) to explore the elegant public spaces on several floors? You will be accompanied by an Edwardian-costumed guide sharing insider stories about this mammoth building project of its day and the famous guests including Hollywood celebrities and European and Asian royalty who have spent time there over many decades.

So how does a thoroughly modern 21st century spa, opened just 13 years ago, look and feel like part of the architectural family when its imposing great grandmother is such an historic landmark? Thanks to a great deal of design planning from the Thermal Mineral Baths and the soothing Spa

Lounge on the lower spa floor to the interior design and decor of 11 treatment rooms located up a set of nouveau-Edwardian stairs, there is little to hint that the spa has not grown old as gracefully as the stately Empress herself.



When signing up for any of the experiences offered at the Willow Stream Spa (fairmont.com/empress-victoria/willow-stream), guests are encouraged to arrive an hour early at this urban retreat in order to set aside their worldly stresses and turn their minds to what Anita Voorsluys, Willow Stream Spa sales manager, likes to call a “mini-vacation”.

“We want guests to spend time enjoying the complimentary services of our Hungarian mineral salts pool, detoxifying sauna and Finnish steam room, as well as the Spa Lounge stocked with hot and cold drinks, yogurt and fresh fruit, offering a pleasant few minutes to think of absolutely nothing! That way, they prepare themselves mentally and physically to get the full value from their chosen treatment. If they hustle in off the street and go straight into a massage or other experience, part of the healthful value can be lost.”



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ose the (Vancouver) Island Senses rejuvenation experience which suggests the essential west coast elements of salt water, pine trees and plenty of rich mud. Over a period of nearly two hours, expertly managed by 11-year Willow Stream specialist, Nicole Smith, I sampled an invigorating salt scrub, a pine-scented hydrotherapy bath and a head-to-toe mud wrap, topped off with an aromatic lavender oil massage, gleaned from plants in the area's lavender fields. In between each Island Senses segment abundant snack platters of artistically-arranged fresh fruit magically appeared to pump up the blood sugar.



As Anita Voorsluys had predicted, I was alert and ready to take on the world following my two-hour treatment, not ready for a nap. This is a goal the Spa embraces, what they call “finding your mind and body energy”, as surely I did that day. If they wish to, clients are invited to use the complimentary facilities after their treatment as well as before, but I was ready to march my brand new energy out the doors of the elegant Empress, right then and there!

The hotel’s Willow Stream Spa is recognized by Condé Nast Traveler as an enviable #5 of the Top Resort Spas in Canada. In 2012, it was also acknowledged by Spas of America as one of the Top 100 Spas in North America.

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