

Victoria's Mountain Escape: A Spa Retreat Close to Nature

Driving north out of Victoria, British Columbia on a four-lane highway, it's easy to notice Bear Mountain long before turning onto Bear Mountain Parkway. I'm only 20-minute drive from the heart of the province's capital city, but already my car is winding upward through a deep green forest of coniferous trees before emerging into an extensive development with two Jack Nicklaus-designed 18-hole golf courses, a resort, homes and condos, and a world-class spa, virtually invisible from the highway below.



As I walk through the entrance of the Westin Bear Mountain Golf Resort & Spa (bearmountain.ca), I am wondering how close to nature award-winning Sante Spa (santespavictoria.com) will bring me with their enticing promise “to draw on the elements of nature to inspire, nurture and empower my wellbeing.” I will soon find out!

It is a beautiful blue sky morning on my mountain top. I have arrived with my sturdy walking shoes and LEKI adjustable hiking stick because I have signed up for a popular Sante Spa package, Wellness + Nature Experiences. Before I get anywhere near the spa's outdoor therapeutic mineral pool, the sauna, steam room or my Elements Mountain Massage, I'm off for a guided hike.

I check in at the next door Mountain Athletic Club and meet Demi Henderson, manager of the club, who will guide me through the Douglas Fir and Western Red Cedar forest trails that back onto the resort. She introduces me to my other escort, a small white fur ball of super-charged energy named Tilly, a dog who regards these forests as her playground and personal domain.

Climbing up the trail behind the Club, we admire the panoramic view that stretches, slightly-misted like a Chinese painting today, layer upon layer over tree tops to islands serving as so many stepping stones across the narrow ocean strait that divides us from the U.S. state of Washington. Particularly worthy of admiration is the Mount Fuji-like vision of Mount Baker, a perfect snow-capped volcano looming above the American shore.



Two minutes later, we are plunged into deep forest and decorative rock faces. We soon have a choice of forking left or right, one fork leading steeply up neighboring Mount Finlayson (rated a five–star challenge to the top) or the three–star rated hike that I favour. While still challenging, it leads more gently downward to Goldstream Provincial Park, centred around a hanging valley, complete with a 47–metre waterfall, streams, wooden bridges and wildlife, especially during the salmon–spawning autumn season when black bears and bald eagles come to the shallow river in abundance to feast on the migrating salmon.

By the time we return to the resort, I’m ready to check into Sante Spa for a whole lot of pampering. To get in the mood, I first enjoy an hour in the sauna, steam room and the outdoor therapeutic pool with its billion dollar view of the islands, a thin sliver of ocean strait and Mount Baker. Finally, I settle into the Forest Lounge for a predictably healthy fruit and nut snack and a glass of herbal tea until my massage therapist, Mandy, collects me for my Elements Mountain massage. She explains the “elements” that will guide my massage: a heated collection of green British Columbia jade stones polished shiny and sculpted flat to fit perfectly in each massaging hand, the essential oil made with black spruce and cedar, and a bundle of twig–like smudge–sticks which, when set alight, create a light healing smoke in the air. The next hour and 15 minutes becomes a happy blur.



The smudge–sticks offer a respectful nod to our First Nation (aboriginal) healing practices sustained over thousands of years in the region, so I am hardly surprised when Mandy gently brings me back to reality with a blessing from one of British Columbia’s most beloved and eloquent tribal chiefs, Dan George:

“May the stars give you hope,

May the sun warm your heart,

May your tears wash away your sadness,

And above all, may silence make you strong.”

Back in the Forest Lounge with my spa menu salad of wild Pacific salmon, fresh sliced pears, pumpkin seeds and several varieties of lettuce, I learn more about Sante Spa from director, Jen Spencer, who has personally designed many of the treatments and packages offered.



“Wherever possible,” she says, “we buy ingredients that are harvested and made into spa products locally, whether it’s sea kelp, lavender, wraps or aroma therapy oils. We also put a respectful emphasis on authentically reflecting indigenous elements in some of our treatments.

“Sante Spa is now in its eighth year, with an impressive 95.7% of clients saying they would refer friends and family to the spa,” declares Jen proudly. “There are certainly many reasons a person chooses our spa, and we do have a strong local clientele as well as visitors year round from all over the world. However, I have no doubt that the sense of place brings our brand alive, with the mountain location and our choice of treatments and ingredients reminding guests of a healthier closeness to nature.”

By Alison Gardner

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Date: 2014-11-24

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-the-mountain-escape-in-victoria-a-spa-retreat-at-close-to-nature-article2533>