



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

TRAVEL: SLEEPOVERS - BRENTWOOD BAY LODGE & SPA

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Hugging the gently curving Saanich Inlet just north of Victoria, the new Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa is a showcase for the West Coast and its spectacular outdoors. But unlike the typical B.C. nature sojourn, with paper-thin Thermarests and bat-sized bugs, escaping the city at this sophisticated boutique resort is all about double-jetted bathtubs, sun-soaked private patios, soft eco-adventures and a cornucopia of regionally inspired culinary treats.

Ambiance

Distilled essence of West Coast contemporary cool, combining a naturally tranquil setting with an unaffected sense of sophistication. Adult and intimate.

Design

While it looks like a strangely high-end motel from the street, Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa is transformed on its more important waterfront side into a compact modernist curve of picture windows, rust-coloured cedar and steel-framed terraces nestled among arbutus trees. Interior public spaces combine bright fir wood beams and high gabled ceilings with rock floors, low-slung hearths and inviting decks. The look is swanky West Coast nature lodge with a dash of 1970s Scandinavian cool.

Rooms

The 33 suites each have a balcony or patio view of the inlet, forested peaks and colourful marina, creating the perfect alfresco perch to enjoy local wine and regional cheeses.

Contemporary interiors reflect the natural surroundings with subtle browns, greens and stone finishes, along with handmade light wood furniture. But it's the jetted baths that will prove irresistible to most. Shutters on the bathroom open, allowing guests to sit in their tub and enjoy their balcony vistas through a calming row of tea lights.

With rock-encased hearths, DVD entertainment systems, complimentary high-speed Internet access, free phone calls

across North America and a mini-bar of local wines and beers, there may be no need to leave the room at all.

Clientele

Guests are overachieving over-35s or recently retired well-to-dos, usually Seattleites sailing or driving up from south of the border, or Vancouverites hopping over from the mainland. Think polo-necked, chin-stroking architects with rectangular glasses or tanned, well-groomed espadrille-wearers with a mid-sized boat in the marina.

Food and drink

Aiming to woo locals as well as resort guests, Brentwood Bay Lodge has a first-class restaurant and a marine pub with great views. Each showcases local produce at surprisingly reasonable prices. Among the pub's menu of high-end comfort foods, the chunky roast chicken brick-oven pizza with wild mushrooms will probably become a favourite, and distinctive craft beers from Phillips, Lighthouse and Salt Spring Island breweries are the ideal accompaniment. There's a range of standard beers for less adventurous quaffers.

In contrast, the Arbutus Grille & Wine Bar's gourmet menu changes daily and focuses on local seafood and regional game, along with organic produce supplied by local farmers. For an excellent set price of \$68, guests are introduced to a feast that typically includes dishes such as tamari-cured black cod, fresh spot-prawn sauté, fire-grilled wild B.C. caribou and a crisp apple tarte tatin that will have many diners wishing for elastic-waisted pants. Entertaining sommelier Brian Storen is always on hand to suggest some perfect wine accompaniments.

Service

With an employee ratio of around three per guest room, the resort could easily feel overstaffed. In reality, the team of well-trained and mostly young employees are attentive without being overbearing. Most importantly, they are friendly and

approachable, and more than happy to engage in conversation about the area where most of them grew up.

Things to do

There's a small outdoor heated pool and hot tub, but most city escapees head straight for the spa, which offers dozens of treatments in its subterranean refuge. The most popular is a 90-minute essence-of-life massage, but vinotherapies using grapes, stems and leaves from local vineyards are also on the menu.

Showcasing fine local wares, there's an on-site deli with an eclectic array of products. The Gabriola Island chocolate bars and Feys & Hobbs jams are fabulous, and the cheeses from Little Qualicum Cheeseworks (including Monterey Jill and Feta Complet) are a revelation. There's also a boutique wine and spirits store stocking best-of-the-region bottles along with dozens of rarities.

For those who can tear themselves away -- and there's a gallery of B.C. art in the lobby that might foil you at the last minute -- the resort is also a launch pad for comfortably exploring the surrounding wilderness. Brentwood Bay Lodge's soft eco-options include kayaking and guided hiking tours through old-growth rain forest. A sofa-lined, glass-domed boat offers narrated nature tours through bald eagle country around Tod Inlet and Finlayson Fjord. Guests can also scuba dive with PADI-certified experts and underwater scooters for an up-close look at giant octopuses, wolf eels, six-gill sharks and a rare glass sponge colony. Butchart Gardens is a 10-minute water shuttle away, and there are plenty of local wineries and cottage farms in the Cowichan Valley and Saanich Inlet area worth exploring, including the popular Victoria Estate Winery and the fascinating Marley Farms Winery, linked to the family of the Jamaican reggae legend.

BY JOHN LEE