

B.C.'s outdoor spirit is captured in the province's network of spas

Spas range from pampering resorts to outdoor adventures and natural hot springs

BY ROCHELLE LASH, FOR THE MONTREAL GAZETTE



Outdoor massage at Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa near Victoria, B.C., specializes in vinotherapy.

Photograph by: Handout photo, Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa

British Columbia is a natural fit for spa life and wellness vacations.

The province's outdoorsy spirit has been cultivated by magnificent wilderness, majestic mountains, lush rainforests and pure waters. Leaders in the trend toward fitness and active living, its residents consistently are ranked among the healthiest in Canada.

And spa life is about lookin' good, too. Vancouver is known as Hollywood North for its many movie shoots and A-list celebrity visitors, and the city boasts several glam places that are ready to buff and beautify. Then, there is B.C.'s laid-back, West Coast vibe. You'll mellow out just experiencing this kind and gentle place; becoming blissed out at a spa is a bonus.

British Columbia is home to more than 400 spas, about half of which are day spas and the rest vacation getaways. They might be destination hotels or wellness and beauty centres in cities, resort towns and even deep in the backwoods, accessible only by air or sea. Visitors can choose from among pampering resorts, outdoor adventures and natural hot springs or made-made, sub-polar

Vancouver has been spruced up for its role as host city for the winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. For many visitors, the opening ceremonies start at recently expanded Vancouver International Airport. Then, for only a few dollars, the sleek Canada Line SkyTrain speeds them downtown to funky, favourite places like Granville Island and Gastown and smart, stylish new hotels like the Loden, the Shangri-La and the Fairmont Pacific Rim.

The Fairmont, a 48-storey tower, is scheduled to open this month. Huge glass walls will let guests see the natural wonders that make Vancouver so inviting - sparkling bays, green and friendly Stanley Park and the snow-capped Coastal Mountains, including Cypress, site of the Games' freestyle skiing and snowboarding events.

For the last word in high-tech extravagance, check into the Fairmont's Bucket-List Chairman's Suite, with its private elevator, huge chandelier shimmering down from a cathedral ceiling and an outdoor patio with space for 60 people. Grab your pals and head to the rooftop and a heated, year-round swimming pool surrounded by meditation pods, hot tubs, fire pits and cabanas.

The Fairmont Pacific Rim's Willow Stream Spa plays on its waterfront location with mineral-rich seaweed wraps and scrubs, rubdowns with marine botanical lotions and soothing baths in sea salts.

A sojourn at Harrison Hot Springs, two hours east of Vancouver, is less fancy, but no less therapeutic. The Salish Indians believe that the sulphur and potash of Harrison Hot Springs have healing powers. When word first got around, a pioneering hotel opened in the 1880s.

Today, the Harrison Hot Springs Resort & Spa has taken over the picturesque location in the agricultural Fraser Valley. Surrounded by mountains and situated on the shore of Harrison Lake, the hotel blends great scenery with great value. With three golf courses nearby, a marina, cycling, fishing charters, farm tours and eagle viewing, there's much to do. Harrison is a traditional resort with dining and dancing, and 337 rooms, suites and cottages. It's all built around five natural hot pools, which bubble and gurgle at a blistering 60C.

"The natural springs are so hot we actually have to cool the pools to 30 to 25C," said Ian Maw, Harrison's director of sales and marketing.

Vancouver Island is home to an inspiring variety of spas, many offering guests an intense connection with nature. The Pacific coast town of Tofino is known for surfing in summer and storm-watching in winter.

At the Ancient Cedars Spa of the posh Wickaninnish Inn, a Relais & Châteaux property on the island's west coast, you can have your massage in a private hut beside the pounding surf.

Near Tofino, the Clayoquot Wilderness Resort, where Scarlett Johansson and Ryan Reynolds were married, is equally luxurious, but more outdoorsy. It ramps up the ruggedness factor with salmon-fishing, hiking, kayaking and sightings of black bears and eagles.

Accessible only by seaplane or boat, Clayoquot is an eco-resort that operates May to September adjacent to the Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO preservation area. It's a fine example of "glamping"- a glamorous campsite where guests stay in 10 safari-style canvas tents decked out with antique furnishings, modern washrooms and propane stoves. Special experiences include holistic treatments at the Healing Grounds Spa and a First-Nations-style salmon feast.

Spa life is tamer on Vancouver Island's east coast. At the Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa, in the wine country on the outskirts of Victoria, pedicures are potent. Brentwood specializes in vino-therapy, a developed-in-France technique that uses grape seeds and grape skins in body-care potions. You'll be getting the benefits of the grapes' antioxidants in more ways than one.

While the rough skin of your feet is sloughed off by stomping grapes, you'll also smooth out with a glass of Hester Creek Merlot from the Okanagan Valley. Finish with a massage and a glass of pinot noir from Starling Lane Winery. You'll be feeling no pain. It's vino-therapy, after all.

Brentwood blends a modern design of glass and open spaces with a woodsy, West Coast look of Douglas fir beams and handcrafted furniture. Its 33 guest rooms have sunset and bay views and a close-to-nature feel. Contemporary cuisine in the SeaGrille dining room is locally sourced.

Brentwood's Marina & Eco-Adventure Centre rents kayaks and organizes water-wilderness excursions.

The Sparkling Hill Resort and Wellness Hotel in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley will bring a new treatment to North America when it opens in March. Its marquee attraction will feature a cryo-therapy cold sauna in which the temperature dips to -110C, colder than even Antarctica, where the lowest recorded temperature is -89C.

Doctors and athletic coaches in Europe have been using the sub- polar environment of cryo-therapy to boost energy and circulation, heighten physical performance, and reduce inflammation and pain in stressed bones and joints, especially in arthritis patients. Cry-sauna patients cover their extremities and survive the extreme cold because it is dry and because they are always moving, not lying down.

Sparkling Hill will play on its glacial orientation in its decor, too, using Swarovski Crystal elements throughout its design, in walls, waterfalls and fireplaces to reflect light and movement. The spa will offer nearly 100 traditional treatments like mud wraps, massages and reflexology as well as individualized programs targeting nutrition, personal training and physiotherapy. Guests also can go hiking, cycling or downhill skiing at Big White or Silver Star.

IF YOU GO:

Harrison Hot Springs Resort & Healing Springs Spa in Harrison Hot Springs, 800-663-2266,

www.harrisonresort.com. The two-night Getaway Package, including mineral pools, buffet breakfast daily and one dinner, starts at \$318 Sunday to Thursday, for two people until March 30, 2010, and ranges up to \$398 during summer. Spa treatments are extra.

Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa in Victoria, 888-544-2079, www.brentwoodbaylodge.com. Thirty-three waterfront rooms from \$179 to \$199 for two people; suites for \$399. Meals and spa treatments are extra. The Gourmet Lovers' B&B Package (or Spa Lovers Getaway) for two nights, includes breakfast, a \$100 dinner or drinks credit (or spa credit), and costs \$458 for two. A vino-therapy massage costs \$115 for 50 minutes.

The Sparkling Hill Resort and Wellness Hotel in Vernon, 877-275-1556, www.sparkling-hill.com. Opening in March, 2010 with 152 guest rooms and suites and three restaurants, starting at \$195 for two, including breakfast, eight saunas and pools. Treatments and the cryo-sauna are extra.

Clayoquot Wilderness Resort about 30 kilometres from Tofino, 888-333-5405, www.wildretreat.com. The resort is accessible by seaplane or boat. Three-night package starts at \$4,750 per person, double occupancy, including air fare from Vancouver, lodging in luxury tent, all meals, wine and spirits, sports and activities, and one massage per person. Other spa treatments are extra.

Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver, 888-264-6877, 604-895-0612, www.fairmont.com/pacificrim. Opening this month with 377 rooms from \$249 per night, including access to heated outdoor pool, spa terrace; suites \$379 to \$6,000 (for the Chairman's Suite). At the Willow Stream Spa, a 60-minute seaweed and salt exfoliation costs \$109.

For more information on B.C. spas, go to Tourism B.C. at 800-435-5622, www.hellobc.com.

For Vancouver spas: 604-682-2222, www.tourismvancouver.com/visitors/things_to_do/spas.