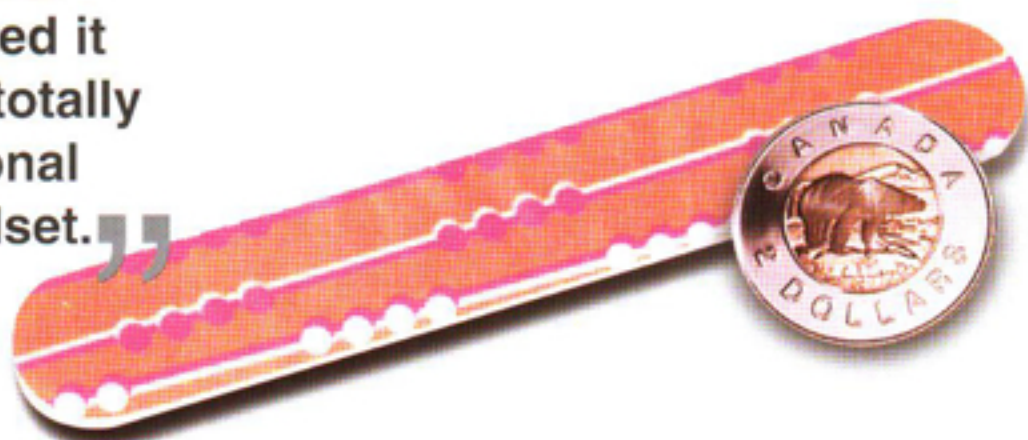


Mix it - Max it

BY COLLEEN FRIESEN

Kinder souls might refer to me as frugal. Less kind people might call me cheap. But I think it's really more of a cost-averaging thing. So, though I might pay stupid amounts of money for a tub of some hair product that is guaranteed to change my life... that same day I won't be able to part with a toonie for a nail file.

“I never claimed it was a totally rational mindset.”



I firmly believe in the idea of mixing high and low. Expensive shoes - because happy feet are essential - are often combined with a cheap (but I assure you, quite groovy) skirt. Or a cheap and funky purse is worn with my bestest black dress.

Mixing it up is the ticket. I furnish my house the same way. This is either really clever or it is the result of the warring schizoid nature of a Gemini. Or maybe it's just my we-must-make-it-do-inner-Mennonite that keeps emerging. Whatever the reason, I know it applies to the spa experience too.

And to that end, dear reader, I bring you some Vancouver deals and some dreamy indulgences, most of them combined in one experience, and all of them walkable within the downtown core.

I remember my mom taking us to a beauty school to get tortuous Christmas hair-dos because they were such a screaming deal. For my sisters and me, it was an improvement over my mother's hack job, but not by much. So the idea of going to a spa school for a cheap treatment is hardly original. I've selflessly thrown myself into these places to make sure no one too inexperienced will get at your delicate bod.

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WESTERN WANDERING | MIX IT - MAX IT!

At the Canadian College of Shiatsu Therapy located in Vancouver's Yaletown district, I experience the 90-minute whole-body acupressure massage. When something like this can be had for only \$30, my cheap self is prepared to love it even if it's not that great. But here's the bonus: it's incredible. Surely my stiff shoulders must be inches lower by the time I leave the little padded floor mat. I float out with a calm mind and softer muscles. I am one grateful customer.

A week later, I'm sitting in the Utopia Academy near the Stadium Skytrain station. An elegant older woman enters. "Am I early for my massage, dear?" she says as she leans towards the receptionist. The woman behind the desk smiles back at her, "Just a minute or two and you'll be in." The blue-haired lady looks over at me, "I treat myself to appointments here every week. Isn't this the best place? These are such incredible deals."

Indeed, a 60-minute massage by a second-year student is only \$33 and the facial I have after that swooning indulgence, is an hour-plus for only \$40. Some might find the curtained rooms a little too reminiscent of a hospital, but I found the clinical feeling to be reassuring. I liked that my aesthetician was supervised and that there was an extra set of eyes when she did my anti-aging treatment.

Of course, the whole point of mixing things up means when you're ready to go for the ultimate edgy and very chic spa experience, you'll head off to Yaletown's skoah and get a facialicious facial. The music is delightfully hip. Think W Hotel hipster soundtracks and spare minimalist design. At \$90, it doesn't quite fall into the deal category, but remember we're cost averaging here and this is so not-your-average spa experience.

Spend a little and spend a lot. Remember. It averages out and somewhere in that heady mix is that balance we are all seeking.

www.utopiaacademy.com
888-681-4450
www.shiatsu.vc
604-694-0095
www.skoah.com
604-642-0200



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