



voyage

## Wild winds and West Coast waves

Hotel luxury and Mother Nature meet to create an exhilarating getaway

Sinking back on the sun-warmed wood of a deck chair, I find myself sighing...again. I am sheltered in a nook of the wall of the Ancient Cedars Spa, wrapped in fleece blankets over my thick cotton robe. The sea smashes the sandy boulder-strewn shore in front of me while woolly cumulus scud across the sky. My feet are submerged ankle deep in hot aromatic water contained in a little copper basin. The bottom of the bowl is filled with marbles, providing a wonderful mini-reflexology session. Suddenly the sun breaks through, and I am bathed in bright blue-skied glory. A saint appears backlit by the heavens—it's my masseur, Scott Jones. Later, he will be delivering me into a new religious experience when he massages my muscles into a melting mass.

The Wickaninnish Inn is located on the wild West Coast of Vancouver Island. In 2006, this Relais & Châteaux property was voted one of the top five hotels in North America in *Travel + Leisure* magazine's annual readers poll. In 2005, *Condé Nast Traveler* deemed it the number one resort spa in Canada. And in 2006, after an anonymous visit by a Mobil representative, the Ancient Cedars Spa at the Wickaninnish was awarded a Four-Star designation.

The Inn is named after Chief Wickaninnish, the most powerful chief of the Tla-o-qui-aht Band at the time of the late 1700s and the first European contact. It is a fitting name, as directly translated it means, "He who no one sits in front of in the canoe."

Later that evening, as the tub fills, I sit across from my husband in our club chairs next to the fireplace. I begin to understand what the chief might have been talking about. The windows stream with winter rains and salt spray; we couldn't get much closer to the shore without being swept away. It certainly feels like we're at the front of a decadent canoe, protected and yet immersed, as we watch the twenty-foot winter waves pounding in from Japan. Though I'm guessing the chief never got to leave his hearth to sink into a deep bath with windows right down to the tub deck.

There are so many Zen/West Coast moments to contemplate as we watch the bubbles in our champagne glasses mimic the jasmine-scented Aveda froth in the tub. Their foam is microscopic compared to the lathering surf line just past the massive cedar trees whipsawing outside the window.

And so, this weather that anywhere else would be a ruined vacation, is why the Inn is full. No longer just a summertime destination, winter storms have created a new attraction. The next day after emerging from our duvet, shuffling across the natural wool carpet, and tucking into a ridiculously sublime breakfast in our room, we head into the nearby funky surfer town of Tofino.

Wandering about in the mist, we find Pasticceria Conradi. The pastries look divine, but it's time for lunch. I decide on the roasted squash/garlic soup—it is, without a doubt, the best soup. Ever.

There is no shortage of floatplanes and boats that can be chartered from Tofino. They take travellers fishing, whale and wildlife

watching, and over to Hot Springs Cove where the bathers are left for a few hours with their picnics to sit in natural rock hot spring pools at the edge of one of B.C.'s wildest coastlines. We check in again with the boat we've booked to the springs with Ocean Outfitters, but unfortunately the wind warning is still in effect.

Instead, back at the Wick, we ensconce ourselves in the Helly Hansen raingear hanging in our room's closet. I feel like I'm at a good friend's house borrowing some boots as the tall handsome man hands over bright yellow Wellingtons from the closet near the front desk. For a place so high-end, it is decidedly casual and homey—an elegant decadence, the atmosphere woodsy and warm and filled with real people, not staff.

Wandering down the trail through the dripping rainforest, we are soon on thick sand. The slick, grey beach is pounded hard by water whose last stop was 6,000 kilometres away. The shoreline stretches off into a misty horizon. We watch wet-suited surfers being smashed stupid by the gargantuan waves, children in purple slickers jumping in puddles, and dogs chasing drippy sticks. The rain sluices down our yellow backs, and the waves thunder vibrations right into our soles. Shorebirds run in frenzied unison, their little legs keeping time to some unseen drummer.

There's nothing like salt air to work up an appetite; but first we have a drink at the Driftwood bar where the bar is indeed a Bunyan-inspired piece of driftwood, replete with barnacles. If Robinson Crusoe had been shipwrecked with unlimited funds and a designer, his bar would have looked like this.

Dinner, this particular January night, is with Guest Chef Ray Henry from Vancouver's acclaimed Diva at the Met. He shares the culinary event with Winemaker Larry Gerelus of Stag's Hollow Winery. Six courses are briefly, but eloquently, described by Henry to the diners in the packed candlelit room, followed by Gerelus' wine explanations. Their voices, whether talking about the Lobster and Sweet Onion Ravioli or the 1999 Renaissance Merlot, add a deeper layer of understanding and appreciation with each mouthful. We sit at round tables with guests from all over the globe. Everyone, no matter how well travelled, is gobsmacked by the food, the location, and our rooms. We take turns exclaiming over the ingenious uses of rock, re-claimed wood, driftwood, and natural materials we've seen in our suites and the shared areas.

"To our incredible luck!" Glasses clink as we toast our fabulous fate with our new friends. The goblets glow as they are raised heavenward, over and over, to cheer our fortune at having found this warm haven on such a dark and stormy night.

The chief probably thought his canoe was pretty cool.

I prefer the Inn.

—COLLEEN FRIESEN