

Taking a breather in Victoria, B.C.

ANNE DIMON

17 June 2009 03:47

Like a whole-wheat pita stuffed with locally grown veggies, my recent visit to Victoria was packed with activities any wellness-minded traveller would love.

It was Vancouver, Toronto and Calgary that made the Economist Intelligence Unit's global list of top ten most livable cities, but when it comes to Canadian cities that most cater to the healthy-minded, my vote goes to Victoria.

According to Statistics Canada (2206), it's the "fittest city" in the country and the "cycling capital" of the country. Add to that, the compact seaside city is scenic, networked with cycling and running trails, offers a handful of good spas, a greater number of healthy-focused restaurants, numerous food festivals showcasing local produce, a temperate climate — the list goes on.

At the Magnolia Hotel & Spa in downtown Victoria, a boutique property located just two blocks from the postcard-pretty Inner Harbour, the day begins with a 15-minute Pranayama breathing class led by Mahima Tripathi.

Born and educated in India, Tripathi is a Reiki teacher and the hotel's director of sales. In one of the Magnolia's beautifully appointed guest rooms we sit on the floor, eyes closed as Tripathi gently guides us through a breathing ritual. "It's an exercise to centre the energies and help balance the chakras," she says.

It takes mere minutes to focus, ground, energize and generally launch the day filled with positive energy.

The breathing ritual turns out to be the perfect appetizer for the Chakra Balancing treatment at The Spa Magnolia. Earlier this year, the intimate Aveda Concept spa was expanded, upgraded and relocated to the space adjacent to the hotel lobby.

It now houses eight treatment rooms, a locker room, a pretty little lounge and a good sized retail area. "Pick a card," the therapist requests. "That will help us determine what chakra is out of balance today," she says.

The choice of card determines the aroma that will be blended into the massage oils and the chakra-specific words that will be recited by the therapist at certain points during the treatment.

The scent of sandalwood, orange and geranium permeates the room as the treatment unfolds: A full-body massage, reflexology for the feet, the application of hot stones and hot towels and a final short breathing ritual. It's a lot to pack into 60 minutes, but it's all good. Afterwards, I relax in the lounge, sipping on orange-infused water before hitting one of the many nearby trails that call out to fitness enthusiasts.

But first, lunch at Mole (nothing to do with the Mexican sauce). It's a casual restaurant where pretty much everything on the menu screams "healthy," at very reasonable prices. Try the yam wrap.

A few blocks away at Cycle Treks' waterfront shop you can rent Rocky Mountain Whistler hybrid bicycles for escorted or self-guided tours around the city, or multi-day tours around the island.

Today, there's time for a short spin along the Lockside Trail, an easy, flat path that continues right up to the Sydney ferry. A bike cruise through the island's Cowichan Valley wine region is one of the favourite full-day tours.

Tomorrow there's a food festival (there are over a dozen annual food festivals that take place in and around Victoria), and a tea tasting of exotic blends at Silk Road (which also has a spa) but tonight we're dining at the handsomely decorated Prime Steakhouse opened earlier this year.

Now, don't let the name throw you. Go for the local catch such as Queen Charlotte halibut, the salmon or the incredible local albacore tuna served crusted with sesame seeds.

The spas, the food, the fitness activities ... Victoria is a great place to take a breather.

• Anne Dimon is a spa and wellness travel writer and editor of www.traveltowellness.com.

For more

• For more info, visit www.magnoliahotel.com and www.tourismvictoria.com

