

Victoria's secret

Magnolia's unique brand of chic



For years, Victoria was described as being more British than the British; a tweedy town filled with fish-and-chip shops, double-decker buses and tea-sipping residents dressed in sensible shoes. Not so anymore—Victoria's evolving from lavender soap and clip-clopping horse carriages to a city with pizzazz.

What's making image-changing easier is the emergence of hotels such as The Magnolia (built in 1998) that brings Vancouver-style sophistication to this quieter, more gracious and much less frenzied city. The Magnolia, a 63-room boutique hotel, has also brought another big-city touch with the reopening of its newly restyled restaurant, Sanuk ("enjoyment of life" in Thai). Once a steakhouse (the former Hugo's Restaurant), Sanuk has a new team for its Pan Asian menu. Executive Chef Patrick Lynch brings many years of international experience to the reworking with a menu that spans from Turkey to Japan but uses local produce, and ingredients infused with the flavours of the Pacific Rim. Working with him are restaurant managers and som-

meliers from top local and international restaurants.

The Magnolia's appeal starts with the Big Three—location, price and comfort. Because Victoria is compact, the hotel's location, just a stone's throw away from the Inner Harbour, means you can walk anywhere. The world-famous Royal BC Museum, with its entire floor dedicated to First Nations life and lore, IMAX theatre and current travelling exhibition (Fatal Attraction, starting October 11 on how animals and people fall in love), is a block away. The Parliament Buildings are also a couple of blocks away as are shops and a long list of excellent restaurants.

Slotted in the "boutique" category, a classification that can sometimes mean "intimate but priced for the Sultan of Brunei," Magnolia packs a wallop in value. From the minute I enter the Edwardian-style lobby, they offer a European kind of welcome—friendly but not over the top. Call me sentimental but I am putty in the hands of someone who welcomes me by name. Bags are whisked up to the room,

registration is over in minutes, and I'm given a welcoming drink by the fireplace as I nestle into one of the overstuffed chairs. During the day there's coffee and tea available, lemonade in the summer and hot apple cider in the winter.

The room I've chosen is one on their deluxe list, which means corner windows that overlook the boats in the Inner Harbour as well as the Parliament Buildings. At night these seats of government are outlined in white lights, so there's a spectacularly different view by day or night. My room is classic and immaculate with a gas fireplace that's perfect for curling up with a book should, heaven forbid, it rain in Victoria. I happen to be into sheets in a big way and the Magnolia has not stinted—bed linens are crisp with a high thread count and comforters are down-filled. The piece de resistance is the marble bathroom. It must be the biggest hotel bathroom in Victoria, with its deep soaker tub (again ideal for rainy days and bubble baths) plus a roomy glass-enclosed shower. Checking out the toiletries, they're Aveda and first class.

Speaking of Aveda, I manage to book in a spa treatment to massage away all the tension accumulated while being dragged around shopping (a sport that ranks right next to bamboo shoots up the nails for me.) I'm welcomed into the spa with a delicate licorice flavoured tea, a warming towel and a footbath. A therapist presents a selection of scents and I choose a rose-flavoured one so my treatment room is redolent of roses. The massage is heavenly, deep and thorough. The spa has a wide range of treatments for men and women including such exotics as a Chocolate Blitz Body Wrap.

Only question is—after all this pampering, how do you gear up to face Vancouver traffic again?

—HELENA ZUKOWSKI