

A tour of Victoria's wine region with Magnolia Hotel & Spa's "Grape Escape" package

Mary Caros | Posted: Oct 30th, 2010

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Sometimes the universe speaks to us in strange ways. It spoke to me via an invitation to experience Victoria's Magnolia Hotel & Spa and their Grape Escape package which included a tour of the Cowichan Valley wine region. The message was delivered in the form of slow boats through the islands, a welcoming boutique hotel and meandering country roads and local wineries. The message wasn't loud, but it was clear: slow down.

The Magnolia Hotel & Spa

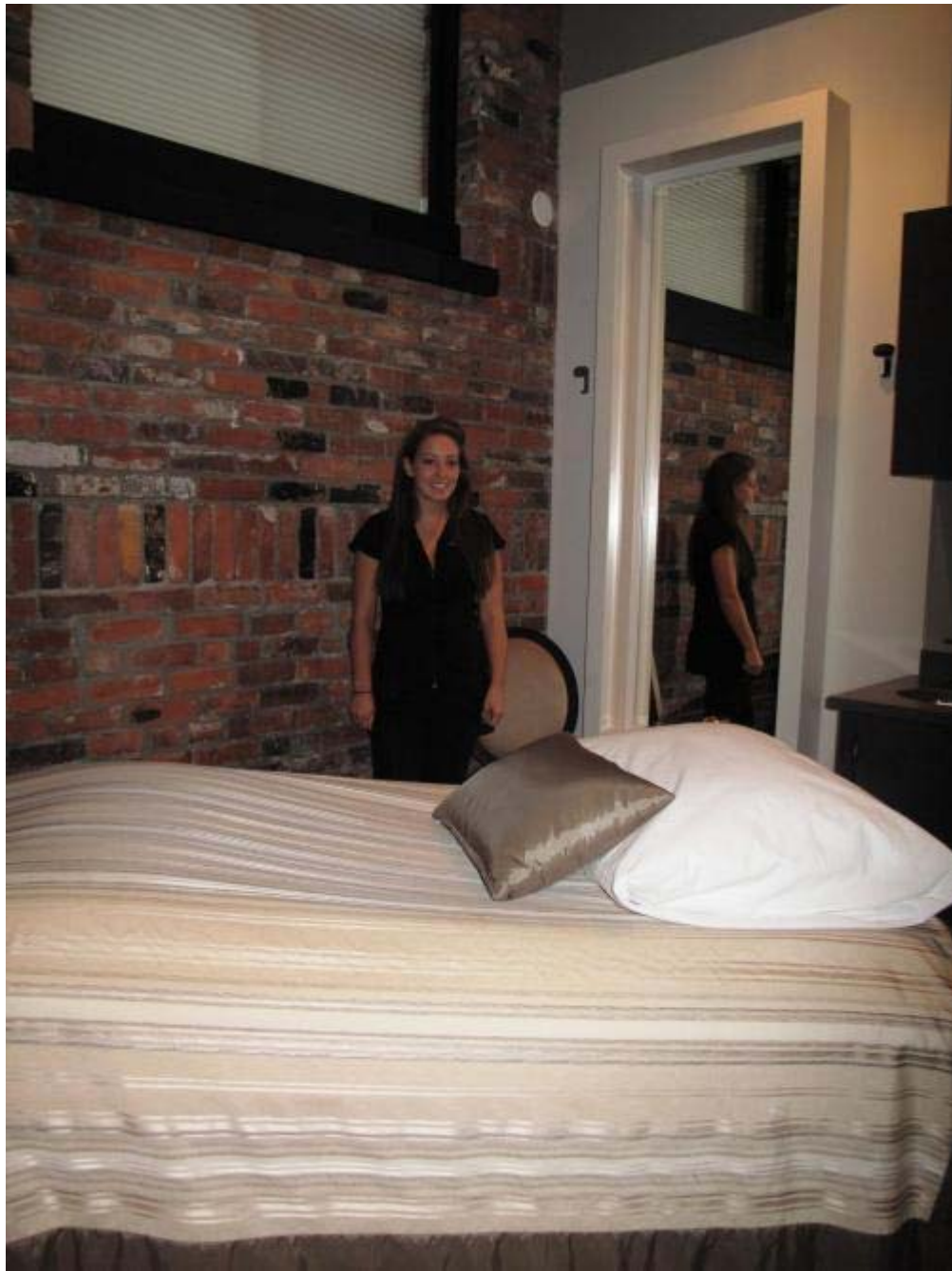
I arrived at the Magnolia hotel in the early afternoon of a warm autumn Saturday.

The Magnolia is charming and dignified without being pretentious, welcoming without being obsequious, and I have been a fan and occasional visitor since it opened in 2000. Conveniently located in downtown Victoria near to the Inner Harbour, this 64-room hotel has married grand hotel service with small inn intimacy to create a place that makes you feel like you're staying with an old friend with old money.



The high-ceilinged rooms have everything you need—a luxurious bed, a sharpened pencil at the desk and the Globe and Mail at the door in the morning--and maybe some things that you don't—a chocolate-accessorized evening turn down and a bath bomb at the tub. Each one of these touches made me feel like someone cared about me and my comfort.

Breakfast was continental style at the hotel's Prime Steakhouse restaurant: a grand buffet complete with bagels, waffles, fruit, eggs, cereal yogurt, and granola. Steak lovers will find much to love on the lunch and dinner menus, too.



An exposed brick treatment room at the Spa Magnolia.

My next step in gearing down was a facial at the beautiful Spa Magnolia, tucked away beside the hotel. Ruth was my lovely, expert massage therapist, and the experience left me rejuvenated, feeling like a more beautiful me inside *and* out. Ruth told me how much she enjoyed her work, in large part because of how well-treated she and other staff are. A spa that cares so well for its staff surely must imbue them with a sense of well-being that they pass on to their clients.

Cobble Hill and Cowichan wine tour

Bill Lewis, Magnolia's manager, left a list of suggested wineries, cideries,

and other locations to explore on a tour of the Saanich and Cowichan wine regions. I did a smaller tour of only the Cowichan area and it was a very full day but with time to explore each stop. Remember, I was here for the slow ride not the 10 wineries in one speed-driving extravaganza tour, so I started my circuit with another slow boat: the Mill Bay ferry.

The Mill Bay ferry is a little gem that shortcuts the trip from Saanich to Cobble Hill and takes you by water and saves you from driving the Trans Canada Highway. It makes a great round trip if you plan to include the Saanich wineries in your tour. I didn't have time for them on this trip, but I had to drop a friend at the ferry in Swartz Bay, so I drove the 10 minutes back to Brentwood Bay and onto the small ferry. Then I sat back and let the captain do the driving for the 25 minutes it took to travel across the Saanich Inlet to Mill Bay. From there, it was a short, beautiful drive to my first stop: Merridale Cidery in Cobble Hill.

merridale Estate Cidery

I got to merridale's La Pommeraie Bistro just as Alain Boisseau, the cidery's passionate French baker, was bringing large trays of cinnamon buns, cheese sticks, and heavenly croissants from the wood-fired outdoor brick oven. They were warm and delicious and I took one to savour, while I did a self-directed tour of the cidery.



Alain Boisseau, merridale's baker, at his outdoor wood-fired oven.

merridale is a labour of love for proprietors Janet Docherty and Rick Pipes. They have grown this expansive operation since purchasing it in 2000 to include a bistro, brandi house, cider house and spa services. Here they practice the art of craft cider-making with all natural, undiluted juice from a blend of their own apples (and some Okanagan) with delightful names like Chisel Jersey, Yarlinton Mill, and Tremlett's Bitter.



Chisel Jersey apples at merridale.

The resultant ciders are surprisingly diverse and have tastes that range from strong and sharp to light and effervescent. Nick, an English ex-pat and merridale's charming cider expert, served me samples including the Prosecco-like Somerset cider which I purchased, along with another chocolate croissant before heading to my next stop.

Glenterra Vineyards

Glenterra Vineyards is just a short trip up the country back road from merridale and here winery owner John Schreiner shared tastings of his organic estate wines in Glenterra's Thistles café.



John Schreiner serves a Pinot Noir at Glenterra Estate Winery

The topic of conversation at Glenterra was the September rains and how they had devastated some of the local region's grape harvests. John's grapes were protected because he had tented most of them. He also hadn't removed as much foliage from the vines so the leaves helped to protect the clusters underneath. The Saanich wineries were hit hardest, he said. I began to get a sense that wine-making is a changeable business and dependent on many things going well over the season.

Cowichan Bay

Lunch seemed like a good idea after Glenterra, and I took the turn off the highway for Cowichan Bay, and hopefully some soup, before looping back towards my final winery stop.

Cowichan Bay is a lovely seaside collage of floating homes, bakeries, bistros, and galleries all smushed together and hanging over the water like a bright watercolour painting.



A smile with my soup at Hilary's Artisan Cheeses

Hilary's Artisan Cheeses sits somewhere in the middle of this happy jumble and here I found a warm corner with a view and a pottery bowl of delicious cabbage soup.

I took a little time post-soup to drink in some sunshine, explore the Cowichan Bay Maritime Centre and the Arthur Vickars gallery before pulling out for the last leg of my tour.

Cherry Point Vineyards

Cherry Point Vineyards is the second largest estate winery on Vancouver island and one of the most established. Recently purchased by Xavier and Maria Clara Bonilla, its 34-acre estate produces some of the finest and most award-winning wines of the region.



Amelio Bonillo pours out a wine education at Cherry Point Vineyards

Amelio, the Bonillo's son and a UBC economics grad, was my knowledgeable, affable host for a Cherry Point wine tasting. With each pour he helped me to understand more about the complexity of building a wine based on grapes, weather, soil, sugars, and the small "design" window that a winemaker has to modify or enhance the qualities of a particular year's grape.

Bonillo talked about Dean Canadzich, Cherry Point's winemaker and the Australian "influence" that he sometimes plays with in their wines. He also

explained how Cherry Point wines are characteristic for their dryness because they do not add extra sugars to their wine, a practice other winemakers often use. Consequently Cherry Point leaves their grapes on the vine as long as possible to ensure the highest sugar content.



Grapes at Cherry Point

As I left, I noticed the contradiction of the rows and rows of sugar-sucking, heat-loving grapes against a wall of towering rainforest cedars and marveled at the ability of this winery and the others in this burgeoning wine region to blend and balance all of the local elements with their own cultural influences to create drinks that are subtle, creative and at the same time wonderfully complex. I decided that if I support these local wineries then I might be supporting a greater understanding of how wine culture, if not the world, needs to work.

If you go:

Taking the plane, Helijet, or bus to Victoria doesn't prevent you from enjoying a wine tour. There are tour operators which provide wine tours of either the Cowichan Valley or Saanich Peninsula for approximately \$95 - \$125 per person depending on the length and type of tour. The Magnolia can also arrange rental cars very easily and cost effectively, and pick up is a breeze, as there are car rentals just one block away. Rates range with the time of year, but it is a safe bet that you can arrange a full day car rental for \$50-\$60 per day or less.

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