

'Garden city' makes great holiday haven

Shop and snack then spoil yourself at the spa

BY JANE MUNDY, SPECIAL TO THE SUN DECEMBER 18, 2015



If Christmas shopping spells stress, here's the plan: check into a hotel in downtown Victoria for a few nights, make a few restaurant reservations and spa treatments, and ditch the car.

Granted, the "garden city" doesn't have Robson Street or massive malls, but you'll likely find unique gifts for everyone on your wish list and all within walking distance. With time to treat yourself to a festive break.

Victoria goes all out for Christmas, dressing up in tens of thousands of lights and hosting special events and activities. The Festival of Trees at the Empress hotel, and the gingerbread-house competition at the Inn at Laurel Point will put you in the holiday spirit.

And you can really pack in a lot when everything is close by. My gal pal and I recently spent a few days in Victoria, mainly to avoid the Christmas rush. Of course there's more to do besides shopping, such as eating and spa treatments.

First, we lollied away the afternoon at the Empress Hotel's Willow Stream Spa, taking advantage of the steam room, thermal mineral bath and swimming pool before luxuriating in a 90-minute "Coastal Retreat body experience" that comprised a head-to-toe body scrub, massage and wrap and even a hair treatment. We then sashayed over to the iconic Bengal Lounge for their signature 1908 cocktail, named after the year the venerable Empress Hotel opened. It's made with vodka infused with the Empress's own tea blend.

After settling into The **Magnolia Hotel**, we planned our shopping route to coincide with cocktail and dining destinations on their "Tapas Trail" map. First stop was the Catalano restaurant and Cicchetti (Italian for small bite or plate) Bar, literally a few steps from the Magnolia's lobby. After spying the neighbouring tables, I could have plowed through every snack on the menu, but decided on crispy polenta and roasted cauliflower, along with a "Spanish old fashioned", with almond infused bourbon.

Fortified, we meandered a few blocks to Trounce Alley. Here is the cutest She She shoe store next to She She Bags. Loaded down with shopping bags of the most unusual handbags, we crossed the alley to the Bodega — a rather sophisticated bar for grown-ups. Unless you're a sherry aficionado, ask your server to choose a sherry flight: three sherries from about 16 offered.

We tucked into the "Bodega Board", a plentiful array of charcuterie, including the silkiest Serrano ham and Spanish cheeses.

We still had room for a light dinner at Perro Negro, upstairs from Ferris' Oyster Bar. Be sure to order the eggplant with honey and the garlic prawns.

After a huge breakfast at Catalano (complimentary with your room), it was time to shed a few calories. The best way to explore downtown and surrounds is by bicycle, which the hotel also provides gratis. Or you can rent a hybrid bike from Cycle BC Rentals.

Next up, more pampering. My facial at The Spa Magnolia was nothing short of amazing — ask for Drew, who slathered an organic sugar cane mask on my face.

Glowing, we were ready for more shopping. LoJo, Lower Johnson between Wharf and Government, is characterized by hip storefronts in heritage buildings, and primarily locally designed fashions. Keep going east a few blocks to the Design District, which includes Herald Street and Chinatown. Here are affordable home decor and furnishings stores, and a huge — not so affordable but gorgeous — Chintz and Company.

We got back on the Tapas Trail for lunch at Chorizo & Co., nestled among eclectic gift stores, such as Oscar and Libby's, on Upper Fort Street. Their chorizo is a perfect balance of smoke, spice and sweet, and the coffee is excellent, especially with a few churros (fritters) on the side.

The writer was a guest of the Magnolia Hotel. The article was not read or approved of by anyone at the hotel before publication.