

CHECKING IN

Magnolia Hotel offers stellar stay in Victoria

Editor's Note: This is the latest instalment in our Checking In series, which profiles hotels from both staycation and weekend getaway perspectives.

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Growing up in the shadow of an older, bigger and more accomplished sibling is tough, but that doesn't mean you can't carve out your own unique success story. And so it is with the Magnolia Hotel & Spa, a 64-room boutique hotel that is at times quite literally in the shadow cast by the grand 431-room Fairmont Empress, which since 1908 has been the jewel in the crown of Victoria's Inner Harbour.

But the Magnolia, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year on the heels of a major remodelling, has carved out its own distinct niche thanks to exceptional service, first-rate rooms — particularly after that upgrade — and an in-house restaurant that consistently ranks as a top 20 in Canada.

Where the Empress revels in its sheer size and bucket-list tea service, the Magnolia is quite comfortable and confident in its decidedly low-key demeanour. If you're the type of traveller who enjoys a more personable and bespoke experience, the Magnolia Hotel is worth checking out.

I consider the Fairmont properties to be among the best in the business — but after spending a couple of nights at the Magnolia I appreciate why it has such a devoted clientele and why it truly is a genuine alternative to the Empress.

MORE HIGHBROW THAN HIPSTER

The appeal of a boutique hotel is evident as soon as you park at the valet station and head inside to check in. Chances are you'll be first in line and within minutes heading up to your room. After a day of travel a fast check-in is always a great first impression.

My second impression at the Magnolia was also a pleasure, this one revealed when we opened the door to our corner suite room. The furniture and decor are considerably more old-world traditional than the wild colours and wilder furniture you see in many boutique hotels. Think more highbrow than hipster. What really makes the rooms glow are the floor-to-ceiling windows that light cascades through. Considering the brown to beige palette, that light is essential as a darker room would feel a bit

dreary. The view through one of our windows perfectly framed the B.C. Parliament Buildings, which was impressive during the day but at night when all lit up meant those curtains remained pulled back until the morning. Despite being a small hotel, the Magnolia has all the amenities the modern traveller expects, be it for business or pleasure. There is a spa, a fitness centre with infrared sauna, a complimentary 24-hour business centre, valet parking, laundry and dry-cleaning services and space for meetings and banquets. What the Magnolia does provide that very few other hotels do is a selection of curated trail maps, which even if you've been to Victoria many times will lead you to undiscovered places. Some require good walking shoes, some a vehicle and one a complimentary Magnolia Hotel cruiser bike. These self-explanatory maps include Victoria Brewery Trail, Magnolia's Tapa Trail, Beautiful Boutiques Trail, Saanich Peninsula Flavour Trail, Cowichan Flavour Trail, Wagging Tails Trails (yes, the hotel is pet-friendly) and the Bikes, Blooms & Brews Trail.

IN-HOUSE DINING

Within a 10-minute walk radius from the Magnolia there are so many dining options that you'll need to consult with the hotel's concierge to whittle them down.

Here's my recommendation: ride the elevator down to the lobby, turn left and enter The Courtney Room. The hotel's in-house restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week, and its daily happy hour (2-5 p.m.) is very popular with the locals (always a good sign).

The premise behind The Courtney Room is simple: fresh local ingredients, classic-cooking techniques and superior service. There's casual dining — fresh-shucked oysters at the bar, shared plates in the brasserie — and formal sittings in the upstairs dining room. We experienced the latter, choosing the tasting menu of beautifully prepared dishes paired with a selection of Pacific Northwest wines. We ended it with a nightcap at the bar then an elevator ride to our room.

After experiencing all that the Magnolia and The Courtney Room have to offer, I put full credence in the long-running list of accolades each have received. For the hotel, the most recent are a 2022 Conde Nast Traveler Readers' Choice Award and a 2022 Travel + Leisure World's Best Award.



The 64-room Magnolia Hotel is celebrating its 30th anniversary of providing first-rate accommodations in the heart of Victoria's Inner Harbour. ARTISTIC IMPRESSIONS

Early booker gets the beach.



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