

# Victoria's Secret

More than just a hotel, the Inn at Laurel Point is a destination in its own right.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE INN AT LAUREL POINT



*Top: Inspired by cruise ships, renowned Vancouver architect Arthur Erickson, designed the eponymous Erickson Wing of the Inn at Laurel Point with ziggurat-esque lines, thus giving each room and patio unobstructed views of the surrounding harbour.*

*Bottom: The biggest dilemma for guests at the Inn at Laurel Point is whether to choose a room with a view of Victoria's Inner or Outer Harbour (shown).*

**IT'S 8 A.M. IN THE MORNING** and I'm enjoying a Zen-like moment of serenity before the business of the day. The place: the seaside Japanese garden at Victoria's serene Inn at Laurel Point. The business of the day? Eating. Or, to put it more delicately, exploring Victoria's great new foodie haunts.

I didn't expect to be here. When my husband asked, one wintry Friday, if I'd like to go out for dinner, my mind was on pizza. I didn't expect a helicopter ride, a luxurious, art-filled hotel, and a meal whipped up by one of the country's top chefs.

Our base for the weekend is one of Victoria's best kept secrets: the surprisingly luxurious, and surprisingly little known, Inn at Laurel Point. Until recently called the Laurel Point Inn, the hotel, designed in part by iconic Canadian architect Arthur Erickson, sits on a private six-acre peninsula on

Victoria's Inner Harbour. Despite being named one of Canada's top 25 hotels by Condé Nast Traveler in 2007, it's still a bit under the radar.

That, I thought, as I stepped into the chic lobby, is probably going to change. Fresh from a \$5-million dollar renovation, the re-named and re-vamped Inn has kept its great bones and independent vibe, but has clearly taken things up a notch. Think sleek 21st century interiors and a restaurant in keeping with the capital's new role as a foodie destination.

The new look, by noted interior designer Robert Ledingham, was most evident in our room, with its clean modern lines, an inviting chocolate-brown leather chair, abstract art and a delicious duvet-topped bed. A sliding shoji door added an Asian feel to a massive marble bathroom while a chaise lounge by the floor-to-ceiling window invited lingering. Out on the balcony, watching the lights of the Inner Harbour come up, we felt as if we were the only two people in the hotel.

Truth be told, this was more clever architecture than pure romance. We were in the hotel's Erickson Wing, which, as is typical of the architect's work, blends uniquely into its setting. In this case, the point of land inspired a design mimicking the lines of a cruise ship, with staggered stories allowing each room to feel as if it's on the top floor.

And, with water on three sides and harbour views from every room, the only decision left for guests is which water view: the Inner Harbour, taking in Victoria's



Top: The Inn at Laurel Point recently underwent extensive renovations, giving every aspect of the hotel a contemporary look and feel.

Bottom: Voted one of the top new restaurants in Victoria by Where magazine, Aura has established a deserved reputation for fine dining excellence.

famous 19th century buildings and the marina action, or the Outer Harbour, offering distant views of the Sooke Hills. Guests also have a choice between suites in the Erickson Wing, or in the hotel's original Laurel Wing with equally fine views and wallet-friendly rates.

Below us lay the hotel's Japanese garden. I was assured that this little botanical treasure doesn't just look Japanese: it really is. It's been organically and lovingly hand-tended for the past 20 years by classically trained gardener Lindsay Gibson of Dai Ichi Designs, with everything exactly where it should be according to Japanese gardening principles. A public trail skirts the waterline, while the garden's seawater pond appears to merge into the harbour. A small waterfall, next to the chef's herb garden and strawberry patch, soon became my favourite spot.

I also spent a morning wandering the corridors of the Erickson Wing, enjoying another of

Victoria's best kept secrets – The Inn at Laurel Point's art collection. The hotel is owned, not by the proverbial big eastern syndicate, but by a very real Victoria family. Paul Arsens, a local hotelier since the 1930s, and his wife Artie, bought the Laurel Point Inn in 1982. Besides being innovative hoteliers, philanthropists, and great employers (staff trips to Hawaii are legendary), the Arsens were also passionate travellers and art collectors, roaming widely around the Pacific Rim and picking up pieces that struck their fancy.

The couple's taste was eclectic and often well ahead of their time: they acquired everything from Merino abstracts to Japanese antiques and South American gaucho carvings, and commissioned work from local First Nations artists long before it was fashionable. The Third Floor gallery cases include, among other treasures, an elaborate ceremonial Kimono from Morioko, Japan, Victoria's sister city in Japan; an antique lacquered sake cask; and a cast iron samurai helmet. Several more pieces in the lobby include a striking sun figurine by Kwakwaka'wakw artist Henry Hunt.

I would have enjoyed meeting the Arsens, though they have both now passed away (Artie died just last September at age 94). Fortunately, part of their legacy was to staff their much-loved hotel with some even more talented and intriguing characters.

Perhaps most dynamic is Managing Director Reverend Ian Powell, who was recently ordained a deacon and is on his way to becoming a priest in the Anglican Church of Canada. A genial British transplant, Rev. Powell is a familiar sight around the hotel, dressed in a clerical collar and dapper business suit. With boundless energy, he juggles running the hotel, greeting guests and leading services at nearby Christ Church Cathedral.

And the Inn's chef? He's just back from the Olympics. Well, not those Olympics but, equally

important in the food world, the Culinary Olympics held last autumn in Erfurt, Germany. Executive Chef Brad Horen and his colleague, Executive Sous Chef Patrick Gayler, were part of Culinary Team Alberta, which topped many European competitors to place second overall. In 2007 Horen was named Canadian Chef of the Year by the Canadian Culinary Federation, and Food Network fans will have seen the affable 30-something on television, mentoring on the *Next Great Chef*. What's more, *Western Living* magazine recently recognized Horen as one of their top 40 Foodies Under 40. Suffice to say, the guy can cook.

For dinner that night, a highlight of our foodie weekend, we settled in by the harbour-view windows at Aura, the Inn at Laurel Point's new flagship restaurant. Boasting an enviable waterfront setting and one of Victoria's surprisingly few seaside restaurant patios, Aura has just been given the nod as one of the country's top 10 new restaurants by the editors at *Where Canada* magazine. (Rumour has it local chefs dine here on their nights off.)

For our night off, we started dinner at the Aura with a plate of crusted wonton prawns – a fun crunchy finger-food with a spicy togorashi mayonnaise. My surf-and-turf paired a maki roll and smoked scallops with sukiyaki braised short ribs (apparently Chef Horen borrowed the rib recipe from his Japanese mother-in-law). My husband couldn't resist trying the applewood smoked duck breast with vanilla bread and butter pudding.

With its warm tones and clean lines, the room is both cozy and modern. It's also a wonderful place to try the best of what Vancouver Island has to offer. Horen and his team are passionate about working with local fare, sourcing local and north coast, line-caught or wild seafood and vegetables from local organic farms.

I was also impressed with the wine list, which included some

of my own island farm gate favourites. Outlets Manager Stuart Bruce explained that he makes a point of representing all the island wineries, even the tiniest treasures.

"If you don't have a chance to experience the rest of the island, at least you can experience it here. We have local music, local food, local wine – it's a microcosm of Vancouver Island," he says.

The beauty of staying in the hotel is that we were back for breakfast: steel-cut oats with caramelized apple slices lent new heights to porridge, and who knew coddled eggs could be so delicious?

Though I could have easily spent the day strolling in the garden and admiring the art, we did have a mission to accomplish: an Urban Culinary Safari.

Our guide, Victoria food writer, tour guide and all-round foodie Kathy McAree, started our morning walking tour gently



with a tea sampling at the delightful Silk Road Tea and Aromatherapy Company. On the edge of Victoria's Chinatown, Silk Road is one of the few places in North America where one can sample tea at a tasting bar, with a real tea master, Daniela Cubelic, explaining the inherent properties of each blend.

Next up: Willie's Bakery. Once Victoria's oldest bakery, it's now a great little café, serving some of the city's best breakfasts and fresh-baked sandwiches.

Many of our stops were such little holes in the wall that,

without McAree, we would have passed right by. Favourites included the bluntly named Pig, for pulled pork sandwiches, and the tiny Choux Choux Charcuterie for house-made artisanal sausages and pâtés.

Refreshingly, McAree mixes the new and trendy with the tried and true. We stopped at the Dutch Bakery, which has served meat pies and marzipan for about 50 years, and the century-old Rogers' Chocolates, before finishing at the Artisan Wine Shop to sample a variety of Mission Hill tipples.

Glancing at McAree's list of further recommendations, we realized we'd just scratched the surface of Victoria's culinary possibilities. But we'll be back; perhaps next February for the Victoria Tea Festival, one of the few tea fests in North America. And we know where we'll be staying. ☞

Centre: A remarkable aspect of the Inn at Laurel Point is the stunning collection of art found throughout the hotel, such as this Kwakwaka'wakw sun mask carved by the late Henry Hunt.

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