

Luxury Road Trip

We set off on the Western circuit to find out what sets Relais & Châteaux hotels apart.

BY CHRIS JOHNS & CHARLENE ROOKE

Savvy travellers know that a great hotel is about more than the count of its threads, the lavishness of its lobby or the size of its suites. What makes a hotel great is a combination of many factors that are hard to quantify, but something you feel the moment you enter. Relais & Châteaux, one of the world's leading hotel designations, calls this the "Five C's:" character, courtesy, charm, calm and cuisine. A group of hotels that began more than 50 years ago as a glorified route guide to stops in the south of France makes for the ultimate road trip across the West to this day, with top creature comforts at every stop.



Clockwise from above left: the grand entryway to Sea Lion Point, one of the gorgeously appointed lodges at Sonora Resort. Fresh oysters are on the menu at the oceanside Wickaninnish Inn. Expert doormen welcome you to the Wedgewood Hotel & Spa. Magnificent views of the Rockies while dining at the Post Hotel & Spa. Post-treatment relaxation at Ancient Cedars Spa at the Wickaninnish Inn. There are more than 30,000 bottles to select from in the award-winning wine cellar at the Post Hotel & Spa.



Wedgewood Hotel & Spa Vancouver, B.C.

There's a scrum of reporters across the street at the courthouse shouting questions at a lawyer, a fire truck wails up Robson Street and the traffic is locked in place. From beneath the blue and gold awning of the Wedgewood a doorman waves and greets you by name. He opens the door and suddenly you're standing in the lobby surrounded by flowers and art. Ah. There's time for a drink before the show, after all.

SAVE ROOM Chef Lee Parsons' lobster risotto is the culinary equivalent of wearing cashmere socks.

HOW'D THEY DO THAT? Breaking all the rules of time and space, the luggage the bellman relieved you of as soon as you got out of the cab is in your room by the time you're done checking in.

ABOVE AND BEYOND The dapper, liveried bellmen have an uncanny ability to remember your name and, more importantly, have unlocked the secret to hailing a cab in Vancouver—a rare and valuable skill in a city where that task can seem Herculean.

NICE TOUCH Chocolates on the pillow are always welcome, but it's hard to beat the homemade chocolate chip cookies that they serve with turndown here. Want a glass of milk to go with it? Room service will have it up on a silver platter in a jiffy.

REASON TO STAY Bacchus Lounge is perhaps the best hotel bar in Canada, the kind of place where they flame orange zest, in the modern fashion, when making a Manhattan. The plush red couches, stiff drinks and live jazz speak to what a hotel bar should be: romantic and hopping.

Rates from \$275. 845 Hornby St., Vancouver, 604-689-7777, wedgewoodhotel.com

The Post Hotel & Spa

Lake Louise, Alberta

The table next to you is whispering in Italian; behind you a couple flirt in French; a pretty Japanese woman across

From top to bottom: Arriving by helicopter at Sonora Resort, where dinner featuring fresh-shaved truffles awaits. Cozy Bacchus at the Wedgewood. Dinner at The Post Hotel. Ancient Cedars Spa at the Wickaninnish Inn.

Opposite page, top to bottom: Wickaninnish Inn cuisine. Tea at the Post Hotel. The Wedgewood's expert doormen. Games room at Sonora Resort.



the room laughs quietly behind her hand. The Post Hotel dining room still evokes the atmosphere of international jet-set elegance that some people say disappeared long ago. They were wrong. Catch the woman's eye, raise your glass of champagne and let the evening unfold as it will.

BEST SEAT Reclined on a chaise longue with your legs wrapped in a blanket, watching the Pipestone river roll by, it's hard not to feel like the hero of an existential novel. In fact, I was inspired to write a haiku to the sublime: *Jagged peak snow capped / Scent of river and chimney / Dinner in an hour.*

SPA Admit it, you deserve a six-hour, four-day spa treatment. Temple Mountain Spa's Aromasoul Extravaganza offers four different treatment choices corresponding to the different elements (earth, air, fire and water), which incorporate techniques from Arabian, Mediterranean, Indian and Asian traditions. Think of it as a complete body and soul tune-up.

SAVE ROOM Swiss born chef Hans Sauter brings training from Japan and Hungary to his menu, although you're likely to find more evidence of the former on his menu in dishes like Dungeness crab and scallop spring rolls from the frequently changing tasting menu.

NOBLESSE OBLIGE Make no mistake, the cavernous, stone-lined wine cellar (more than 30,000 bottles from 2,000 selections) contains some extremely rare and expensive bottles. There are also a pair of very respectable \$26 house wines available for the mortals among us. Cheers!

ABOVE AND BEYOND When you check in, your fireplace is already papered, kindled and logged, awaiting only a long match—on the mantle, of course—to ignite it.

Rates from \$200. 200 Pipestone Rd., Lake Louise, Alberta, 1-800-661-1586 or 403-522-1586, posthotel.com

Sonora Resort

Sonora Island, B.C.

Didn't the Campbell River area used to be for rugged, hard-core fisherman only? They're not the ones writing comments like "more than perfect" and "magical" in the guestbook here. The newest Relais & Châteaux member in the West is surrounded by tidal pools that will almost convince you that you're on a river, not an ocean; sea lions, eagles are plentiful and whale- and bear-sighting is in close reach. Three lodge buildings

and two exclusive villas (containing four suites each), including the spectacular West Coast contemporary Sea Lion Pointe, give you plenty of view options. Should activity call, the professional-calibre covered tennis court and putting green will do nicely.

BIG BIRD The hands-down best way to arrive is on one of London Air's fast, sleek Agusta leather-seated helicopters, which take off from Vancouver's South Terminal and set you down on Sonora less than an hour later. Fast, efficient, quiet.

SAVE ROOM The chef's tasting menu (established by the talented Matthew Stowe, a tradition now continued by his former sous chef Terry Pichor) is a nightly surprise and delight of local seafood and the freshest produce and ingredients available, flown in daily.

SCORE A highlight of the games room—besides two golf simulators, pool table and shuffleboard and signed sports jerseys from celebrity guests—is the screening room, complete with 12 plush leather seats and old-fashioned popcorn machine.

LONG WAY The genuine First Nations longhouse on the property, complete with upstairs (gas) firepit, is a popular conference and retreat gathering space.

PLANT THE SEED The state-of-the-art glass conservatory is a popular spot for candlelit weddings. One couple was helicoptered to a remote glacier to tie the knot on an untouched, geocached spot.

BEST SEAT The third-floor Gillard Lodge hot tub (complete with outdoor shower) feels like it's suspended over water.—C.R.

Rates from \$500. Sonora Island, B.C., 888-576-6672, sonoraresort.com

The Wickaninnish Inn

Tofino, B.C.

As you walk along Chesterman Beach the biggest waves spray you with a fine mist and by the time you get back to the Wick you're thoroughly soaked. Now, wrapped in a fresh robe after a hot bath, you're sitting on the balcony with a crossword and a cappuccino. A pair of eagles flies by, so close you make eye contact and hear the



Cowboy Country

The former Relais & Châteaux hotel Little Beaver Creek Ranch in cattle country in the interior of B.C. is now the Glimpse Lake Private Cowboy & Country Club. Saddle up!

Somehow you dozed off looking out over the lake this afternoon. Now, as you stretch then wander around to the front of the century-old lodge, you look up to see—as if on cue—a rainbow blazing so brightly it practically casts a shadow. This complex of authentic Western buildings is straight out of Deadwood, but a high-tech theatre, swimming pool, tricked-out gym and even a spotless infirmary hide behind those rustic log façades.

ABOVE AND BEYOND Owner Alex Schultz, locally known as the Swiss Cowboy, is a renowned "horse whisperer." There are 25 quarterhorse geldings on the ranch and the finest tack available (we're talking handmade saddle, as well as boots, chaps and, of course, cowboy hats) is yours to borrow.

DON'T FENCE ME IN The 164-acre property borders ranch land and a First Nations reserve—all tolled a million acres of prime cattle country to ride. Guides equipped with GPS devices accompany all riders.

CATCH IF YOU CAN Glimpse Lake, where floatplanes bring in guests (there's also a heli port), is teeming with trout.

SAVE ROOM They may refer to a cozy nook off the main dining room as the BBQ Shack, but when you're dining on a duo of local buffalo, braised cheek and rosé cooked entrecote with corn ravioli and sweet corn salsa on jerusalem artichokes mousseline, you know this is cowboy food redefined.

Glimpse Lake, Quilchena, BC, 250-350-3461, littlebeavercreekranch.com

whooshing of their wings.

IN THE KNOW Most guests are content with long walks on Chesterman Beach, but anyone wanting to explore the area like a true local should sign out one of the bicycles that the hotel keeps on hand. For the ultimate Tofino moment ride it barefoot in a wetsuit while carrying a surfboard under one arm.

SPA The Cedar Sanctuary room at Ancient Cedars Spa naturally possesses what many spas aim to create by design. The smell of cedar doesn't come from an aromatherapy bottle, but from the walls of the room. Those bird calls and the crashing waves aren't generated by Bose speakers, but emanate from right outside the door.

SAVE ROOM Over the years several chefs have headed up the kitchen at the Wick, some more successfully than others. The current toques in charge, John Waller and Nicholas Nutting, might just be the best they've ever had. The seared scallops and miso braised pork belly, paired with a glass of Aurore Sauvignon Blanc from boutique Okanagan producer Le Vieux Pin, was the culinary highlight of this entire trip—which is saying a lot.

ABOVE AND BEYOND Fill your giant double soaker tub, bubbles optional, sink in up to your chin, and let your eye wander between the porcelain shore and the unobstructed view of the Pacific from your bathroom window.

NICE TOUCH A yellow fisherman's rain slicker hanging in your closet. Rates from \$280. 500 Osprey Lane, Tofino, B.C., 1-800-333-4604 or 250-725-3100, wickinn.com

For information, visit relaischateaux.com. To create your own luxury road-trip, consult travelalberta.com and hellobc.com.