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New website helps Canadian pick wellness spas

Martha Worboy , Canwest News Service

Canadians are always looking for quick ways to escape the stress of day-to-day life. But instead of travelling south in search of white sand for a dose of R&R, why not hit one of the luxurious spas our country has to offer.

A new website encourages travellers to choose Canada when looking for a "wellness" destination.

The online travel guide, www.traveltowellness.com/canada, offers tips on spas to visit across Canada, from Tofino, B.C., to Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley.



Hollyhock Retreat Centre in B.C. is a wellness retreat that encourages progressive thinking.

Photo courtesy of John DeVault for the Calgary Herald

Anne Dimon, the site's founder and editor, says Canada offers ideal spots for health and respite vacations since it has an abundance of spas offering wellness treatments, exceptional dining options and inspirational natural beauty.

Dimon says it is important, when choosing the right place for that hot stone massage, not to simply focus on the spa but to think about the overall experience.

"Look beyond the spa itself -- the spa may be wonderful but you still may walk out and it's (been) a horrible experience.

"Make sure it's in the location you want, and it serves the food you need."

Dimon says spa-goers need to ask themselves such questions as what their most important objective is in going to the spa, what kind of accommodation they desire and what special treatments they want before they book.

"A wellness vacation is not the same thing for everyone. Some need a couples suite, a fireplace . . . Some want yoga and nutritional counselling -- everyone has individual needs," she says.

Spa demand has gone up in recent years.

According to a 2006 Canadian Tourism Commission report, one out of four adults (25 per cent of Canadian consumers 18 and older) said they have been to a spa, and 58 per cent of spa-goers said their visit had been within the past year. Consumers are increasingly looking for an "overall" experience when they visit a spa, wanting not only to "look good" but to "feel good" as well, the report said.

There are roughly 2,300 spas in Canada, the bulk being in Quebec, Ontario and B.C. With so many options to choose from, the Travel to Wellness site makes it easy for spa-goers. A Best Spas Canada list is featured on the site, along with a breakdown of recommended spas by province.

In her two years of cross-country spa research for the guide, Dimon says she found - compared to the ultraluxurious spas of Scottsdale, Ariz., Dubai or Las Vegas -- what Canadian spas lack in luxury, they make up for in other areas such as accessible outdoor fitness, local dining options and a wide selection of upscale accommodation.

And then there's the great Canadian outdoors. "Nature is so much a part of the wellness experience," Dimon says. "People need to spend time in nature and Canada is a great spot to do it."

FIT FOR A HOLIDAY:

- Spas recommended by Travel to Wellness:

- **Best Couples Suite** -- Spa at Fairmont Chateau Montebello, Montebello, Quebec, www.fairmont.com/montebello/Recreation/SPA

- **Best for Water Therapy** -- Willow Stream Spa at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, Banff, Alberta, www.willowstream.com

- **Best for On-site Gourmet Cuisine** -- The Inn at Manitou McKellar, Ontario, www.manitou-online.com/spa.html

- **Best for Scenic View** -- Willow Stream Spa at Fairmont Banff Springs, Banff, Alberta, www.willowstream.com

- **Best for Unique Accommodations** -- Wickaninnish Inn & Ancient Cedars Spa, Tofino, B.C., www.wickinn.com

- **Best for Year-Round Resort** -- The Spa at Four Seasons Resort Whistler, Whistler, B.C., www.fourseasons.com/whistler/spa.html

- **Best for Fitness** -- The Spa at White Oaks Resort & Spa Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, www.whiteoakresort.com

- **Best hiking and inspirational views** -- Humber Valley Resort, Corner Brook, Nfld., www.humbervalley.com/foundspa.asp

Where Should I Go?

Ideal Wellness Vacation Destinations in Canada (suggested by Anne Dimon, founder of www.traveltowellness.com/canada):

- Vancouver Island
- Whistler, B.C.
- Okanagan Valley, B.C.
- The Laurentians
- Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont.