

INSIDE AN INDIGENOUS ARTS HOTEL



“Skwachays” is the traditional name of the area at the head of False Creek, where spring waters once flowed and attracted elk, sturgeon and salmon, and where bog cranberries and wild rice once flourished. Now the name, pronounced skwach-eyes, adorns Skwachays Lodge, an Aboriginal hotel and gallery that sits on West Pender St. where Vancouver’s Gastown, Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside meet. By **Jennifer Bain**



CRAIG MINIELLI/AURA PHOTOGRAPHICS

The backstory: Your travel dollars will be well spent at Skwachays Lodge, which proudly describes itself as “Canada’s first Aboriginal arts hotel” and a “boutique hotel that is making a difference.” It was previously a healing lodge but opened in its current incarnation in 2014, as a social enterprise that’s run by the Vancouver Native Housing Society. Profits from the hotel and adjoining art gallery are plowed into subsidizing 24 artists who live and work within the lodge.



CRAIG MINIELLI/AURA PHOTOGRAPHICS

The rooms: “Arrive as a guest, leave as a friend,” urges the envelope that contains my room key fob and welcome letter. Six First Nations artists working with six interior design firms created 18 unique rooms here and mine was #507, the King Salmon Suite and the work of artist Richard Shorty and Porada Design. “People, like salmon, will always return home, even if it means swimming upstream against all odds,” the hotel explains. Shorty’s bold *Spawning Salmon* painting over the bed’s headboard is the centrepiece here to tell you to pay your respects to the king of fish and remember that you can call this place home.



JENNIFER BAIN/TORONTO STAR

The totem: No other urban Canadian hotel can boast of a dramatic 12-metre totem pole on its roof. I could actually touch the bottom of the Dreamweaver Pole from my balcony. It’s a story pole, topped by three watchmen that act as the lodge’s sentinels and guardians. It features a raven (symbolizing creation and knowledge) holding and protecting the light of the moon, a man (signifying that this story is about the work being done by man), an eagle (far-seeing) and a bear (strong and protective). Inside the hotel, the floors have also been themed as important animals — raven, eagle, bear, wolf and orca.



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The extras: Skwachays has all the boutique bells and whistles, such as plush linens, Plasma HD TVs, free Wi-Fi, Bluetooth audio docking stations, in-room safes, Spirit Bear Coffee and toiletries by Mother Earth Essentials. The sixth floor is home to a rooftop sweat lodge and offers Indigenous smudge room ceremonies where locals and visitors can purify their bodies and spirits by burning sacred plants. My favourite touch: “Chasing my dreams” and “soaring with the eagles” doorknob tags to say whether you’re sleeping or out exploring and want the room made up. Rooms run \$189 to \$249 during peak season, and \$129 to \$189 during off-peak season. Suites are \$275 to \$370.



CRAIG MINIELLI/AURA PHOTOGRAPHICS

The food: The hotel is across from the International Village Mall and steps from all kinds of great restaurants, like Save On Meats, but start the day with the free grab-and-go breakfast in the Kayachtn (the Salishan word for welcome) Room. There’s bannock and other baked goods by Skookum Catering to eat at the communal totem table with its beaver house image by Haida artist Eric Parnell. You can lounge by the fireplace and TV and drink free coffee, tea and Vivreau water (hot, cold and sparkling) any time. There’s also regional wine and Canadian craft beer.

Jennifer Bain was hosted by Tourism Vancouver and Destination B.C., which didn’t review or approve this story.



CRAIG MINIELLI/AURA PHOTOGRAPHICS

The art gallery: “There’s a lot of interest in Indigenous culture and the original history of Canada,” explains general manager Maggie Edwards on a tour of the Skwachays Lodge Aboriginal Art Gallery, which is in the lobby between the reception desk and welcome room. “Coast Salish art is very popular and people want to make an impact with their money.” Most of the artists set their own price in this Fair Trade gallery, but pricier works are sold by consignment. The gallery represents several hundred artists.

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