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ABORIGINAL IMMERSION

VANCOUVER ARTS AND CULTURE HOTEL
IS THE FIRST OF ITS KIND IN CANADA

By SUSAN LUNDY
Photos by CRAIG MINIHELLY
at Aura Photographics

The totem, called Dreamweaver, punches into the skyline of West Pender Street in Vancouver, hugging the edge of a longhouse, built — incongruously yet spectacularly — onto the rooftop of Skwachàys Lodge.

This marked the first sign that our experience would be special. Once we stepped through the hotel's front door into a world of First Nations art, we understood we'd discovered a one-of-a-kind accommodation, perfect for anyone seeking a great downtown Vancouver location combined with an authentic Aboriginal culture experience.

Located at the crossroads of Vancouver's Gastown and Chinatown, the boutique-style accommodation is Canada's first Aboriginal arts and culture hotel. It opened in September 2014 and has been enjoying rave reviews and huge word-of-mouth success.

My husband and I arrived at Skwachàys Lodge last October with a full agenda: brunch with our daughters, who live in Vancouver, a little shopping, and a Canucks game at Rogers Arena, happily just a block or two away from the hotel. However, once shown to our exquisite room, we wished our schedule were a little lighter.

To create the rooms at Skwachàys Lodge, six world-class Vancouver interior designers collaborated with six Aboriginal artists. The result is 18 distinctly themed rooms, featuring original carvings, paintings, fabric, art, custom furniture and décor.

Our room, the King Salmon Suite, was created by Porada Design and artist Richard Shorty. It pays homage to salmon, which play a central role in the life and culture of coastal First Nations. Shorty's tribute to the salmon run is captured in his painting "Spawning Salmon," which is the first image you see as you step into the room. Cast in Plexiglas and set against a backlight, the striking piece of art stretches across the entire headboard wall and, illuminated, basks the area in a warm glow. The room's finishes are earthy and neutral, making use of rich red tones, light fabrics and wooden furnishings to represent nature's surroundings. It has all the comforts one expects in an upscale accommodation — fluffy bathrobes, plush linens, comfy king bed, 43" Plasma HD TV — but the richness of the art makes it unique and even more appealing.

Our daughters wait in the comfortable sitting area (which includes a single sofa bed) as we drop off our bags, and we all traipse outside onto the balcony (a





Skwachàys Lodge offers guests an experience immersed in Aboriginal arts and culture that supports local Aboriginal artists

little too cold to enjoy the patio seating) and gawk at the totem running up the side of the building.

The hotel's architect, Joe Wai, preserved the heritage building's century-old brick façade and designed a traditional northern longhouse to sit atop of it. The totem, a "story pole" carved by Francis Horn, Sr. called Dreamweaver, is 40.5 feet tall and rises high above the Vancouver roofline.

Back downstairs, we admire art in the Urban Aboriginal Fair Trade Gallery, and pore over massive books filled with remarkably well-priced original First Nations art and prints, trying to decide on just one to purchase. (We chose a Shorty, apropos of our stay in the King Salmon Room.)

Adjacent to the gallery is a beautifully designated common area, with tables, comfy lounging chairs, snacks and beverages. The furnishings are works of art in themselves, including a stunning hand carved table, and the entire room is ringed with First Nations paintings and sculpture.

Owned and operated by the Vancouver Native Housing Society — a registered charitable organization — Skwachàys Lodge is described as a "new, sustainable model for supportive housing."

In addition to the 18 rooms and street-level gallery, it includes 24 Aboriginal artist live/work studios. One hundred per cent of profits from the hotel operation and the fair trade gallery subsidize the studios and further the VNHS mandate to "improve the well-being of Vancouver's urban Aboriginal people."

During a tour, we are shown the basement, which, during the next stage of development, will transform into a working studio where hotel patrons can watch the artists at work. One the top floor, we discover the peaceful, artful area where guests can take part in traditional Aboriginal cultural experiences such as a sweat lodge and smudge room. There is also a small conference room.

"The rebranding and conversion of the lodge now completes our vision," said Dave



Eddy, CEO of the Vancouver Native Housing Society in a press statement. "The success of the hotel and gallery will enable us to provide an authentic cultural tourism experience and create revenue necessary to subsidize rent and enhance the lives of the Aboriginal artists living in the residence.

"This is a truly dynamic and sustainable solution for housing that provides a positive social impact for some of the most marginalized members of Vancouver's

population."

Rates at Skwachàys Lodge start at \$149 a night — a price that allows visitors to affordably immerse themselves in Aboriginal culture amid a stunning, modern, urban setting, in a great location.

We packed up, carefully placed our new art into our truck, and headed home with definite plans to return.

For more information, visit online at skwachays.com 