

Traveller

Skwachays Lodge, Vancouver review: artful twist in native lodge

David Whitley | Sep 19 2014 at 5:58 AM



Each of the hotel's rooms is individually designed by an artist.



Our rating



4 out of 5

TripAdvisor Traveller rating



39 reviews

SHARE

An innovative indigenous lodge gives David Whitley an enriching stay in Vancouver.



THE LOCATION

Sandwiched between Vancouver's Chinatown and the historic Gastown quarter of the city, yet not quite in either, the surroundings are central but sketchy.

If all goes to plan with the Downtown Eastside's slow gentrification, the location will no longer be the Skwachays Lodge's Achilles heel.

For now, though, while most things are within easy walking distance, you'll encounter visible signs of drug addiction on the way.

THE SPACE

A key indication that the whole experience will be far removed from the cookie cutter, comes at the reception desk, which is inside an indigenous arts gallery.

The building is owned by the Vancouver Native Housing Society, with the top two floors run as a hotel.

Some of the building's longer term residents are artists who have work for sale in the gallery. You might even bump into the designer of your room in the lift.

Indigenous themes run throughout – most notably in the 12-metre totem pole sticking out of the roof, but also in the theming of the floors. Each has a totem animal, which keeps cropping up in the decoration, be it eagles on the fifth floor or ravens on the sixth.

The rooms themselves are wildly different, some with gently thematic touches and others going all out.

Room 501, for example, has deeply personal handwritten poems and pencil sketches turned into uncompromisingly dominant wallpaper.

COMFORT

"All rooms individually designed by different artists" usually sets the alarm bells ringing – such hotels can be riddled with maddening impracticality, but wisely, the artists have been paired with experienced design firms and the management has a firmly grounded hotel background. Skwachays doesn't do plush, butler-serviced, gold-trimmed luxury, but it rises above expectations in furnishings and getting the basics right, so you're surprisingly happy to kick back, rather than just look at it all.

THE KIT

Each piece of furniture has been designed for the space it is in, and often the wood from the 110-year-old building's previous incarnation has been reshaped into tables or headboards. In the Water Suite, the handiwork of Vancouver Winter Olympics medal designer Corrine Hunt, the bedside tables are hollowed out tree trunks.

The long desk housing the fridge, microwave, large flat screen TV, iPod dock and coffee machine has been carved into a wave pattern.

The technology and modern amenities are all present and correct, but they've been cleverly presented in keeping with the overall spirit of the hotel.

GOING OUT

Gastown has the heritage looks and is great fun at night. Try the Alibi Room for craft beers and Bambudda for highly inventive cocktails. For something more chilled out, the Dr Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden is an oasis of tranquillity in Chinatown. The hotel offers up a rudimentary help-yourself breakfast, although there is a full kitchen that may be called into action in future and in any case, some of Vancouver's foodie hotspots are nearby: Wildebeest at 120 W Hastings Street is a meat-lover's dream, Bao Bei at 163 Keefer Street offers stylish Chinese, while Meat and Bread at 370 Cambie Street serves up possibly the greatest porchetta sandwiches in history.

THE VERDICT

A joint that could have been sacrificed on the altar of shallow gimmickry has got it right. This is largely because the heart is overwhelmingly in the right place. Indigenous art isn't a flavour of the month decor choice here - there's a genuine wish for guests to get closer to First Nations culture. The hotel has been deliberately designed with that in mind, but while things are done pleasingly differently, there's a sensible professionalism backing it up.

HOW TO GET THERE

From Vancouver Airport, expect a cab fare of about \$35, otherwise take the 26-minute Canada Line train to Waterfront Station, and walk 11 minutes to the hotel - head east down Cordova Street from the station, turn right at Abbott Street, then walk two blocks and turn left into West Pender Street. Reception is inside the Urban Aboriginal Gallery on the left.

ESSENTIALS

Skwachays Lodge, 31 West Pender Street, Vancouver. King rooms start at \$195 a night. See skwachays.com.

The writer was a guest of Skwachays Lodge and Tourism Vancouver.