

Taking the Winter Plunge

Team fist-fighting, log jousting and snowball throwing, it's puzzling why so many northern winter traditions seem to involve pain. So, it should come as no surprise that painfully cold water is an important part of an authentic Nordic spa experience.

"Increasing your heart rate is invigorating," explained Lee-Anne Thomsen, the spa's guest services supervisor, as we stood overlooking the 20-hectares of ice-laden forest, outdoor baths and countryside. Although it would be easy to imagine this was Finland or Russia, we were actually at Le Scandinave Spa, a new \$6.5 million facility located 2 hours north of Toronto in the outskirts of the town of Collingwood, on the southern shore of Georgian Bay.

Incorporated in 1858, the town was once an important center for railway and shipping traffic, and later shipbuilding. Many of the largest vessels sailing the Great Lakes were launched from Collingwood's harbor, with steamers bound for Chicago and Milwaukee as well as Western Canada. Today, it's possible to see the architectural legacy of that proud marine history within the restored downtown district, recognized on the prestigious Canadian Register of Historic Places. After a period of economic decline during the last century, the town reinvented itself to capitalize on its waterfront location and has evolved to become one of Ontario's most popular four-season tourist centers.

Situated at the foothills of Blue Mountain, Ontario's highest ski hill, the town is ideally positioned for outdoor winter adventure. Alpine skiing, snowboarding and tubing are popular options at nearby Village at Blue Mountain, an upscale Intrawest resort community also offering a range of cosmopolitan dining and entertainment for the après ski crowd. Outdoor enthusiasts also enjoy snowshoeing through the area's wilderness trails or hiking across southern Ontario's longest suspension footbridge at the Scenic Caves, a spectacular natural cave and cliff formation atop the Niagara Escarpment.

The newest outdoor experience, the Nordic spa, has been designed to capitalize on the area's natural beauty. Set amid a quiet forest, it is Canada's second Le Scandinave Spa. Despite the word "spa" in the name, don't expect pampering or coddling.

"This is a serious detoxification experience," explained Thomsen.

At the heart of the spa's philosophy is the belief that a sequence of hot, cold and relaxation periods provides health benefits unavailable by simply floating in a hot tub.

"We recommend spending 12-15 minutes in a hot bath, steam or sauna room to open the pores and rid the body of toxins," explained Henderson "That should be followed by a cold plunge or icy shower to rinse away impurities and improve circulation. Finally, there should be 15 minutes in a relaxation solarium."

To deter guests who might be tempted to skip a step, a laminated map of the spa facility and outline of the suggested bathing sequence are provided at check-in. The largest outdoor Nordic bath in Canada, it offers over 25,000 sq. ft. of spa activity and boasts three hot baths (including a waterfall), a Norwegian-style indoor steam room, a Finnish sauna and three cold plunge pools (including an icy Nordic waterfall). Yoga and pilates classes are also available on a drop-in basis.

It's not for those in a hurry. The sequence, which should be repeated five times for optimal benefit, takes about 2.5 hours to complete.

Swaddled in the plush white towel supplied upon check-in, I scurried across the heated stone walkway to the closest hot outdoor pool, the Mountain View Bath, to begin.

As steam rose from the 102 F sapphire blue waters, it cooled in the frigid air and misted my face like a refreshing Evian spray. Although my ears felt like popsicles, the warm water was so relaxing I was tempted to remain submerged for the rest of the day gazing at the snow-clad Blue Mountains.

A squeal from a guest jumping into a plunge pool reminded me this was supposed to be therapeutic. Deciding to ease into the full-body cold water experience, I headed to the hot waterfall. After all, at 99F it was a full 3 degrees colder than where I'd been. Sliding behind a steaming waterfall, I was soon out of sight and basking in my own secluded alcove.

"Don't forget to plunge," shouted a nearby spa technician as he adjusted the cold baths.

Obligingly, I made an effort, admittedly more sparrow-in-a-puddle than a true plunge. Although a 41F temperature may feel balmy when you're out walking the dog, it feels positively polar when you're clad in only a bathing suit and flip-flops.

Fortunately, it was time for my massage appointment so I headed to the massage pavilion. Much like the Russian *banya* or Finnish communal bath where bathers beat each other with birch branches for exfoliation, the emphasis at Le Scandinave is on the therapeutic. You won't find rose petals or aromatherapy treatments here.

"We are focused on what we do best," spa co-owner Mylisa Henderson explained. This meant a no-nonsense Swedish massage for me. Before long, I was in a room fragrant with cedar, being pummelled, kneaded and manipulated by the capable hands of Andrea, one of the spa's 28 registered massage therapists.

Afterward, it felt as though I'd been working out at the gym – minus the effort. I headed to the secluded Forest Hot Bath to unwind. Billowing waves of steam rolled across the 106F water's surface and disappeared into a forest of towering birch trees. With the aroma of woodsmoke from a nearby fire pit, I could almost imagine a *troika*, the Russian horse-drawn sled, gliding by.

When the winter sun emerged from behind the clouds I decided it was time to take the cold water plunge. The shock was surprisingly invigorating and I had to admit that the complete Nordic bath experience did chase away the wintertime blahs. Although a shot of vodka and a fur hat would have been nice.

If You Go

Le Scandinave Spa is located at 152 Grey Rd. 21, Collingwood. All-day access to baths is (\$42 Canadian). Services such as a 60 minute Swedish massage (\$112), Hot Stone or Thai-yoga (\$160) include bath access and must be booked in advance. Guests must be 19 years or older. www.scandinaveblue.com

Accommodation overlooking Georgian Bay and the Blue Mountains is nearby at the newly opened Days Inn & Suites Collingwood. Visit www.daysinn.ca or call (1 800 DAYS INN).

Special events, lodging and snow updates are available at www.bluemountain.ca.

Dine at Oliver & Bonacini Grill in the Village where classic winter fare is given a stylish twist. www.oliverbonacini.com