

## PARADISE FOUND

Over the past 15 years, Ste. Anne's Spa has gradually been reinventing itself from cozy country inn to world-class destination spa. Recently the facility was voted the top destination spa in Canada by the readers of *Spa Finder Magazine*, surpassing the world-famous Banff Springs Hotel for the honour, a distinction that has put Ste. Anne's into a class of its own.

STORY BY JAY ROBINSON      PHOTOS BY SAW PHOTO



The rambling stone architecture of Ste. Anne's Spa is reminiscent of buildings one might find in Scotland or France. The estate has undergone numerous updates and additions since the original farmhouse was erected in the 1850s.

*"I have chosen this beautiful garden where I will send many people to be healed."*

Jay Rawlings,

his prophecy given for Ste. Anne's

The prophecy given in the early days of Ste. Anne's, when the estate was a country inn bed and breakfast, could not have more meaning today.

Upon first setting eyes on Ste. Anne's Spa, it is easy to assume one might have

been secretly teleported to an historic estate in France or the highlands of Scotland. The road that winds up to the main facility north of Grafton offers glimpses of the rustic stone construction that defines the architecture of all the buildings on site.

Ste. Anne's is a special place. Not because of the abundance of unique and invigorating treatments available, or even the inescapable view that dominates the horizon.

It is even more special than the richly appointed rooms, personal chalets and cozy common areas found throughout the

buildings on the 570-acre estate.

What truly makes Ste. Anne's special is far less tangible. It is the sense of ease one feels when one arrives at the main reception, the overwhelming peace, akin to a visit to an old friend's home or a favourite relative's house.

Historically, the word "spa" refers to a healing waters, specifically in the legendary town in of the same name in western Belgium. As far back as the 14th century, people from all over Europe would venture to Spa to access its healing waters to "heal" any number of maladies. Since then, the word spa has become the



**ABOVE:** In the main dining room, enjoy the view as well as award-winning cuisine of Chef Christopher Ennew. His emphasis is on quality and freshness, less than counting calories.

**TOP:** Relaxing on the patio to take in the view is an added bonus for visitors.

brand name of natural-healing centres around the world. And Ste. Anne's Spa is certainly no exception.

In 1981, Carl and Nan Corcoran purchased the Ste. Anne's estate as a retirement project. The original idea was to revitalize the main buildings into a retirement residence and possibly a bed-and-breakfast. However, there was much work to do as the estate had fallen into disrepair after nearly two decades of neglect.

The Ste. Anne's estate is well-known to Northumberland residents. Even before the Corcoran family purchased the

land, it had historical ties to the region. The original stone farm house dating back to the late 1850s was built by the famous Masseys of the farm implement business. Later, the generous views and peaceful surroundings were the summer residence of the Blaffer family, oil-rich Texans. The Blaffers extensively renovated the estate in the 1930s and 40s creating, a rambling mansion referred to locally as the "Grafton Castle."

However, all this history aside, it is the new Ste. Anne's, the one evolved from the original concept of as a private residence/B&B envisioned by Carl and

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**TOP:** Jim Corcoran, owner of Ste. Anne's Spa, stands at the gate leading to the 14,000-square-foot addition completed in 2004.

**MIDDLE:** Overnight guest accommodations are equally comfortable with common areas with added touches such as fireplaces, books, even board games. But, items such as televisions and phones won't be distracting you as you unwind.

**BOTTOM:** Common areas at the spa are furnished with comfy chairs and vintage antiques to imply the comfort one might find at home while relaxing between treatments.

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Nan Corcoran, that is establishing its history as a place of personal healing.

By the end of the 1980s, the Corcoran family was running a very successful bed-and-breakfast operation with numerous accolades to its name. This success aside, Carl Corcoran was proposing selling the inn and moving in another direction. This is where Jim Corcoran, the current owner of Ste. Anne's Spa, entered the picture.

"I made a proposal to my father to let me take over the inn. But, at first he was reluctant to accept this proposal; he felt our family had fully explored the venture," Mr. Corcoran says. "But I kept at him and finally he accepted the idea that, one way or the other, I was going to make this happen."

In 1990 Jim Corcoran took over the operation of the inn. With the aid of his sister, Cindy, a registered massage therapist, the inn opened the first spa-like services offered on site. Since then, the business has become a truly unique healing destination experienced by more than 22,000 guests a year.

"I remember when my sister Cindy and her friend Nella first started their massages and facial treatments. Not all guests would be inclined to participate in a treatment, but for those who did, the difference was more than obvious," Mr. Corcoran says.

In addition to the large variety of traditional spa treatments offered; such as massages, body wraps and esthetics services, Ste. Anne's has become known for pushing the boundaries of physical and personal healing.



Consider the Moor Mud Hydro wrap wherein, after a body masque of Golden Moor Mud and exfoliation, you are submersed in the hydrotherapy tub filled with Golden Moor Plus, a blend of super-special mud mixed with pine oil, and given a hydro-massage. Finish the treatment off with a warm Vichy shower and an application of hydrating lotions and, voilà, you have arrived in paradise, revitalized from head to toe.

If the moor mud sounds a little out of your comfort zone, then maybe a detoxifying Eucalyptus Body Wrap or a simple couples massage to end a stressful week is more in line. The list goes on and on, there are so many treatments offered. But, the true uniqueness of Ste. Anne's is more than the spa services.

The Ste. Anne's experience is in the whole package. The treatments, the spectacular location, the fresh, award-winning cuisine, the cozy antique furniture found in the common rooms, the classy overnight accommodations, even the pristine spring water that flows from every tap.

The superior staff set this spa apart. Ste. Anne's has a long reputation for being the best at what it does. That reputation brings people from all walks of life to the facility, from movie stars to rock stars, to you. The common thread all guests share is that everyone has arrived for the same purpose: the need of some healing touch, a personal tune-up if you will. With that in mind, all guests are given with the same attention.

The reputation of Ste. Anne's far precedes this article. In some circles there might be the misconception Ste. Anne's is only for the rich and famous. But, rest assured; the halls of Ste. Anne's are clear of pretentious airs and presumptions.

The spa is designed to be a "time out" for guests looking for some down time. Using your cellphone or Blackberry in common areas is a faux pas. Conspicuously missing are televisions and phones in rooms. Treating oneself to a stay at the spa forces you to shut off the impulse to check in with your world and take time to unwind.

Remembering the special intangible qualities of the spa, one of the greatest assets is relaxing and dropping your guard. This is essential to absorbing the full potential healing process that is the foundation of the spa experience.

"When we were operating as a country inn, we would have guests from all over

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come to stay and they would make play at golf and tennis and enjoy a few drinks. Often guests continued to compete at the games that led them to us in the first place. But, in the end, they would often leave no more relaxed then when they first came though the door," Mr. Corcoran recalls.

"Now our guests leave rejuvenated, reloaded and refreshed."

The common (but mistaken) perception used to be county dwellers by nature were slower-paced folk, and urban dwellers fast-paced. More common today is the reality both urban and rural lifestyles have picked up speed, to the point we all are moving mentally and physically at a frantic gallop.

Getting the kids to hockey/school, attending an extra meeting, working longer hours to meet tighter deadlines and pushing ourselves harder than ever means people need to schedule more downtime to take the pressure off. Yet, recent studies show this rest is not happening. This constant running at top speed can let people down with a bang.

"I am a firm believer in the power of

touch. People need to be touched. This deeply human trait is a key healing technique sadly neglected in our modern Western culture," Mr. Corcoran notes.

Healing by touch, indeed. An amazing Swedish massage performed skillfully by a registered massage therapist can work out the knots and soothe the nerves that get so frayed sitting at a desk, or behind the wheel, plodding along, week in and week out.

If the perception of some readers, males in particular, is that spa treatments are solely for the ladies, may I say that you are sadly misinformed. A generous proportion of the services at Ste. Anne's are for both sexes and there are also specific treatments for male spa guests. Ste. Anne's Spa is for all, big and small, old and young, from near and far.

Many who live in Toronto have never taken a trip to the top of the CN Tower. You wouldn't go to Paris and not visit the Louvre. Likewise it would certainly be a loss for Northumberland residents to not take in a day at Ste. Anne's. After all, we're all human. ■