

VALUE SPAS

MY QUEST FOR HIGH LUXE AT HALF OFF TAKES ME TO
ONTARIO'S STE. ANNE'S SPA BY VERA VALUE

RELAXATION IS THE ELUSIVE PRIZE promised by nearly every spa. But have you noticed that no two spas define it in quite the same way? This thought muscles into my head as I linger over chocolate mousse cake—just a sliver!—after an unhurried three-course lunch at Ste. Anne's Spa in Grafton, Ontario, about 75 minutes west of Toronto. Through the window I see guests lounging on teak chaises under a sweeping Canadian maple. A few others congregate by the enormous pool, but no one is swimming laps. Classes, many of them just 30 minutes long, seem geared more toward relaxation than perspiration. So it's no surprise that my fellow lunchers are pretty mellow: Spa robes and easy-fit jeans rule. At Ste. Anne's, I decide, relaxation means expending as little energy as possible.

I've scored a sweet three-night deal for \$489 Canadian a night (C\$520 with tax). It offers a dose of Ste. Anne's exertion-free philosophy—a deluxe room with meals, classes, and, best of all, C\$150 a day in spa services. That trumps the usual C\$550 a day for a single with C\$100 in spa services. In U.S. dollars it's even better, given the exchange rate: US\$484, all in. (Package details and prices change from month to month.) With no tipping or service charges (that is, no math), my brain gets downtime, too. (But how much take-it-easiness can Vera Value, type A sybarite, stand?)

Ste. Anne's is easy on the eyes: a rambling stone manse punctuated by courtyards and gardens and cocooned by soothing surroundings, the Haldimand Hills and Lake Ontario. Although a weathered stone wall encloses the grounds, Ste. Anne's was never a convent but, rather, named for one of Canada's patron saints, Ste. Anne de Beaupré.

I hit the ground strolling, with a guided tour, just for me, that commences moments after I check in. The 1850s main building, where I'm

billeted in the Blue Room, started life as a farmhouse. It's early evening, and as we reach the window-lined octagonal wellness room, a meditation class is about to begin. "Join us," beckons Vanessa Lees, the ponytailed instructor. Is this part of the tour? I haven't even seen my room yet, but why not? I plop onto a mat next to six other women with mini pillows over their eyes. It's a classic guided meditation, led by Vanessa's preternaturally serene voice. I clear my mind—briefly: Thoughts of dinner intrude.

Forty-five minutes later, in a candlelit Jane Austen setting, it begins to unfold leisurely: caramelized-onion soup (exquisite), a veal chop and Parmesan risotto with bok choy and yellow peppers (superb), and a trio of tiny custards in chocolate, mocha, and crème brûlée (recipe, please). There are no calorie counts, but portion control is in full force. At the next table, a be-robed couple sips Cabernet, and by the window, a woman is having a Chardonnay, but, alas, there are no libations on the menu. "You have to bring your own," says the man, raising his glass.

Ste. Anne's lets you feel guilt-free about sleeping in, too. Although breakfast starts at 7:30, the earliest class (morning meditation) isn't until 8:15, and the morning hike, my first stab at activity, is at 9:45. I have plenty of time for multigrain pancakes with blueberries and homemade yogurt with honey (yum) before joining seven other hikers, including a bride-to-be and her bachelorette party. The trail merits a 10 on a nature lover's scale, a 1 on a fitness scale. It loops through meadows, flowerbeds, and a forest straight out of "Hansel and Gretel" and takes me less than half an hour to traverse. I ask if we can go farther the next day, but the answer is no. "Do it twice," suggests the bride.



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Relaxation is the order of the day at Ste. Anne's (top). Above: The Moor Mud Bath.

Yoga follows with a full house, including two novices. Sizing up her audience, Vanessa leads us through hatha basics that can be adapted to any level. Next is a crowd-pleasing guided meditation that edges past the allotted 30 minutes. “If you schedule relaxation into your life, you just might relax once in a while,” she says.

I stick around with two other women to bounce, balance, and do crunches in a fitness-ball toning class, again with Vanessa. My pulse quickens. I’ve broken a sweat! It feels great. But in half an hour we’re done. I consider visiting the well-equipped fitness room in the basement, but something in the air says, “You’re in the country. Smell the flowers. Hang out.” I head for a chaise in the shade. Birds chirp, the breeze is delicious, and...OMG, was I snoring?

With C\$450 to play with, I’ve lined up a facial, massage, mud bath, and, first on my dance card, a eucalyptus wrap (C\$90 for 45 minutes). It consists of a stint in

the women’s steam room, a swaddling in hot eucalyptus-scented towels, and, while the towels do their task, a face and foot massage with Aveda lotion. I can’t imagine a more soothing treatment until I lie on the heated table for my Earth Stone Facial (C\$150 for 75 minutes). Make that full-body facial. After soaking my feet in salts, Nazarene Keith conducts a symphony of creams, lotions, oils, and hot towels to cleanse, tone, and exfoliate my face. While it rests under a balm, she oils my neck and shoulders and rubs them with hot stones. On goes a deep-cleansing mask, and—ahhh!—the hot stones dance over my legs. Then another mask to hydrate. As I hold up a mirror, I remember what was left out: extractions. “That’s right,” says Nazarene. “Ours are meant to be relaxing facials.”

Relaxation at Ste. Anne’s is viral. The next day, I sleep in, waking only when I remember I have a Moor Mud Bath

(C\$90 for 45 minutes, including Vichy shower). The sight of a big bathtub filled with hot black goo (mud mixed with Saskatchewan clay) makes me want to run for the door, but the substance turns out to be both thick and airy. I float like a cake of Ivory soap. Lisa Ferguson cools my forehead with cold towels and massages a hydrating mask onto my face. All is well. I exit the tub reluctantly, shower off, and head for my Pure Aroma Massage (C\$120 for 60 minutes). I choose a fragrant mix of vanilla, tangerine, sandalwood, and cinnamon-clove oils. “You’ll smell like a dessert,” says Ryan Morris, who applies them with a sure hand. I’m beginning to drown in relaxation.

Over lunch—the scallop pizza with a ground-almond crust is a showstopper—a guest (in a robe, yes) visiting with her sister remarks that Ste. Anne’s is calming because it feels like the house of your wealthy, welcoming aunt. She has

a point. With just 28 guest rooms, it’s homey. And everything—spa, 15 rooms, and restaurant—is under one roof. Sitting rooms abound. (My favorite is the farmhouse living room with the pillow-covered Victorian settee.) And no two guest rooms are alike. Mine has a wood-burning fireplace and old-fashioned shutters that bar the early-morning light but no TV. Elizabeth Bennet would have loved it. And it works. After three nights, I’m ready for real-life stress again.

So here’s Vera’s Value Judgment: With superb food, comfortable accommodations, and a first-rate spa, Ste. Anne’s is a great place to rekindle a romance, bond with your best friends, or treat a bad case of burnout. It’s not the place to start a diet or train for the Iron Man. Relaxation is in the air. All you have to do is breathe.

Reservations 888-346-6772

Website www.steannes.com

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