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# Jane and Kate's excellent adventure

by Kate Zimmerman and Jane Mundy for Vancouver Sun: Travel

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"Pack your bags," says Jane in that authoritative way of hers. "Bring a cocktail dress, rubber boots, gardening gloves and a chef's knife. Oh, and a raincoat, of course — it's early summer and we're going to Vancouver Island."

"Wait a second," Kate replies. "Boots? Knives? I thought we were going to gourmet resorts, lolling in pools and taking spa treatments. That's what you said."

As usual, there's a bunch of expletives before Jane explains that spa treatments might be on the agenda but what we are really doing is packing for a foodie road trip. A foodie foray. A foodie foraging foray. Anyway, food will predominate and some of it, we two gourmands might have to find and then cook for ourselves.

"Don't worry if you have to do a little work," Jane says sardonically. "The accommodations are to die for."

All right, already.

Jane volunteers to do some reconnaissance solo by checking out the new Miraloma hotel in Sidney. Miraloma overlooks Tsehum harbour's "no wake zone": not even the sound of a yacht engine disturbs the serenity. Bonus: this elegant resort-style inn is a stone's throw from Dock 503 restaurant, where Chef Simon Manvell prepares spot prawns with sea asparagus followed by silky smooth and locally smoked albacore tuna atop organic spinach leaves. You can count on Manvell to source the freshest possible ingredients and Jane reports that she would come here for the perfectly grilled oysters alone. Then there is Cowichan Bay Farm's exceptional chicken and duck breast (more on that later.)

With promises of king-sized pillows and 200-thread-count pillowcases dancing in her head, Kate tears off to meet Jane. Our first destination together is Sooke Harbour House. When we check into our luxurious rooms, Kate discovers that hers is the size of a ballroom, complete with a stylized arbutus whose branches stretch above the headboard of her king-sized bed. Naturally, she decides to file a facetious complaint with Sooke owner Sinclair Philip. "I have a problem. My room is too small," she tells him, tongue-in-cheek. Without missing a beat, Philip offers to switch her to the "bowling room."

It's time to pull on the Wellingtons for our seaweed foray. Since we have the cocktail outfits but not the rubber boots, we borrow a couple of pairs from the "Seaweed Lady." Diane Bernard hand-cuts live seaweed from rocks in the waters around Whiffen Spit, which is located at the southwest tip of the island. Bernard's Outer Coast Seaweeds is Seaweed Central for area chefs, including Sooke's own Edward Tucson. The inn is known for its devotion to local produce and product. Seaweed, harvested just off Sooke's own coast, looms large, and Bernard conducts regular seaweed tours for interested parties.

Philip comes with us. He has no compunction about eating raw things scraped off wet boulders. So while Bernard drapes us in seaweeds that look less like food than like something Adrienne Clarkson might wear, both she and Philip encourage us to eat from their salty buffet. Soon we, too, are chewing uncooked limpets as blithely as any seabird. Bernard tells us about the numerous health benefits of the seaweeds, as well — she doesn't just sell this stuff for food (pestos are imminent) but turns it into spa products. (Kate samples a seaweed wrap in her room later and finds it heavenly.)

Before dinner, armed with glasses of champagne, we tour the garden with Philip. It's a beautiful spot, but more important than that, it's where many of the ingredients of our marvelous upcoming dinner grew up. From day lilies to begonia stems, the beauties in this plot are employed in sauces and foams and glazes, giving Chef\_Tucson's wildly inventive cuisine its distinctive edge. Sooke's garden is so famous that its gardeners offer regular tours and talks.

The tasting menu spreads over four hours, each course perfectly paired with B.C. wines, several from the island. Among the highlights are smoked albacore tuna with lemongrass mousse and ginger scallion sauce with Nootka rose petal oil and beet cracker, and *alaria* seaweed (harvested by Bernard) with crusted crispy squid nestled amongst goosenecked barnacles scented with grand fir and mint chili glaze and Cobble Hill asparagus.

Next day we head to Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa. "Who knows what sort of musty shed it might turn out to be. Jane made the arrangements," the now-spoiled Kate thinks sulkily, while keeping up a brisk commentary on Jane's driving.

Dumpy outbuilding? Not. Brentwood Bay is instead a sleek lodge that nestles into the forested shoreline of Mill Bay like a shy woodland creature and is one of only five Canadian entries in the 2005 edition of *Small Luxury Hotels of the World*. The main building, where its restaurants and lobby co-exist, are all honeyed wood post-and-beam and soaring floor-to-ceiling windows. The lodge looks like something Frank Lloyd Wright might have cheerfully doodled while drinking beer

in the sunshine. We scarf down delicious calamari in its Marine Pub before teetering down the hill for a foraging cruise. We're going to learn something if it kills us.

The foraging cruise is usually an afternoon's glide in a glass-domed boat piloted by Matt Smiley of Eco Cruising B.C. that takes passengers out among the buoys set out by local hunters of prawn and crab. Our tour is information-packed but brief because one of the newer Brentwood Bay Lodge options is having a private cooking show in the Arbutus Grille & Wine Bar for two or more by chef Alain Leger, accompanied by wine pairings. Our mission: check it out. Our own chef's knives never see the light of day as Leger does all the work; the *mise* is already *en place* when we get there. But we have the option of a little light oyster shucking and plenty of heavy oyster slurping.

Dinner in the Arbutus Grille is another consummate West Coast experience — we tuck into an immense seafood platter loaded with crab, spot prawns, clams, oysters, scallop sevice, and salmon three ways, accompanied by a second platter brimming with accoutrements.

To bed, and then to La Pommeraie, an airy new bistro set in the orchard at Merridale Cidery, near Cobble Hill. (This is easily done, as the Mill Bay ferry is next door to the lodge.) Here the food is wonderfully fresh and simple: an asparagus frittata and salad followed by rhubarb crumble (as if we need dessert). We wash lunch down with an assortment of Merridale's award-winning potables, including its Scrumpy cider.

After La Pommeraie, we veer south to the top of the Malahat and the Aerie Resort, which is not West Coast in the least but rather a blush-toned pseudo-Tuscan villa. The Aerie is one of 13 Relais & Chateaux properties in this country, and may feel homey to the sort of folk who choose their hotels on the basis of R & C's stamp of approval. We are housed in Villa Cielo (above the main buildings), which sweeps us upstairs on a grand staircase better-suited to white-gowned debutantes than to those of us with crushed apples stuck to the bottom of our Texas. Villa Cielo's view, overlooking Finlayson Arm (and looking past a replica of Michelangelo's David), is magnificent.

"We're looking down on hawks," Jane marvels.

But our gluttonous daily regimen allows no breaks for prolonged birdwatching. Down the stairs we thump to the villa's kitchen, where Chef Christophe Letard is waiting to instruct us. Guests at his cooking classes can participate as much or as little as they like; we elect to go minimal by tweezing a few bones out of the arctic char and then we resume our well-warmed spots on the kitchen island's stools. Letard proceeds to concoct course after course on the order of partridge,

pheasant, foie gras and chestnut sausage with dandelion sunflower seed pesto.

He is unpacking a hefty rack of venison to which he is about to do God knows what magic when Jane stops him.

"I couldn't eat another bite," she sighs.

It's time to let Letard get on with the slightly more important task of preparing dinner for the dining room's guests. A few hours later we are among them, learning about the hotel's impressive wine collection from general manager James Kendal while tucking into Letard's aromatic lemongrass and lobster broth with seaweed, sea urchin and oyster and a breathtaking pineapple and vanilla goat cheese crumble.

Is this top-able? Our bloated gullets will not rest on their laurels. The next morning we spend a few hours checking out local producers with Kathy McAree of Travel with Taste Tours, who specializes in introducing visitors to the gustatorial wonders of the Cowichan Valley — from Hilary's Cheese to wines from Cherry Point Vineyards (the second aboriginal-owned winery in North America) to Cowichan Bay Farms' pasture-raised chickens and ducks. The latter, we buy frozen from an unmanned shed, leaving our money in a cashbox and writing our own receipts. Then, we ramble north to Cobble Hill and Fairburn Farm.

Proprietor Mara Jernigan is a bit of a celebrity, one of the founding members of the island's Slow Food Movement and a well-known cooking class instructor with special expertise in Italian cuisine. After establishing and running nearby Engeler Farm, she's moved to Fairburn to operate its rambling farmhouse as a B & B, cooking school and multi-course Sunday summer lunch mecca (book well ahead).

The lunch she serves us is, in a word, perfect — a bright yellow frittata from area chicken eggs, studded with local sheep's cheese and minced homegrown herbs, alongside a platter of salad made from Vancouver Island greens, B.C. hothouse tomatoes (this being spring), white and green asparagus from "Chuck's" (a neighbourhood farmstand) and seared pasture-raised duck from "Lyle's" (Cowichan Bay Farm).

Afterward we follow her down the road to Blue Grouse winery, where tastings of owner Hans Kiltz's Siegerrebe force us to buy almost a case of his product. Later that night, over halibut with a sauce made of pepper *brunoise* and *verjus* (leftover grapes from nearby winemaking), Jernigan continues to spread the word about how we should all eat what springs from the earth in our own part of the world.

Some of her message even sinks in. The next morning, as we heave ourselves onto the Nanaimo-Horseshoe Bay ferry, our guts sloshing with seaweed and daylilies, apple Scrumpy and gooseneck clams, Belle Ann cheese and Blue Grouse wine, "Lyle's" duck and "Chuck's"

asparagus, we realize that true fabulousness is found not in stylish hotel rooms and luxury toiletries — not that we are the least bit ungrateful for those — but in the rich bounty of this region. We haven't unsheathed our chef's knives on this trip, and we haven't touched gardening glove to dirt. But others have, and our cooler is full of Vancouver Island products, from sausages to vinegars, to explore when we get home.

"Let's eat local," we say, digging into ferry burgers while chugging toward the mainland. "Or as close to it as we can. Pass the chipotle mayonnaise."

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