

# Soaring into Sonora Resort's sweeping luxury

BY MICHELLE HOPKINS, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE    SEPTEMBER 4, 2009



Sonora Resort north of Campbell River.

**Photograph by:** Handout, Darren Bernaerdt

VANCOUVER - We were flying over Desolation Sound heading to Sonora Island; the rugged unspoiled beauty of the fjords and inlets that dotted our crossing stunned us. Even though it started to rain, it was absolutely breathtaking as we descended into Sonora Resort, just north of Campbell River within the mouth of Bute Inlet.

On the final approach, the Turbo Beaver floatplane skimmed across the fast, swirling current to touch down and land at the Sonora Resort dock — in the famed Inside Passage of B.C.'s coast. The sheer power of the current was awe-inspiring to watch. I couldn't believe salt water could travel so swiftly — in this inlet, it runs like a fast-flowing river.

A friendly dock crew immediately greeted us and the Sonora experience began. We headed into the resort where appetizers and drinks awaited. The staff here think of everything, even our fishing licences were ready for our signatures.

Dennis and I headed to our suite to drop off our bags and we smiled knowingly at each other. The elegance of the room was only matched by the dazzling views offered from our large window. In the swirling tidal waters below, seals and sea lions played in the current, while the eagles soared above the nearby shores of Stuart Island. As we took in the natural beauty of the outdoors, we watched as these birds of prey swarmed like flies to feast on the abundant small fish forced to the surface by the tidal rip. Sonora is a magnificent haven for nature lovers.

As tempting as it was to stay in our suite, we ventured out to take a tour of the grounds. Dennis, a self-described fishing fanatic, had to find the trout pond he'd heard about. It is stocked with rainbow trout and he cast his first fly with much fanfare. Catch and release was the order of the day, though.

Then it was time to head to the dining room for an early dinner. Since it's an all-inclusive resort, the alcohol is included, but there are a number of gorgeous wines to choose from, should you want to imbibe in a more expensive fashion. There's nothing better than sipping a glass of Okanagan's Mission Hill Estate cabernet sauvignon (Sonora's house wine) while overlooking some of the greatest views on the West Coast.

We could choose from the five-course gourmet menu executive chef Matthew Stowe had put together. That evening, we selected from such delicacies as octopus carpaccio or chilled Chilliwack sweet corn veloute (a mouthwatering mix of house smoked oysters, local spot prawns, basil pistou and leek confit).

For our entrees there was Nova Scotia lobster, seared Sooke trout or potato-wrapped Thiessen Farms squab chicken roulade. Dessert was a refreshing chilled summer berry consommé.

At only 27, Stowe, who trained at the world-renowned Culinary Institute of America in New York City, is a decorated chef with a newly minted cookbook, *The Tastes of Sonora Resort*.

The Vancouver-raised Stowe, passionate about sourcing out the freshest ingredients as often as possible, serves local seafood on the daily a la carte menu. Suffice to say, we ate like royalty at Sonora. In fact, we had a chance to pick up some of his secrets during a three-hour, interactive cooking class. We came home armed with five new, mouthwatering recipes.

In addition to the culinary delights, the resort is a destination for the fishing warrior. Fishing was a highlight for Dennis, who was privileged enough to go out twice. Although we weren't fortunate enough to catch a salmon (another guest proudly showed off his 20-pounder), our fishing guide, Henry, was able to find a pod of more than 100 white-sided dolphins. He slowed the boat long enough to entice the playful dolphins to frolic in our wake. One dolphin made a full leap out of the water and Dennis captured it on film — what a rare privilege to witness these intelligent mammals at play.

That night, we attempted to stay awake to enjoy a movie in the 12-seat, state-of-the-art theatre. Maybe it was the snug chairs or the fact that we had had a full day, but neither of us could keep our eyes open.

The next day dawned bright and sunny. After another fabulous meal, served by staff who are literally at your beck and call — they were friendly and so helpful — we put on our sunscreen and walking shoes and headed out for a hike. (Before we left, I asked for a copy of *The Vancouver Sun* and the manager of the resort made sure it was on the next plane in).

After a two-hour hike on this otherwise undeveloped and pristine island, the grotto-style mineral pool beckoned us. Perched on the side of a rock, it offered stunning views of the Yuculta Rapids and surrounding mountains. We sat and allowed the minerals to soothe and rejuvenate our tired muscles.

On our final day, we took part in an eco-tour in a high-speed RIB (rigid inflatable boat) through Desolation Sound and the Arran rapids. With us were a couple from Italy and their two children, as well as two other couples. With cameras ready, we were all eager to see a black bear. In broken English, the Italian woman told us she had spotted a small one on the side of the hill. The bear sat long enough for a lucky few to snap pictures before he retreated into the woods. As if that wasn't exciting enough, we watched as a few dozen eagles, perched on treetops, took flight and soared above us.

Our guide Aaron Nagler — known by the resort staff as "the voice" because he speaks beautifully and eloquently — was incredibly knowledgeable. Throughout the guided tour, he explained the eco-system and the abundance of wildlife we were feasting our eyes on. As we went through Orford Bay, Nagler told us that the Homalco First Nations people would return there every summer to fish the abundance of chum, pink and coho salmon that ran through the area.

No trip to a resort is complete unless you have a spa treatment. Dennis and I were pampered at the deluxe Island Currents Spa at Sonora with a couples' tension-relieving massage. Okay, you are probably asking yourself, how could they possibly have needed one of those? Perhaps not, but it was blissful nonetheless.

There is so much to do here, or if you prefer, you can simply relax — and we did in the charming, cozy solarium. Although we could have ordered a small repast, we enjoy a glass of wine while reading our novels in oh-so-comfy chairs.

As we boarded the floatplane heading for home, I entertained the fantasy that surely dances in the minds of every visitor who has ever visited this first-class resort — what would it be like to spend a week or more lingering in this luxurious oasis amid a wilderness setting? We promised ourselves that one day we will try to return.

## Facts:

Earlier this year, Sonora Resort received a Relais & Chateaux designation (the French-based collection of nearly 500 of the most exclusive properties and restaurants worldwide).

Accommodation includes 12 themed lodges with 88 luxurious rooms and suites.

It is an all-inclusive resort, which includes: accommodations, amenities, meals, alcohol beverages and in-room snacks and bar.

For more information, visit [www.sonoraresort.com](http://www.sonoraresort.com) or call toll free at 1-888-576-6672.