

MIKE BENNETT, TRAVEL EDITOR
MBENNETT@THESPEC.COM
905-526-3279

TRAVEL

GET IN THE SWIM

Vancouver Aquarium unveils \$45-million expansion

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The Vancouver Aquarium has unveiled its expanded facilities, showing off a new entrance, 360-degree digital screens and a 4.3-metre glowing blue globe with the North Pole at the bottom to enable visitors to see Canada more easily and highlight the Canadian Arctic.

The \$45-million, 5,100-square-metre expansion is the most significant addition to the aquarium in its 58-year history. New B.C. exhibits include aquatic life from the Gulf Islands and a school of coho salmon. There are also new habitats featuring animals from around the world.
The Canadian Press



The Ridge Runner, Ontario's first mountain coaster, takes visitors on an exhilarating ride at Blue Mountain.



COURTESY SCANDINAVE SPA



The Scandinave Spa offers everything including a large Finnish sauna, Norwegian eucalyptus steam room, thermal and Nordic waterfalls, hot baths, cold plunges, indoor solariums and outdoor fireplaces.

PHOTOS: SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Gear up on the hills, unwind at the spa

Collingwood offers adrenalin-inducing pursuits and a rustic outdoor spa

ANNE BOKMA

My friend Melanie and I have always shared a sense of mischief. Once, in our 20s, we climbed the United Empire Loyalists statue in front of the courthouse in downtown Hamilton after a night on the town, whipped off our shirts and waved them at the honking cars passing by. What can I say? We were young and carefree. Beer may have been involved.

More than 20 years later, with five teenage kids between us, we still like to get up to a bit of adventure now and then. That's why we are hooked up to the Wind Rider zip line at the Blue Mountain resort in Collingwood. Delicately bouncing up and down on our tippy toes and strapped in a harness that feels like an adult Jolly Jumper, Melanie and I perch on the ledge of the platform and prepare to hurl through the air at 50 km/h. Once, we lost our shirts together. Now I wonder if we've lost our heads.

Collingwood is known as the ski capital of southern Ontario, but it's got plenty going on to entice summer visitors — especially at Blue Mountain, which has invested \$6 million over the past five years creating adrenalin-inducing experiences such as the zip line, the Ridge Runner (Ontario's first mountain coaster) and the Timber Challenge high ropes course, an aerial adventure with suspension bridges, ladders, and cargo nets 18 metres above the forest bed.

Later this summer it will introduce a massive free fall airbag onto which you can jump and plummet from a towering platform — a grown up bouncy castle for thrill-seekers. If you're after something more sedate, you can take a Segway tour along the peak of the mountain brow. Our guide, Peter Brisley, a 66-year-old retired teacher from Burlington, gives us a 15-minute lesson on how to manoeuvre the two-wheeled transportation device before taking us on an off-road trek at a clip of about 20 km/h, stopping periodically to marvel at the stunning views of the Georgian Bay area, where persistent patches of snow still cling to the hills in mid-May.

An open-air gondola takes us back down to the base of the mountain where we hop on a cart on the Ridge Runner coaster, an elevated track that's con-

structed several metres off the ground. The ride is deceptively lulling as we are automatically tugged along uphill, but the 10-minute one-kilometre journey down has us whipping through corkscrew turns and zigzagging through the trees. Drivers can control their own speed by using a manual brake, but we go full throttle at 40 km/h, hooting in delight as we fly down the mountain.

Dazed from the coaster ride, we head over to the zip line station where a staffer straps us into our harnesses and moves us along briskly to the edge of the platform. Before we know it, he's counting one-two-three and we push off. (When it comes to zip lining, she who hesitates is lost. If you chicken out at the last minute, you will be gently lowered to the ground by a rope for all to see and then have to skulk down the hill since there's no other way to get to home base. This is a humiliation neither Melanie nor I have any intention of enduring.)

We flap through the air like socks on a clothesline and squeal like schoolgirls. It's over too quickly to have time to embrace our fear and we land, laughing hard, after being yanked to an abrupt stop. We smack hands in a high five, proud of this mid-life achievement. More importantly, we are pleased we haven't peed our pants.

We reward ourselves with an exqui-

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site five-course prix fixe meal prepared by award-winning chef Justin Miller at Cabin Bistro in downtown Collingwood and, after spending the night on-site at Blue Mountain in a spacious two-bedroom suite at the Westin Trillium House, we are ready for something a little more relaxing.

So we make the five-minute drive to Scandinave Spa, a unique outdoor facility situated on 10 hectares of forest and featuring a large Finnish sauna, Norwegian eucalyptus steam room, thermal and Nordic waterfalls, hot baths, cold plunges, indoor solariums and outdoor fireplaces.

Our hollering on the hills the previous day gave our vocal chords a workout so perhaps it's fitting that there are signs everywhere on the property urging us to be quiet (for example, We Honour Silence, Respect the Tranquility) in order to fully soak in this retreat experience.

A sign on the steam room door is more blunt, ordering Absolute Silence. As we once told our kids when they were little, it's time to use our "inside" voices — not an easy feat for Melanie, who has the loudest and most infectious laugh of any of my friends, or for me, since I'm known as a big talker. But when we see a trio of women gently being chided by an attendant (whom we come to label "the enforcer") to shush, we resolve to zip our lips and mutely follow the spa's instructions to cycle through the hot treatment in the bath, sauna or steam room to open our pores and slough off toxins, then plunge in a frigid pool to jump start our circulation and finally relax in a hammock or lounge until our equilibrium is restored.

We emerge from the experience feeling as pink and purified as newborns. The spa attracts 100,000 visitors annually and one-third of them also opt for a massage in one of the 13 treatment rooms staffed by 65 massage therapists.

We skip the massage in favour of a simple lunch in the spectacular setting of the on-site Spa Bistro, a Wi-Fi- and booze-free zone located high up in the trees with large windows overlooking lush greenery. We melt into our chairs and chow down quietly. We can finally talk if we want to, but like everyone else in the restaurant, we feel compelled to extend the feeling of calm and our voices don't rise above a whisper.

Sometimes silence really is golden.

Anne Bokma is a travel writer based in Hamilton.