

Focused on Nature

GUESTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD VISIT SONORA RESORT TO OBSERVE NATURE, TO FISH, TO RELAX AND MAYBE, TO GET SOME WORK DONE

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NOTHING FOCUSES THE MIND like an encounter with a grizzly bear. A really big grizzly bear.

I'm standing on the gravelly banks of the Orford River, a spectacularly remote stretch of wilderness 200 kilometres northwest of Vancouver, when the grizzly lumbers into view some 30 metres downriver. He is huge, perhaps 300 kilograms, and he is hungry.

Fortunately, the objects of his culinary desire are the crimson and silver salmon that hover and dart in the river's shallow channels. As I watch, the bear wades into the river, swipes at the frothy water, and brings a thrashing salmon to the surface. Although the grizzly is totally focused on devouring his catch, and I am totally focused on watching him, a little question creeps into my mind: What if the bulky red jacket I am wearing makes me look like a fat, tasty salmon? >





Accommodation at Sonora is predictably luxurious. The uniquely themed lodges offer spacious rooms, cosy goosedown duvets and spectacular sea views.

Sonora sits on a gentle slope above a small bay, its cluster of buildings – west coast-styled lodges, a conference centre, a spa with fitness centre, a conservatory and more – surrounded by verdant forests on three sides and fast-moving water on the fourth. This pristine wilderness is teeming with wildlife including eagles, sea lions, seals, minke and orca whales, Pacific white-

sided dolphins and porpoises. Black bears share Sonora's island but grizzly bears are a one-hour journey away via high-speed boat (this is a very good thing).

I arrive at the resort on a sunny September afternoon. As I step out of my floatplane and onto the dock, a gaggle of guests climb out of the resort's eco-tour boat. They chatter happily about what they saw on their wildlife-viewing excursion: porpoises playing in the boat's wake, Steller's sea lions lolling on Jimmy Judd Island ("we could smell them before we could see them," says one woman who holds her nose for effect) and an eagle that swoops to the water and grabs a salmon in its talons. "I felt like I was in my own Wild Kingdom episode," says a very happy man from Toronto.

I feel like I'm in an edition of Architectural Digest as I explore the resort. Guest accommodations are clustered in intimate lodges that incorporate fir post-and-beam timbers, stone fireplaces and local artisan-designed furniture in inviting common areas. Guest rooms, 87 in total, feature natural wood and botanical tones, luxurious linens, a fully stocked bar fridge (remember, the resort is all-inclusive), fireplace and expansive picture windows overlooking the swirling Yuculta Rapids.

For VIPs and small groups wanting unsurpassed privacy and luxury, the resort offers two private retreats: the Eagle Rock Lodge and brand-new Sea Lion villa. Each waterfront outpost offers guests a private kitchen with chef, dining room, living room with a stone fireplace and vaulted ceilings, and four bedrooms with individual hot tubs.

The Sea Lion takes rustic elegance to a whole new level. Opened in May 2008, the villa sits on its own peninsula and houses a one-of-a-kind art collection commissioned by the resort. The work of eleven West Coast artists, including Philip Gray, a young Tsimshian/Cree artist whose 18 totem poles grace the interior and exterior of the villa, add an air of cultured sophistication to the natural surroundings.

While my guest room in Gillard Lodge is humble compared to these soaring standards, it is still one of the most inviting rooms I've ever had the good fortune to inhabit. I'm happiest curling up in a rust-colored easy chair, gazing out of the picture windows to the swirling tidal waters. I watch gulls float in the currents, turning this way and that in a delightfully random pattern that reminds me of Disney's mad teacup ride. Seals pop up their heads near the docks where staff are cleaning the day's salmon catch. Eagles fly past, pumping their powerful wings once, twice, three times before disappearing from view. I lose track of time.

Until I'm hungry. Then I know it's time to wander over to the Tyece Lodge to enjoy fresh oysters and sizzling skewers of prawns at the outdoor grill or fancier fare such as butter-poached lobster and pistachio-encrusted Salt Spring Island rack of lamb in the dining room. The resort's wine list keeps pace with the cuisine, offering an impressive selection of fine wines from B.C. and beyond.

Guests adventuring away from the resort for the day are invited to fill lunch bags with fresh turkey wraps, roast beef subs, cookies and other tasty options. Or the resort may host an alfresco lunch of barbecued salmon and duck on a beach close to the most popular fishing holes. When I comment to one of the serving staff about the abundance of fine food she whispers conspiratorially, "We get a bonus for every pound we fatten you up."

Fortunately, there are ways to work it off. The resort has a Spa & Wellness Centre with fitness studio, a covered tennis court,

Meeting and incentive travel guests are surely Sonora's most vocal cheerleaders. And little wonder. The resort's facilities include the Innes Conference Centre with five meeting rooms kitted-out with the latest audio-visual and high tech tools and a traditional Salish longhouse for inspiring gatherings. These spaces, surrounded as they are by luxurious accommodations and spectacular scenery, allow groups to focus, to strategize, to step out of the box in search of solutions to their business challenges.

But never mind stepping out of the box. On the grizzly watching excursion, I am stepping out of my comfort zone. I was fairly relaxed earlier in the tour when observing grizzlies from the safety of elevated wooden viewing towers encased in thick chain-link and secured with a heavy-duty gate (gates that, Barnes assured me, "only a truly motivated bear could get in"). Now, out on the gravelly riverbank, I am anxious.



hiking trails and the opportunity to go kayaking. Heck, there's even virtual golf. I play a round on the Mauna Kea course just so I can say I golfed in Hawaii on the weekend. (Golf enthusiasts wanting the real thing can travel to Storey Creek, a championship course that's won Golf Digest's Best Places to Play Award for three years in a row.)

The Spa & Wellness Centre offers an array of health and soul-enhancing treatments. I surrender myself to the hydrotherapy tub, an ultimate stress reliever with 252 jets and colour light panels that are said to soothe the eyes (and that, truth be told, remind me of the disco lights in Saturday Night Fever). I follow this with a massage by the talented therapist Marina. Afterward I'm invited to enjoy the hot and cold outdoor mineral pools, but opt instead to take my supremely relaxed self back to my room and watch the gulls swirl.

Guests from around the world come to Sonora to observe nature, to fish, to relax and eat and laugh and maybe, just maybe, to get some work done. Case in point: The Carolina Pepsi Bottlers from Raleigh, North Carolina have been making an annual pilgrimage to Sonora for business and social purposes since 2001. So how much does this group love Sonora? "The scenery, the fishing, the expert guides, the resort staff, and of course, those large salmon make for an unforgettable experience," writes Tom Barnes, the Bottlers' Vice President of Marketing. "My group talks about it all year, until the next trip begins."



Above (left): Guests can enjoy the hot and cold outdoor mineral pools.

Above: Gourmet meals feature local produce.

Left: A mountain glacier is an idyllic spot for a picnic.

The Sea Lion is Sonora Resort's newest luxury lodge. Situated a short distance from the main resort, Sea Lion offers extra privacy along with the great views.

