

Collingwood IN WINTER

Gorgeous retreats, challenging weather

BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT
PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

GEORGIAN BAY IS GORGEOUS in summer, with gentle waves rolling, sun shining brightly, cool breezes wafting down from the Niagara Escarpment. But in winter? When the waves freeze at the shore? When the snow is deep and thick? When it's cold?

Last December Mike and I spent a few days exploring some of the spots in the Collingwood area. The places that are a dream of a summer vacation are very different in winter, not worse, just a different experience. ▶

Beautiful, tranquil Scandinave Spa is dramatic in winter. Important tip: of the two towels you are given, keep one dry in your locker for after your final shower.



Pretty River Valley Country Inn

We checked into Pretty River Valley Country Inn, a complex of buildings on an organic farm right in the Niagara Escarpment's Blue Mountains, south of Collingwood. Linda Proudfoot, who with husband Paul Bilewicz owns, lives at, and manages the inn, showed us to our suite, consisting of a lovely sitting room with wood-burning fireplace, a two-person Jacuzzi in a corner, separate bedroom and bathroom.

Mylar and Loreta's

For dinner we went to Mylar and Loreta's Restaurant in the hamlet of Singhampton.

There is history to the building, which first, in the mid 1800s, was a hotel. For almost 50 years it was a general store, and since 1983 it has been run as a restaurant by the current owners.

I had a sweet potato/chili vegetarian soup while Mike had a Greek salad. Mike's main course was the roasted pork house specialty. I had a perfectly cooked hot vegetable plate.

"Our vegetables from the grill have been popular a long time," said Spencer Ridding, son of owner Sandy Hamilton. "Vegetarians love it."

For dessert we had warmed strawberry/rhubarb crisp with

vanilla ice cream, delicious on a cold winter's night.

Back at the inn, I tried the Jacuzzi bath, which soothed muscles I didn't know were sore, that had been strained by clearing downed branches on my property at home.

A Full Day

Before breakfast the next morning, Mike went out to take photographs. Breakfast at the inn was an organic buffet of tea biscuits, bread, fresh fruit, yogurt, juice, coffee. We had freshly made omelettes of sun-dried tomato pesto, asiago cheese and asparagus and Mike added their home-raised sausage.

Well fuelled, we repeated Mike's earlier walk so he could show me his discoveries. We took an old farm laneway to the top of the Niagara Escarpment where, through the trees, there are some good views of the Pretty River Valley. We could hear the sound of the river from the top. Following a different trail back down, we came upon an intriguing metal graveyard. Rusted farm implements lie scattered and abandoned, some almost hidden by fallen leaves, another with a tree growing through it. They inspire artists to sketch and draw them. There is something mournful about the way they are gradually returning to the earth.

▼ The lobby entrance to Pretty River Valley Country Inn. The suite we stayed in is at ground level in the red building.



Breakfast was freshly made omelettes of sun-dried tomato pesto, asiago cheese, asparagus, and home-raised sausage.

► (Top Right) The sitting room with wood-burning fireplace, with bedroom beyond.

► (Bottom Right) The corner Jacuzzi bath is opposite the sitting-room fireplace.





◀ On a cold winter's evening, a woodstove adds heat and cheer to Mylar and Loreta's Restaurant.

▼ From the top of the Niagara Escarpment at Pretty River Valley Country Inn, there's a great view of the valley between the leafless trees. In summer these views will be much more difficult to see.



Continuing down to the inn, we passed paddocks for the Icelandic horses. Shaggy and short, they are cute, friendly and curious. Close to the inn is the paddock for the three reindeer. Their antlers are impressively huge, and grow new each year. A corner of the dining room is stacked high with a pile of dropped antlers from previous years.

Back at our suite, we discovered a stash of free hot chocolate, tea and homemade cookies in the hall. We took complete advantage of these treats during our stay.

Scandinave Spa

That afternoon was our appointment at Scandinave

Spa, a retreat looking onto the Niagara Escarpment. A series of buildings and beautiful outdoor spaces has been designed for the Scandinavian baths experience; for which you wear a bathing suit and move between the Finnish sauna, Norwegian steam bath, cold water plunges and hot water pools, as well as solariums and an outdoor fireplace.

We were advised to follow the sequence of warming the body, then taking a cold plunge or at least a cold shower to close the pores and raise the heart rate, followed by a rest to restore the body to a normal state, and to do this sequence a few times.



▲ The reindeer Gandolph, Elfen and their baby are kept in a paddock beside the Inn's buildings.

◀ One of the old implements in the metal graveyard.

▼ At the Spa, a wood fire adds warmth and scent.





◀ The Icelandic horse after inspecting Gloria, who is bundled against the cold.

▼ Steam rises from hot baths surrounded by snow at Scandinave Spa, which is open through the winter for bracing experiences.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY SCANDINAVE SPA.



The steam room smelled delightfully of eucalyptus and caused sweating almost at once. After a few minutes it was time to leave. I tried the cold plunge but was not able to get in past my thighs. I believe Mike dipped under once, but he also found it extremely cold. The temperature outside was minus five degrees Celsius and there was a wind.

We enjoyed the various hot baths and rooms, but found it cooling enough simply moving around outside in our wet bathing suits, with wet towels. We tried the Forest Hot

Bath after dark, with lights on around the pool. Steam rose from the water and the place seemed more intimate with darkness all around.

After a final shower in the change rooms, we met in the reception lounge for a light supper from the bistro area. Then we returned to the inn, done for the day.

On the third and last day of our stay, we asked to photograph the reindeer, which involved a few people helping to catch the one called Elfen. They are used to pull Santa's sleigh in a Collingwood



▲ Linda Proudfoot and Paul Bilewicz, owners of Pretty River Valley Country Inn, with Elfen, one of their reindeer.



◀ Mike at one end of Scenic Caves' suspension bridge, with snow clouds blocking the views. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT.

▼ On a clear winter's day, you can see for miles and miles, including Georgian Bay, from the suspension bridge at Scenic Caves. PHOTO PROVIDED.



Walking the bridge seemed like being in the clouds.

Christmas parade each year, but don't seem to be handled much otherwise. After some closeups, Paul gave us a tour of the Croft Rooms in a separate building. These are luxurious suites that can sleep four or can be rented together for groups of 10. There is an exercise room on the main floor and a helipad nearby, convenient for year-round air tours of southern Georgian Bay.



Scenic Caves

In the afternoon we went to Scenic Caves to walk the suspension bridge, at 420 ft long, said to be Ontario's longest. With little snow on the ground, we didn't need snowshoes to walk the trail to the bridge. We went down part of the Escarpment, along a gentle waterfall and among dark, bare trees. Snow was falling gently.

We know that the view from the bridge is spectacular, extending for 10,000 sq km and including Georgian Bay, Wasaga Beach, and as far as Penetanguishene. This day, the snowfall hid our view. Walking the bridge seemed like being in the clouds.

The snow turned into a serious storm by the time we got back to the inn. We thought we should head for home before it got dark, but despite Paul having sanded the driveway and snowblowing with a big tractor, we couldn't get the car up the hill to the buildings. We left the car at the road, walked up the drive and carried our overnight bags back down. Unfortunately, ice was forming and we both fell hard. We made it to the car and safely home, but with new respect for the Collingwood winter.

When we let Linda know what had happened, she replied "Sorry to hear about the falls. Hope you noticed the large sign on the pole at the bottom of the Inn, indicating alternative parking. We are happy to shuttle guests and their belongings to their cars. As you have found out it can be a challenge with the weather." **NEV**