

# Boarding the Stress Express

by Bryen Dunn

Like many people, I often forget to take time for myself, to reflect, recharge and rejuvenate. We all tend to get busy in our daily routines, many of which cause undue stress on our bodies, both mentally and physically. I've started forcing myself to drink more water, eat lighter and healthier, sit up straight when working at the computer, and making sure I fit in some time for a bit of exercise. All quite simple and easy to implement in one's own space.

However, there's much more to health and nutrition that can only be achieved with some focused planning and determination. While some hit the treadmill and sauna at the local gym, others seek out refuge through a holistic practitioner, naturopath, reflexologist and therapeutic massages. Understanding the mechanisms of your body and nourishing both inside and out are essential to leading a healthy lifestyle.

One way to achieve these goals is to book some time away from your regular regime and put yourself in pamper mode. I jumped at the opportunity to do a weekend getaway at Ste. Anne's Family of Spas, just over an hour east of Toronto. The original Ste. Anne's is located on over 500 acres of rolling hills near Grafton, Ontario in Northumberland County. A second smaller boutique style property, Dorset Manor Spa, is in the quaint town of Port Hope, Ontario, and offers much of the same facilities and services.

As a novice to the spa experience, there were a few things that attracted me to Ste. Anne's. The proximity to the city makes it an easy escape, yet the remoteness of the location gives the feeling of having ventured out farther beyond. As well, the treatments and services offered were beyond my expectations, with everything from esthetics and massages, to wellness and hydrotherapy. The clincher for me, though, was the option to book their Stress Express package, the only destination spa in Canada that offers both train and shuttle service, or door-to-door limo transportation.

Arriving at the Cobourg train station, a smiling staff member was there to greet myself and my partner on the platform, before whisking us off to Ste. Anne's 20 minutes away. My stress was already starting to dissipate, when our driver asked if we had picked up some wine already. Having done my research in advance, I was packing a bottle of red. However, for those that may not have known, the one-stop shop in Grafton is a grocery, LCBO, and Beer Store all wrapped into one convenient location. It's highly recommended to make this stop, as although the properties are not licensed they do allow guests to bring their own beverages, and it will truly add to your evening dining experience.

From here, our driver offered the bumpier scenic route,

or the more direct main roadway to the property. I decided to put the limo to a test and chose the gravel road that provided panoramic views of the hilltop manor as we approached. After a brief orientation of the property, we checked in and were allowed access to the day spa facilities until our room was ready. This included the outdoor grotto area with hot tub and cold plunge area, steam rooms, indoor and outdoor (seasonal) pools, wellness facility with access to select wellness classes, and three on-property walking trails.

As the sun was beginning to peak through the overhead clouds, I took the opportunity to check out some of the outdoor trails, one of which lead to the horse stables. They even offer an evening guided stable visit where guests can help rally up the stallions in preparation for the nighttime siesta. It was now time for lunch, which as with all meals during your stay, is included in the package price. The dining room windows faced south toward Lake Ontario, overlooking the outdoor terrace and swimming pool. Once seated, I noticed a significant number of other guests who were dining in their robes, which by the way, is highly encouraged.

The menu is prepared by onsite Certified Chef de Cuisine, Christopher Ennew, who has been with the property for nearly 10 years. Ennew leads a team of chefs who create culinary well-balanced masterpieces using only the freshest ingredients available. The menu options include vegetarian and gluten free, as well as a selection of organic meats, healthy pasta dishes and freshly made breads. Chef Christopher most definitely considers the healing powers of food for the body and soul, complementing the overall onsite spa experience. Highly recommended are the daily soups prepared with locally grown herbs, the Panini sandwiches, or any of the signature salad dishes.





Rooms are either located in the main building or offsite in one of the spa cottages, which can accommodate up to six individuals, making it perfect for friends and family gatherings. We were given the "Blue Room," which came with a Jacuzzi tub, working fireplace, and a four poster antique bed. There's no telephone or television in any of the onsite rooms, again encouraging guests to unplug and connect with themselves rather than others. I was really starting to feel this was "me" time. After soaking in the hot tub and spending time in the eucalyptus steam room, it was time for our Afternoon Tea!

The assortment of teas offered is beyond belief. I'm not much of a tea toddler, but the aromatic scents of these freshly perked creations were irresistible. The Sweet Green and Coconut Breeze concoctions were simply delicious and went down smoothly with our assortment of cheeses, fruits, and baked sweets. I was feeling pampered in paradise and each and every staff member I encountered must be given some recognition for being part of this. Although I was a guest there, it did feel like we were all one big happy family as well.

Dinner was just as delectable, with a variety of heartier selections to satisfy the palette. The Cajun chicken pasta was mouth watering with just enough spice, which was complemented beautifully with our bottle of Shiraz. Desserts ranged from the healthy to the decadent. Overall the onsite dining is as much of the spa experience as the treatments themselves, which we'd be experiencing the next morning. After a quick match of scrabble in the games room, it was off to la-la land sufficiently satisfied.

Most people chose between one of the two properties for the duration of their stay, however I was curious to see what the Dorset Manor property looked like. So after a breakfast of assorted cereals and pastries and a scrumptious made-to-order Eggs Florentine, we bid our adieux and caught our ride over to Port Hope. Pulling into the circular drive we arrived in front of the pillared Victorian mansion,

perched high atop a hill overlooking Lake Ontario. The grand entrance opened up to a reception area, and immediately I noticed a difference in the atmosphere. This nine room property is exclusive to overnight guests, while the larger more expansive Ste. Anne's allows day spa patrons as well.

Most guest rooms feature antique furnishings and private balconies, and between meals and spa treatments guests can relax in the seasonal outdoor pool, lounge in the sauna and hot tubs and explore the historic town of Port Hope. The meals and spa services are identical at both properties, and with over 35 different options to choose from, deciding on what I wanted done to my body was more difficult than choosing items from the dining menu. Finally it was time for the pièce-de-résistance: the treatments!

### *Ste. Anne's Family of Spas*

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After perusing my options, I settled on the Synchronized Tuning, which to me read like a drop down menu of items I could decide on after discussions with my practitioner. This is exactly what it was. We chatted about the different options I had based on my wants and needs, and I chose a hot stone massage, combination seaweed and mud body wrap and some reflexology on my feet. I was a spa virgin to every one of these, but I just laid back and took what was coming to me. The volcanic stones are heated to a temperature hot enough to relax the muscles, and additional ones are added as the others cool down. The stones were used to enhance the massage technique, gently rubbed all over the back of my body from shoulders to legs. As I had no visual perception of what was happening, it created a fully sensory experience each time a new heated stone was applied.

The full body wrap was deemed a detoxifier, and we all know this is a necessity in today's life. I was covered waist down in mud and waist up in seaweed, then wrapped in a heated cover for about ten minutes. During this time I received a neck and shoulder massage, and had the pressure points on my feet explored. By this point in time I was fully relaxed, and somewhat incapacitated. I could feel the different sensations between the mud and seaweed as time progressed. The seaweed had a bit of a coarser texture, and felt a bit warmer than the cooler sensation of the mud. Simultaneously, my practitioner was applying pressure to the different zones and reflex areas of my toes and soles to gather readings on the overall condition of my body and mind. I was in a serene state of tuning in to my body, while tuning out from life's stress.

When finished, my warm shower was running so that I could rinse away the toxins and stress once and for all. The Aveda line of body products throughout both properties are a nice added touch and Ste. Anne's just recently introduced their own line of soaps, lotions, cleansers, and scrubs called Skin Nourishment.

Sadly, after a quick lunch in the airy dining room, it was time to catch the shuttle back to the Stress Express, for the return journey home. Sitting on the train staring out the window was definitely much better than having to deal with traffic on the roads. As their website states, "The Ste. Anne's philosophy focuses on creating an atmosphere to help rebuild your strength, recapture your energy, and reflect on what's truly important in your life. A stay at a Ste. Anne's Spa is an investment in yourself and your future well-being." I wholeheartedly agree!

Bryen Dunn is a freelance journalist based in Toronto with a focus on tourism, lifestyle, entertainment and community issues. He has written several travel articles and has an extensive portfolio of celebrity interviews with musicians, actors and other public personalities. He's willing to take on any assignments of interest, attend parties with free booze, listen to rants, and travel the world in search of the great unknown. He's eager to discover the new, remember the past, and look into the future.

