



Creating & Marketing Unique Getaways

by Mick Matheusik



Hotsprings Valley Retreat, Yukon

Many properties in BC and the Yukon have successfully tapped into niche markets with unique getaways that attract new market while increasing return patronage. Much of what they offer is what many operators in both BC and the Yukon have already realized: rather than selling hotel or lodging rooms, they are selling memorable experiences. While unique service and amenities are important, those associated with the accommodation settings, design, and facilities set the foundation.

Particularly after winning the 2010 Olympics bid, BC is increasingly on the radar screen for event and incentive planners seeking a unique destination amongst the global marketplace. With its "Supernatural" landscapes, impressive choice of ski or alpine destinations, world class spa resorts or urban hotels, BC is now rivaling Hawaii, Jamaica, and Mexico in offering distinctive romantic settings for special events and ceremonies.

The quaint chapel nestled carefully into the forest at the Hills Health Guest Ranch at 108 Mile House recreates a nostalgic wedding ceremony setting that many guests are aspiring to for that intimate and memorable milestone event in their lives. They can also head out on horseback to an authentic Indian tipi for a rustic cowboy marriage. Couples can complete the day with an intimate dinner at the historic themed 1871 building. All members of the bridal party can also indulge themselves as part of pre- or post-wedding packages by enjoying both traditional and holistic spa therapies or fitness at the extensive, 22,000 sq. ft. spa/wellness facilities.

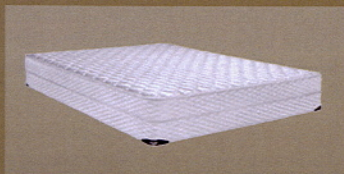
Unique wedding experiences are also being offered in mountain resort settings such as at the Scottish inspired Highland Lodge near Golden. The lodge offers 10 luxurious suites with spectacular mountain views and a 105-seat pub featuring the finest Scottish whiskies in the world. Couples can book the entire facility and accommodate more guests at the adjacent Kicking Horse Mountain Resort. Nestled in the alpine forest, couples can feel like they are in "absolute heaven" by lounging in the rooms' oversized jacuzzi tubs enjoying the majestic views of the ski mountain, nearby Canadian Rockies, or scenic Kicking Horse Pass. The Kicking Horse also offers fine dining at the Eagle's Eye, Canada's highest restaurant with awe-inspiring views of the Purcell Mountains. The restaurant is complete with two deluxe suites above it, so the bridal party can experience the mountain top setting and have "fresh tracks" the following day.



Eagle's Eye Restaurant at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort near Golden, BC

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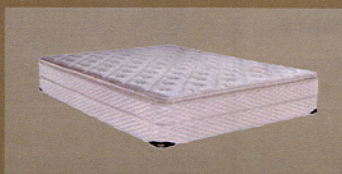
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The Kicking Horse Mountain Resort is Canada's first new resort to be built in over 25 years and targets a very specific niche market known as the “affluent purist”. It is also a “must visit” destination for any discerning skier. This year, the mountain and Highland Lodge have been rated as one of the world's top five adventure experiences by *Men's Journal* and has also been awarded by many of the world's top ski magazines as offering the best powder and snow conditions in North America. The Director of Marketing for the resort, Michael Dalzell, is continuously marketing at trade shows, and bringing in travel writers from magazines representing the market profiles they are seeking to attract to the resort. In tandem, the owner of the Highland Lodge, Stuart Dickson, also works closely with travel writers and wedding planners to tap into the growing destination weddings market, which is estimated to represent about 10% of today's weddings.

Mount Washington, Vancouver Island



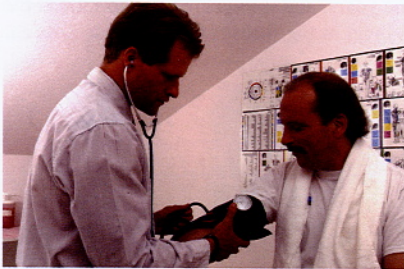
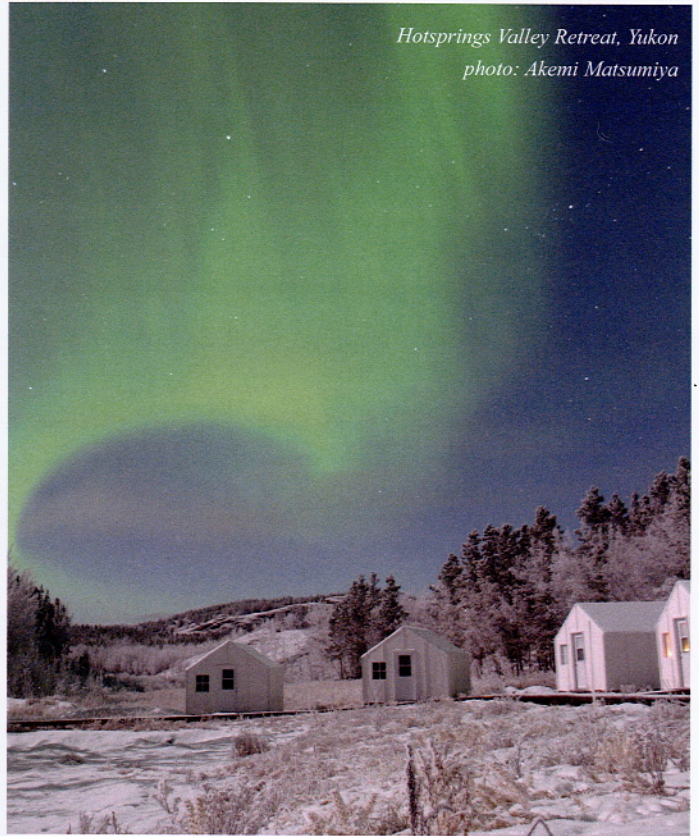
Some brides and grooms ride up the chair lift at Mount Washington on Vancouver Island to have their ceremonies on the mountaintop. They stay at Bear and Deer Lodges at the Mount Washington Alpine Resort situated near Courtenay. Again, the superb views of the Gulf Islands, Strait of Georgia, and snowcapped mountains and glaciers of the Island and mainland all sparkle making this an inspiring location to tie the knot. Mount Washington appeals to out-of-town guests as they can “base camp” there to experience the alpine activities of Strathcona Park as well as the non-alpine activities in the Comox Valley or the Campbell River area, all within a half hour of the lodges at the mountain.

Urban properties such as the historic Fairmont Empress or Ocean Pointe Resort & Spa in the inner harbour of Victoria also make use of their scenic settings to catch the eye of event planners. Being the ultimate in romance and elegance, the bride and groom are made to feel like royalty at these properties' magnificent ocean settings. The Rose Garden at the Empress is ideal for wedding photos while the Willows Stream Spa adds that indulgence component as part of “The Fairmont Platinum Honeymoon” or “Royal Wedding Packages.”

Various educational clinics such as painters' workshops/classes, culinary clinics, mountain bike treks, private ski excursions and lessons with instructors or coaches, fly fishing, shopping or sightseeing packages are some of the other ways that these lodges, resorts, and hotels have filled their rooms.

Randy Williams, TIAC President, says travellers are increasingly gravitating towards eco and adventure travel. Located about 25 minutes outside of Whitehorse in the Yukon, the Hotsprings Valley Retreat at the Takhini Hot Springs features "rustic luxury" in 11 canvas-wrapped cabins which help guests connect to nature. This also evokes the sense of the traditional wall-tent cities typical of the Yukon's gold rush and early settlement history. Owners Gary Umbrich and Carla Pretzl have created unique memories for visitors seeking an authentic Yukon experience with many of the luxuries of home. Step inside a beautiful cabin with pine floors, vaulted wood ceiling, colourful trims and embossed wallpaper, complete with cozy down duvets. Outside your door, you can enjoy the scenic beauty of the Yukon wilderness, the northern lights, dog sledding, and of course, the adjacent mineral hot springs. Working closely with Yukon Tourism, they participate in co-op marketing to promote not only the adventures of the North but also the unique experiences guests can partake in while at their cabins. An integral part of their marketing also involves farm tours and direct marketing with destination management operators or travel wholesalers.

*Hotsprings Valley Retreat, Yukon
photo: Akemi Matsumiya*



*Hills Health Guest Ranch,
108 Mile House*

Some properties are now selling spa lifestyles to sustain a bed base for their hotel and resort properties. One facility to tap into the rapidly growing wellness market is the Hills Health & Guest Ranch. The Canadian Wellness Centre at the ranch is a complete lifestyle learning centre, which provides the environment, support, and professional services to help people change and improve their lifestyle in pursuit of long-

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term wellness and health. Pat and Juanita Corbett, the owners of the Health Ranch, attend both national and international spa conferences and trade shows as well as work with travel editors, spa magazines, and directories to promote these packages to this rapidly growing market.

According to Spa Finder, the world's foremost spa travel, media, and marketing company, approximately one in four adults of the North American population has been to a spa while many teenagers are also increasingly visiting spas. Active spa-goers represent 3.7 million Canadian consumers and 32.2 million US consumers. The Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC), in conjunction with the International Spa Association (ISPA), recently reported that the spa industry has increased 18% compounded over the last nine years, and is expected to continue at the 8-10% level in the foreseeable future.



*Hills Health Guest Ranch,
108 Mile House*

The majority of the spa market is being driven by the baby boomers, many of whom view spa treatments as a requisite to staying healthy, looking good, and as an integral foundation to their daily/weekly lifestyle. In brief, they want "live younger longer". To accommodate this goal, destination spa and wellness centres are replacing or supplementing golf courses, marinas, and other recreational amenities. They are typically the key drivers to fill rooms and now sell real estate, much of which is rented back, to increase a hotel's bed base. Pat Corbett, the Chairman of the CTC task force on spa and wellness tourism predicts that the longevity of this trend will continue for the next 15 -20 years following the aging baby boomers' desire for healthy and active lifestyles. Market research conducted by American LIVES confirmed this prediction, estimating that one third of North Americans are seeking a healthy lifestyle, and this figure is predicted to increase to two thirds by 2025.

Whether it's spas/wellness centres, wedding events, or painters' workshops, increasingly guests are looking for more experiential, healthy, or educational experiences nestled in amongst unique environmental settings. These are rapidly becoming demand generators to fill the increasing supply of beds at resorts and hotels throughout BC. 