

BY SHAWN GILCK

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS –Sheer excess may never have been this much fun.

That may be the ultimate compliment in the world inhabited by the owners of Le Scandinave Spa at the base of Blue Mountains.

The facility offers saunas, steam rooms and massages – everything anyone needs for a little pampering – but the highlight has to be its spectacular outdoor pools. Three of the five pools are heated to a decadent 100+ degrees Fahrenheit, making them nothing short of heavenly decadence in the midst of an arctic cold snap. One even features the ultimate in luxury: a heated waterfall.

Mylisa Henderson is the spokesperson for the four-person ownership group that includes her husband David Grexton and their partners Lesley and Robert Cederberg. They began work on their multi-million dollar, 25,000 square-foot dream about two years ago on a 50-acre property along the Grey-Simcoe boundary. After a breakneck construction period, the spa opened for business in mid-December.

While the nominal inspiration for the spa has its origins in the famous Scandinavian traditions, they've drawn heavily on other sources for inspiration, like the historically-renowned Roman baths in places like Bath, England.

From Scandinavia they've borrowed the saunas and steam rooms, along with the Scandinave name. After all, it's unlikely that anyone appreciates the finer and more recreational points of heat more than northerners who have to survive four to six months of winter.

“The Nordic spa concept is one where you heat your body up, usually in a sauna type of spa,” Henderson explained. “You would sit in the sauna for 10 or 15 minutes, basically until you can't stand it anymore, and then you'd run outside and roll in the snow to cool off. It's quite an invigorating experience. Your blood starts flowing and you really feel energized.”

While in weather like this, visitors could certainly jump into the snow to cool off, Henderson said they're encouraged to try the cold plunge pools instead.

Henderson and the rest of the ownership group were canny enough to recognize the drawing power of water.

“Absolutely,” she said. “The idea of water in the spa business is becoming a very big part of what people look for. It's an old-type concept that people have been doing in Europe for centuries. We're just trying to bring the concept here. What we're offering is a very flexible, no time-limit experience for you to make it a true pampering for yourself.”

Earlier this week Henderson squired two members of the Grey County Tourism department around the spa while being interviewed.

Le Scandinave had just opened for business for the morning and patrons were trickling in. It was fascinating to watch the small number of swimmers cavort in the steaming water while the temperature refused to budge from -10 Celsius.

“If you watch the people on days like this you can actually see steam rising from their bodies as they move around the pools,” Henderson said with a smile. “Earlier this week too, snow fell like confetti on the visitors.”

“For us the snow has been a great thing,” she added. “The whole experience of being able to walk around the heated walkways and have no snow and sit in a heated pool as the snow drifts down is a beautiful scene and something that people really gravitate to. It’s magical.”

Tourism assistant Amanda Pausner said the spa was exactly the kind of thing Grey County was looking to promote as an alternative tourist destination.

Henderson said her ownership group drew heavily from the first Le Scandinave Spa, which is located at Mt. Tremblant in Quebec. The chain is completely independent from the Intrawest Corporation but knows it’s a good complement and draw for the ski set.

“We’ve (the spas) become the biggest Nordic spa experience in North America,” she said.

Quebec resident Stephane Gervais was one of the people spoiling themselves with a few hours at Le Scandinave. The real estate agent said he lived at Mt. Tremblant and had often visited its spa. He was more than enthusiastic about what he saw at the Blue Mountain version.

“These pools are bigger than the ones at Mr. Tremblant,” he said with pleasure.

That put a smile on Henderson’s face too. One of the goals of the spa was to avoid the claustrophobia of trying to cram too many people into facilities that were too small.

So far, the longest anyone has stayed has been six hours, Henderson said. That was a group of women from Toronto “playing hooky” from their jobs.”

“They were getting a little wrinkled by the time they left,” she recalled.

The spa is open year-round, Henderson said. Eventually walking trails will also be built but that’s likely a year or two away.

“Things have been great for us,” she said. “A big part of it is getting people to see what the activity is all about. Our massages are booked. We’re very busy with that. There’s still room to grow the business in terms of getting people to try the baths, but that’s

education and getting people to know what we have here. We're promoting to just give it a try. We do need to get the word out."

A day's visit to the spa is quite affordable. A full-day pass is \$42.

Le Scandinave is located about six kilometres from Collingwood, not far from the current location of the Pretty River Academy and Blue Ridge Stables. It's also within walking distance of Blue Mountain Resort.

Cutline:

Amanda Pausner and Heather Molnar of the Grey County Tourism department on a fact-finding mission enjoyed a visit to Le Scandinave Spa Tuesday. SHAWN GILCK
PHOTO