

Travel editor Jon Fear • jfear@therecord.com

Chilling out IN South Georgian Bay

On a winter weekend it's a great place for exercising the body . . . and tastebuds

By Melody Wren

Instead of hightailing it to some tropical locale, why not bask in winter's glory at an all-Canadian destination?

In summer, the South Georgian Bay area is bustling with cottagers, boaters and international tourists gazing at the famous Blue Mountains. In winter, it's a snow globe scene and a go-to place for skiing, snowshoeing, snow-tubing and snowboarding.

Don't expect a sleepy cottage area. It's all happening here — with a blend of rural, country and gourmet sophistication.

The area captures the whole exhale vibe with unique topography for four seasons of diversity with the bay, the mountains and rolling hills.

Not all of us can get away for a week or two, but taking a three-day

weekend and venturing into parts unknown can feel like a total escape.

To unwind after a busy week, we started the Friday of our own long weekend at the Scandinave Spa just outside of Collingwood. While a destination spa might seem the obvious antidote to post-busyness fatigue, the allure of this retreat goes beyond facials and massages.

After enjoying everything the spa had to offer, we changed into the appropriate snowshoeing gear and headed to the nearby Scenic Caves Nature Adventures site, a private business southwest of Collingwood.

These caves are at one of the highest points on the Niagara Escarpment, a point from which you can look out over the town of Collingwood and view the spectacular shoreline of Georgian Bay and a thousand square miles of unsurpassed scenery.

► **Collingwood** continued on page E11



The suspension bridge at the Scenic Caves Nature Adventures site near Collingwood is described as the longest such bridge in Ontario. From it you can see Georgian Bay.

MELODY WREN

OUT FOR THE DAY

Two new museums showcase achievements close to home

By Vinnie Buchanan

Our area is one that honours its past. And there's no better way to observe this than by visiting one or both of two recently opened museums — the Guelph Civic Museum and the Waterloo Region Museum in south Kitchener.

Guelph Civic Museum

The Guelph Civic Museum, operated by the City of Guelph, used to be in an old commercial building just west of the downtown core.

Its new home is in the former Loretto Convent at Cork and Norfolk streets, built about 1850 and immediately north of the huge Church of Our Lady Immaculate that overlooks the downtown.

The move gives the museum 30,000 square feet, almost three times what it had before. The stone walls of the old structure have been saved. Bright new maple floors and good lighting make



ROB O'FLANAGAN, GUELPH MERCURY

The Guelph Civic Museum is at Cork and Norfolk streets in downtown Guelph, right beside the Church of Our Lady Immaculate, which towers over the city's downtown core.

the inside space both inviting and useful. The only outbuilding attached to the former convent is one that was the original privy for the nuns — today used for the

storage of recyclables. Landscaping of the grounds will begin later this year.

The museum's permanent exhibit, the Families Gallery, is

well suited to younger visitors, since its theme is life in Guelph in bygone days. Sitting beneath a huge map of the city, today's children can use computers to explore information about the past. They can dress up in old-fashioned hats and clothes. There's also a mockup of an old city streetcar and a recreated 1950s kitchen.

In the Loretto gallery, visitors can look through a window at a recreated nun's "cell," where the figure of a nun sits at a small desk near a window, correcting papers.

One hallway shows a chronological history of Guelph. It will lead to a space that Katherine McCracken, director of the museum, describes as a thematic local history gallery focusing on three ideas — "we work here," "we play here" and something called "the dark side."

Two interesting temporary exhibits are currently on display. One shows optical illusions

collected by retired University of Guelph professor James L. Hunt. It's called Illusions: When the Brain gets it Wrong.

The second exhibit, Fashion in Three Centuries, focuses on fashions popular in 1812, 1912, and 2012. It is the work of Jonathon Wolford and Kenn Norman, who have amassed a huge collection, including shoes, for the display.

In the works is a gallery devoted to the history of the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph.

Waterloo Region Museum

The bright new Waterloo Region Museum, operated by the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, stands like a huge colourful quilt beside Homer Watson Boulevard, at the edge of Doon Heritage Village, which was previously known as Doon Heritage Crossroads and Doon Pioneer Village.

► **Exhibits** continued on page E10

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The Dam Pub in Thornbury, Ont., has a collection of 613 whiskies.

Thornbury pub loves its whiskys

► Collingwood continued from E12

The caves were carved millions of years ago by glacial ice. With all the new snow at the time of our visit, it was a Christmas scene and the air was still.

We snowshoed on well-groomed trails and across Ontario's longest suspension bridge, which was built at a cost of \$1 million by Owen King Ltd., of Walkerton. It's 126 metres long and hangs 25 metres above the valley and is 300 metres above the level of Georgian Bay. From the bridge we happened to see a distance snowstorm as it moved across the bay, looking like a surreal grey dotted mass — one that we would meet up with later.

At the end of the day, we checked into a beautiful two-level suite at the Pretty River Valley Country Inn. We hesitated about leaving the room, even for dinner, once we saw the wood-burning fireplace, stacked with wood and ready to go, the corner whirlpool tub and king-sized bed. The small upstairs loft had sweet twin single beds, perfect for family travels.

Perched in the hills, with tributaries of the Pretty River on the property, the inn offers ideal views from most angles.

The country retreat is home to Icelandic, Miniature and Percheron horses, plus reindeer, rare-breed chickens and guinea fowl. There's even an apiary with 20,000 bees down by the pond. State of the art conference facilities are offered and settings for boutique weddings. A two-minute walk from the inn you can find an outdoor hot tub, exercise room and salt water pool.

We had a lot of plans for Saturday, but as blizzards loomed and roads were closed, the day took on a somewhat more flexible tone, as needed.

After a scrumptious breakfast at the inn (gluten free scones baked just for me, thank you), we drove to the farm of famed chef Michael Stadlander and spent a good portion of the morning chatting to him.

Then we drove on through the worsening blizzard to get to enjoy lunch at Haisai, Stadlander's restaurant in Singhampton, Ont., where we were thoroughly pampered by the chefs-in-residence, Marita and Jorg from Stuttgart, Germany.

The eclectic restaurant and bakery are not to be missed.

All of the furniture and the pottery dishes were made by the incredibly creative Stadlander, who is living a lifestyle that reflects his "five-mile" philosophy. The stunning pizza that Jorg made for our lunch was topped with summer tomato sauce (made with tomatoes from the farm garden), wild leeks and smoked ham from his on-site pigs — and baked in a wood-fired oven outside the restaurant he constructed.

Filled to the brim with incredible food, we drove on through the snow to Georgian Hills Vineyards near Thornbury where the enthusiastic owner Robert Ketchum shared with us his extensive knowledge of wine over several tastings.

After trying Seyval Blanc, a low-alcohol wine, we were instructed to bite into a wafer-thin slice of McIntosh apple and a nibble of Cape Bessey goat cheese — then have another taste of the same wine, which now had a completely different taste, the savoury contrasting exquisitely with the sweet.



MELODY WREN

Robert Ketchum of the Georgian Hills Vineyards holds forth on wine.



MELODY WREN

Marita Gomez and Jorg Neth are the chefs-in-residence at the Haisai Restaurant & Bakery at Singhampton, Ont., near Collingwood.

The Vidal Blanc was sipped, followed by a bite of a serious Blackburn medium cheddar, which softened the second sip right up. Then came the Gamay Noir, a bite of smoked rainbow trout and sip again.

It was a fascinating taste adventure that completely baffled the palette.

Next we ambled along to The Dam Pub in Thornbury, which was filled to capacity on a blustery Saturday afternoon.

Owner Stephanie Price regaled us with stories and information about her large collection of whisky, said to be the second biggest collection in Ontario, with 613 whiskies in total.

Price is a certified special ambassador for two distilleries in Scotland, where she was trained. A monthly whisky tasting is held at The Dam Pub on the third Tuesday of each month. A typical tasting, or "nosing," is comprised of three nips. Each whisky flavour changes completely after a small addition of water.

During our visit we were introduced to an Ardbeg, an Auchentoshan and to The Dam Pub's own label whisky, made by Aberlour. Stephanie advises that if you don't like the taste at first, try it again. The casual tastings cost \$25 and end with a chocolate pate to round the event off on a sweet note.

The day ended back in Collingwood with a feast of local food dishes — trout from Kolapore, lamb from Shelbourne, and pickarel from Lake Huron — served in a historic building that houses the Huron Club Restaurant & Bar; an unexpected find among the area's mom-and-pop diners and chain restaurants. The Huron Club has works by local artists on the walls and music by local musicians playing in the background.

With so much on offer, it would be easy to visit the South Georgian Bay area repeatedly and have a great experience every time.

Melody Wren is a Guelph writer.

If you go . . .

• **Pretty River Valley Country Inn**
529742 Sideroad 30-31, RR 1, Nottawa, Ont., southwest of Collingwood near Pretty River Valley Provincial Park (1-705-445-7598 or www.prettyriverinn.com). Check the website for weekend packages that include spa visits, Haisai restaurant meals and tastings at The Dam Pub and the Georgian Hills Vineyards.

• **Scandinave Spa Blue Mountains**
152 Grey Rd. 21 (Osler Bluff Road), Town of the Blue Mountains, Ont. (www.scandinaveBlue.com or 1-877-988-8484). A \$48 day pass will let you take full advantage of the facilities.

• **Scenic Caves Nature Adventures**
260 Scenic Caves Rd., Town of the Blue Mountains, (www.sceniccaves.com or 1-705-446-0256). Offers 22 km of groomed cross-country ski trails, classic and skate skiing, plus 7.5 km of snowshoe trails.

• **The Dam Pub Gastropub**
53 Bruce St., Thornbury, Ont. (1-519-599-2110 or www.thedampub.ca).

• **Haisai Restaurant and Bakery**
794079 County Rd. 24, Singhampton, Ont. (1-705-445-2748 or www.haisairestaurantbakery.com). Reserve well in advance for meals at this renowned eatery.

• **Georgian Hills Vineyards**
496350 Grey Road 2, Town of the Blue Mountains, Ont. (www.georgianhillsvineyards.ca or 519-599-2255); Perfect Pairings tastings offered Saturdays at 1 p.m. for \$20.

• **The Huron Club**
94 Pine St., Collingwood, (1-705-293-6677 or www.thehuronclub.ca).

• **Travel information**
For general travel information about this part of Ontario, visit: www.visitsouthgeorgianbay.ca

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