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The World's Coolest Hotels: Listel Vancouver

By Tony Tedeschi



Lobby

example . . .

We begin this series on "The World's Coolest Hotels" with the Listel Vancouver, partly because the hotel will help us define cool, which, in the final analysis, defies any kind of objective definition. In fact, we chose "cool" — not "best," "finest," etc. — because the word is inherently, undeniably subjective. But what is travel if not a quintessentially subjective experience?

Webster buries the most interesting definition of "cool, adj.," way down in the list — that "slang" interpretation or colloquial definition we are talking about here — as "very good, pleasing, excellent." Are they kidding? That doesn't begin to cut it. How about cool as pertains to form or function; talent, even attitude; a person who gets it versus someone who doesn't; creativity in the arts, music especially? What would music be without cool? You don't even

With this edition of naturaltraveler.com, we begin a feature called "The World's Coolest Hotels." It will appear on the site, from time to time, frankly, when we have a cool hotel to talk about. How do we define cool? Permit us to offer our first

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need to be there to somehow get what someone means when he or she defines a musical experience as cool.

Anyway, to the Listel Vancouver. Form or function; talent, even attitude; people who get it as opposed to people who don't; creativity in the arts, music especially . . . all of the above. I mean a hotel that quotes the Enlightenment poet Alexander Pope about the "genius of place," in its website welcome message . . . you gotta check it out, right?

From the moment you check into the Listel, your exposure to the arts in Vancouver begins: sculpture outside the front door, other pieces in the lobby; along with paintings, prints, photographs. If the lobby announces what a hotel is about, this one is saying arty, but with a sense of excitement — versus the staid, classical art touches you see in most hotels.

The innovative attitude at the Listel begins at the top with the ownership, the Suzuki family, principally Choji, the father, and Hiro, the son. They are credited with playing a major role in introducing the timeshare concept to Japan in the 1960s. They own three hotels in Japan and one other in Canada, in Whistler. All display their own independent nuances. Independent ownership of the Listel is undoubtedly a factor in its management's ability to take bold steps, not having to wrestle the layered bureaucracies of chain properties.

"Our owners have always encouraged us to be as independent as they are," says General Manager Jim Mockford, "to respect traditional hotel management methods while experimenting with new and original ideas. Some have worked, others not but we've all benefited from this pioneering sensibility."



Lise Magee and Jim Mockford

One of the major motivators in the Listel's ascendancy to the epitome of cool is Lise Magee, the hotel's public relations director. I stayed at the Listel on my first visit to Vancouver. Selecting the

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Listel, then, was a difficult choice because the city has so many wonderful hotels, including the superb Fairmont and Sutton Place hotels, the wonderful Opus and Pacific Palisades. There is also the exquisite, Wedgewood, an absolutely first-rate hotel, consistently voted one of the best small hotels in the world.

photographs.

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During that first visit I got a chance to meet Magee. I have been around hotels for decades, have met many, many hotel executives, worked in the business myself for a few years. There's not a lot out there that hasn't been tried. But, when talking about why the Listel is special, Magee speaks with enthusiasm and the depth of understanding of a hands-on manager, explaining how this hotel experience exposes the visitor to a taste of the creative soul of her city, beautiful British Columbia beyond and the larger universe of Canada in general. The best sales people are always the ones with the product they sincerely believe in. The best of the best use their influence to help create and modify that product. It was clear to me, from the outset, that Magee had used her considerable influence to create an entity the media would warm up to without having to be sold. And, when the media buys in, a hotel benefits from that invaluable, implicit, third-party endorsement, so effective with potential guests. When Magee spoke about her hotel, I could feel immediately that she was talking about innovations she had help drive, even as she deflected credit to all others involved. I connected with her immediately.

Driven by the sense of "pioneering sensibility," G.M. Mockford spoke of, the hotel management decided to raise the bar on room design, in 1997, during a major redesign of its accommodations. A very short walk from the Listel is the Buschlen Mowatt Fine Arts gallery, representing world class artists from Canada and abroad. The Listel partnered with Buschlen Mowatt, which provided original art and prints for each room on two entire floors — the fourth and fifth — now called Gallery Floors. Artwork is hung or otherwise positioned as it would be if it were being given a prominent place in one's home. Information on the artists (more than 30 are represented), the paintings and books specific to the artists or their periods are in every guestroom on the floor. The collection is worth more than a half-million dollars. On the other hand, Buschlen Mowatt benefits as well, since hotel staff direct visitors to the gallery and many have bought pieces there — present company included.

Given the success of the Gallery Floor concept, the Listel took it a step further with the opening of its Museum Floor, a few years later. Partnering this time with the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, the hotel set aside 25 rooms on its top floor to showcase a First Nation's experience. Staying the night in a Museum Floor room places you within an ultra-modern interior design, augmented with things original and distinctly British

Columbian, including First Nations art, from the native-carved cedar headboards to the works of artists such as Musqueam painter Susan Point and Kwakwaka'wakw potter Judy Cranmer.



Gallery Floor Suite

If you want to take this level of interest beyond the hotel, the Listel sells a package called Coastal Cool (there's that word again), including: a canoe trip featuring traditional

songs, legends and cultural history; admission to the UBC Museum of Anthropology, dinner at an authentic First Nations restaurant and other perks.

Along with accommodations on the two special floors, all the rooms in the Listel are nicely appointed with all the comforts of a modern hotel and the latest in entertainment and Internet connection accoutrements.

Not surprisingly, the Listel is a place that embraces employee involvement. All the tenets about the way staff should treat guests apply here:

remembering your name

the second time you show up for anything, offering to help before they are even asked, answering questions or getting the answers, smiling . . . sincerely. Employment at the Listel involves more than just concentrating on your particular function. Case in point: the



Museum Floor Hamatsa Mask

kitchen concept.

The kitchen at the Listel truly is at the heart of the building. "It's on the route which all of the hotel's staff travel 15, 20, 30 times a day," G.M. Mockford says. "Arriving for your shift? Only way is through the kitchen. Going to the staff room for a quick coffee, a call home? Can't avoid the kitchen. Going from the guest rooms to the restaurant? Quickest way is through the kitchen."

Talk about networking your food and beverage op. However, don't be deceived that all this traffic would somehow have a negative effect on the menu. Quite the opposite. Food and beverage service at O'Doul's Restaurant & Bar, just off the main lobby, is as good as it gets, from breakfast through dinner. Breakfast, as in substituting salmon in the Haida (Eggs) Benedict; lunch, as in Pan-fried Fanny Bay Oysters, with crispy leek and spicy lemon butter; or dinner, as in Spicy Pacific Northwest Jambalaya, with tomato saffron risotto, Chorizo sausage, house-smoked chicken, ham, prawns, clams, mussels, scallops and salmon (if hot could be cool, this would be it). The wine list includes a range of U.S., European and other foreign wines, plus a wonderful selection of Canada's thus far not-fully-appreciated fine wines. The restaurant is the winner of numerous culinary awards.

O'Doul's also has music, really good music: jazz seven nights a week. And that's not just a matter of a piano player plinking away at the keys. The restaurant presents some of the finest Vancouver jazz artists. Where else would you have fodder for a CD, "Take Time," that CBC Radio host Paul Grant describes as representative of "a great time to be a jazz fan in Vancouver"?



O'Doul's Restaurant & Bar

"We see 'Take Time' as a snapshot of this period in the restaurant's history," says Lise Magee, who produced the CD. "These are the people and the sound you will see and

hear every night at O'Doul's. It's an embarrassment of riches."

A restaurant with a "history"? Musical, no less. Cool.

Along the corridor leading into O'Doul's are photos of jazz giants who have played in and around the city. Again, not just any photos. For example, one depicts the moment jazz trumpet great, Miles Davis, his back to the audience, tells the brash, young trumpeter, Winton Marsalis, to get off his stage during a session when other artists were joining Davis at a main stage concert. The story goes that Marsalis had been dissing Davis in the media for what Marsalis viewed as Davis's sellout to fusion jazz.

While, given all of the above, one might get the impression you never need to leave the Listel, there is, of course, one great reason to do so: Vancouver and environs. And that's another wonderful thing about this cool hotel; it's right in the midst of downtown: on Robson Street, one of the main drags for strolling, shopping, visiting cultural attractions, dining and more. Many of the city's great restaurants are walking distance from the Listel. The city's historic Gas Town area, with its unique shops, is a moderate walk away. Ditto the rehabilitated Yale Town area. Stanley Park with its wonderful tree-lined paths along the twisting shore line of Lost Lagoon, Coal Harbour and English Bay is right down the hill from the hotel. Granville Island, with its yacht harbor, shops, galleries and restaurants is a short cab or bus ride — or a long walk — away.

We could go on, but verbosity is, well, uncool. Suffice it to say, we are delighted that the Listel Vancouver has provided an appropriate example of what we mean by cool hotels . . . except, of course, when the next one we talk about completely redefines the concept. And, as we said at the outside, what is that but cool.

For more information, click www.listel-vancouver.com

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