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## Miraloma on the Cove offers elegant seclusion

Sidney getaway includes search for blue herons, seafood and cider

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Special to Vancouver Courier

"Is that a blue heron?"

"No," answered my companion, shaking her head sadly. "That was a seagull."

We were standing on the balcony of our third floor suite at Miraloma on the Cove as the sun set on a Friday in April. I'm no wildlife expert, but the resort hotel's website had mentioned it was blue heron nesting season and I was hoping for a glimpse of one of the graceful birds.

That's as good a reason as you need to go to Miraloma. In fact, you don't need anything more than a desire to get away from the city.

A resort hotel in Sidney barely ten minutes from the Swartz Bay ferry terminal, Miraloma had been on my mind since my first visit a year ago. I'd been struck by its lofty arts and crafts interior and the elegance of its exterior, not to mention its spectacular setting overlooking the waters of Allbay.

But the resort accommodation offers homey little touches. Besides fireplaces and two-person soaker tubs, the rooms come with board games--even if you never get to them, it's nice to know they're available. And every night, staff set out hot chocolate and cookies in the main lobby. Meanwhile, on the hotel grounds, a wooden enclosure ensures privacy for those wishing to dip into the resort's hot tub.

These features, along with its secluded location, give Miraloma the aura of a special occasion destination.

Of course, it's in Sidney, and not a lot happens in the Vancouver Island town. On our Friday night in late April we walked over to the Blue Peter on the dockside. The restaurant was closed and the pub was dead except for four other people, and two of them were staff.



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Miraloma on the Cove resort hotel overlooks the waters of Allbay.

Bartender Sirkhan, a Turk with long brown dreads, kindly shared his pizza with us, and when we heard about the music trivia game every Saturday we knew we'd be back the next night. We won both rounds we entered, upsetting some locals who thought they had the prizes--free pints of beer--in the bag. (By the way, in case it ever comes up, the theme from Gilligan's Island is actually called "The Ballad of Gilligan's Island" and was recorded by a group called the Eligibles.)

On Saturday the kitchen was open, and we were able to sample the restaurant's "famous" seafood chowder. We passed on the Latch, an Italian restaurant on the hotel grounds. Welcoming and ramshackle from the outside, inside it seemed a little stiff and formal.

Our contact at Bellstar Hotels and Resorts, Miraloma's owner, provided us with a choice of activities for our Saturday afternoon. They included an Eco-Tour of the surrounding water, shopping for home décor in Sidney, and a bike tour of the nearby wineries. (Whale-watching and diving trips are also available.)

We stopped at a winery, Marley Farm, which sits about 20 minutes southwest of Sidney in the middle of the peninsula. Marley's theme is Rasta--one of the co-owners is, legend has it, second cousin to Bob Marley--and the wines are fruit-based. We sampled a few and left with a bottle of strawberry rhubarb, which proved to be a neat balance of sweet and tart.

For lunch we decided on the Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse. About a 10-minute drive from Sidney, it's a nine-month-old business specializing in ciders made mostly with locally grown organic apples. The building houses a serving room as well as the pressing and storage rooms. The serving room is high-ceilinged and almost church-like, and features antique furniture and long, communal tables, with windows looking out towards the water. We lingered over a flight of ciders ranging from the extra dry to a sweet dessert "pommeau," paired with a tasting plate of local foods including Saltspring Island cheeses, sea asparagus and a kiwi-ginger jelly.

I didn't see a blue heron, but I brought back a couple of bottles of nice cider.

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