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Looking for spring in all the right places

Motorized spring fling on Vancouver Island in a Mercedes-Benz cabriolet rejuvenates all senses

By Garry Sowerby, Special To The Sun June 3, 2011

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There is a boat. A ferry boat, it seems, and my wife, Lisa Calvi, and I are relaxing in the lounge sipping coffee, poring over maps and watching tourists on the deck snap pictures of themselves on camera phones. Every one is smiling, laughing.

Then I'm behind the wheel of the oh-so-white Mercedes-Benz E350 Cabriolet, top down, hair flying, not a care in the world with tunes blasting from the 12-speaker 500-watt Harman Kardon sound system.

I wake briefly trying to pull myself back to reality, but now the vivid spectacle of thousands of fuchsia spring tulips is on the back of my eyelids. I can almost smell them.

Butchart Gardens, the hundredyear-old botanical gardens near Victoria is where yet another dream is taking me. Brian Smiley, the cheerful retired marine biologist who ferried Lisa and me from our hotel appears, telling me Saanich Inlet, carved by an advancing glacier 10,000 years ago, is 700 feet deep in some places.

Where am I? Why am I drifting in and out of this dream state as if under a spell?

"Okay, gather your things now. I'll wait outside in the hall." Her voice is sweet, professional.

Slowly, I come to my senses. I'm not going crazy. It's a deep body massage at Essence of Life Spa at Brentwood Bay Lodge that's the culprit and the dreams are snippets of what has happened in the eight hours since we left downtown Vancouver on a three-day road trip in search of that most elusive of seasons, spring.

Brentwood Bay Lodge, a delightful full-service resort, is just a 20-minute drive from the Swartz Bay ferry terminal on Vancouver Island, but it's a gazillion kilometres from downtown Vancouver in ambience.

After a sampling of Mercedes-Benz's sporty new E-Class cabriolet, a couple-hour ferry boat ride, eco-cruising on the southernmost fiord in North America and strolling through one of the world's most inspiring biotechnical gardens, I'm completely rejuvenated.

That night we feast on grilled pecan crusted halibut and chunky tandoori crab cakes, then retire to our bayview room. They're all bay-view rooms at Brentwood Bay Lodge and sleep comes easily.

Day 2 of our motorized spring fling begins with a four-hour road trip to Ucluelet on the island's west coast. Our plan is to take the Mill Bay ferry across Saanich Inlet on a small open ferry. The last time I used this shortcut, actress Kim Basinger was on board.

Alas, the pier is being renovated to accommodate a new slightly larger ferry, so we take the longer route through Victoria.

No sweat, I don't mind a chance to give the svelte 268-horsepower E350 a chance to stretch its legs over Malahat Mountain with its panoramic views of the Gulf Islands.

The sun is shining but it's chilly. We don't care, though, and at the push of a button the top does a disappearing act into the trunk. With more heating outlets than I can count, along with a "head scarf" feature that blows hot, or cool, air out an outlet in the headrest, we motor north toplless.

The crème de la crème of the day is the 90-kilometre drive from Port Alberni to Ucluelet on B.C. Highway 4. The winding, serpentine road surrounded by whitecapped mountains and crystal lakes is a driver's dream. I've always been a clutch-on-the-floor manual tranny guy, but take the opportunity to play the paddle shifters on the Benz's silky seven-speed transmission.

I make a game of avoiding the brake, toggling up and down through the gears. It's getting cooler, and the leaves are fewer on the trees as we head to the west coast through the rainforest. Indeed, it seems we are going back in time as spring slips a few weeks.

In Ucluelet, we check into Black Rock Resort, a swank, contemporary resort perched on a rocky outcrop where Mother Nature is the only gardener.

The next morning I'm back on the move again. Open it up on the downhills, drop the speed in the corners and lay on the power for the climbs. The air is fresh, vistas breathtaking. Breaking into a sweat, I pull over for a rest.

The brake lights never come on during this part of the trip, as it's not the Mercedes-Benz I'm toying with, but my well-worn Nikes on The Wild Pacific Trail.

Lisa and I jog back to Black Rock Resort and relax over a hardy breakfast, then it's time to motor back to Vancouver, via the Nanaimo to Horseshoe Bay ferry this time.

It's Lisa's turn to finesse the Mercedes-Benz along Highway 4.

I'll let the E350 Cabriolet pamper me while I sit back in the passenger's seat, take in the scenery and catch a little spring.

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