

TRUE/SLANT

By Sue Frause

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Victoria: Crown jewel of Vancouver Island



As a self-proclaimed [Closet Canuck](#), I spend a lot of time traveling to Canada — especially in [British Columbia](#). After all, the province is just a hockey puck away from my home in nearby Washington state. And ever since I was a kid, Canada has held a certain allure for me. Maybe it's 'cuz we had to cross an international border to get there, or as young students we were able to crawl into pubs and bars at the age of 18. Whatever the reason, give me any excuse to head north, and I'm so there. Summer is super fun in BC's capital city of Victoria, located on Vancouver Island. Here are some of my favorite things to do, along with lodging and dining tips.

Take a walking tour: [Discover the Past](#) is a dandy little walking tour company in Victoria. Owned by John Adams, the menu includes ghostly walks, neighborhood walks and Chinatown. The 90-minute Chinatown tour is an entertaining way to learn about Victoria (did you know that Victoria's Chinatown is the oldest in Canada?). Afterward, have lunch at one of the restos in Chinatown. Your guide will steer you in the right direction.

Go to the Royal BC Museum: The North American premier of *Treasures: The World's Cultures from the British Museum* is at the [Royal BC Museum](#) through Sept. 30, 2009. See 309 of the most treasured artifacts from the British Museum's collection, spanning more than 1.5 million years of human history. Stop by the Bengal Lounge at The Fairmont Empress Hotel after, for a Victoria Gin & Tonic. It's Canada's only premium gin, handmade from a wood-fired still. And made in Victoria!

Take a sunset paddle: My husband and I went on a summer sunset paddle with [Ocean River Sports](#). The 2.5 hour kayak trip is in Victoria's Inner Harbour on Friday evenings through Aug. 15, 2009. OK, we didn't see much of a sunset, as it was sort of drizzly — but paddling all the way up through the upper harbour and into the historic Gorge Waterway was a refreshing way to begin the weekend. Plus, I had a seal playing hide-n-seek with me most of the way. Afterward, we enjoyed dinner at the ooh la la! [Brasserie L'Ecole](#), located just blocks from the Inner Harbour.

Eat fish: Whenever I go to a saltwater town, I've gotta have fish. My two favorite spots for fish in Victoria are [Ferris Oyster Bar and Grill](#) for oysters and [red fish, blue fish](#) for fish 'n chips. During one of my last visits to Ferris, I could be seen standing outside the Yates' Street resto, waiting for the lunch doors to open. I had my usual: Japanese Breaded Oysters (BC oysters of course) served with green onion and ginger mayo. I haven't ventured away from the yummy Wild Pacific Fish + Chips at red fish, blue fish. Located on the waterfront, I need to also try their Fish Tacones that everybody is raving about.

Go gardening: [The Butchart Gardens](#) is located 14 miles north of Victoria in Brentwood Bay. Established in 1904, the 55 acres of privately owned gardens is open to the public, and open year-round. Imagine, it takes 50 full-time gardeners to keep it looking so lovely. The Gardens has more than one million visitors a year, so go early in the day (plus you'll beat the afternoon heat). I was there in springtime when the tulips and daffodils were in bloom, and enjoyed a Cobb Salad in The Dining Room, where they also serve afternoon tea. There are two other more casual places for food and beverages. Summer entertainment includes early evening music and fireworks on Saturday nights and nightly *Night Illuminations* shows.

A perfect room: I do have my Victoria favorites when it comes to where to spend a night or two. [Fairholme Manor](#) is a beautifully restored Italianate mansion located in the lush and leafy Rockland area of Victoria, about a 15-minute walk from downtown. This is not a fussy-butt B&B type place, and the rooms are bright, airy and spacious. The breakfasts, served in the sunshine-walled dining room, are wonderful. *As a disclaimer, I edited Sylvia Main's cookbook of breakfast and brunch recipes, but they truly are wonderful!* And I still love [The Fairmont Empress Hotel](#), which celebrated its 100th birthday in 2008. It's the grande dame of Victoria, elegant but at the same time homey. **Other fine hotel options are [The Magnolia Hotel](#) and [The Oswego Hotel](#).**

Special deals: Tourism Victoria is offering visitors booking two nights on its promotional website at www.itsvictoria.com **two** passes for the Royal BC Museum Exhibition *Treasures: The World's Cultures from the British Museum*, along with **two** tickets to the National Geographic IMAX Theatre. Accommodation rates start at \$105 CDN / \$96 USD per person, per night. The offer is valid through August 31, 2009 and must be booked no later than August 3, 2009.

The Fairmont Empress Hotel
Photo by Sue Frause