



Victoria's Inner Harbor

a trip fit for a queen

Get a taste of the good life in Victoria, British Columbia.
By Karen Loftus

I tend to bring a bit of ambition on trips. With so little time and so much to see, I'm often running around a city, making sure I fit it all in. Years ago, my friend Fay and I were racing through the streets of Edinburgh with nary a look at the incredible views. With a schedule of five shows per day, we were trying to catch our next act. Like true New Yorkers we walked, heads down, hoof to heel, and we were panting when we arrived. As we locked eyes, we recognized the need to achieve in each other. Caught off guard by our own ridiculousness, we bent over howling with laughter in spite of ourselves. It was the best entertainment of the day.

Last summer, flying back from Berlin, I sat next to a documentary filmmaker, behind his well-heeled parents, who appeared posh and privileged from a distance. I was finally relaxing after a week of hard-core sightseeing, ordering my second glass of port for all the flight to see, puffed up and proud of my newfound decadence. He recalled their leisurely vacay, "There was none of that cultural BS. It was a real vacation with lazy days on the beach with lots of reading and the best meals imaginable. What about you?" More embarrassed than accomplished, I stuffed aside my

many brochures, my global trophies, and said, "Same."

This time, my plan for Victoria was not to have one. Once known for the newlyweds and nearly dead, it's now a chill destination spot for those who want to kick back or kick it up a notch on the culinary front. Prepared for the ultimate in Canadian comfort, I checked into the Magnolia Hotel and Spa, a classic hotel in the center of town, steps from the water. I rented a car but decided at the last minute to leave driving behind, as I realized most of Victoria is best experienced on foot.

There's an unavoidable European-style pub culture on the island, and so I started at Irish Times, a beautiful building with great beers, music and an extensive wine list. I had a Mission Hill pinot and chatted with a guy from the Canadian navy, then went in search of Spinnaker's, a well-known "gastropub" where they offer local food and wines, and brew beers on site. I asked for directions from Don, an older local. With three hip daughters in tow, covered in tattoos and piercings, the friendly foursome walked me across the bridge, had several glasses of wine with me, and invited me back for homemade wine. That's what I call travel trust and going with the flow.

Next day, I wandered the streets, hitting LoJo for shopping. Patch, an enormous and well-displayed vintage shop, is your best bet for one-of-a-kind finds and bargains. Addiction is the shop for fashion-forward pieces from Canada, the U.S. and Europe. It's comparable to Fred Segal's and H Lorenzo in Los Angeles or Scoop in New York, thanks to owner Stefani Hartwig, who really knows her stuff.

During lunch at Re-Bar Modern Food, a vegetarian restaurant, I couldn't help but see the similarity to Seattle: the even mix of expressive tats and the seemingly conservative who dress for sports or weather, with a laid-back vibe and an all-are-welcome attitude. A local named Heather told me there is no gay neighborhood, as all communities blend together, equally accepted. That carries over to nightlife, where all intermingle except at Prism, Victoria's only exclusively LGBT nightclub.

I continued to Fisgard Street, Canada's oldest and perhaps smallest Chinatown. En route I hit Silk Road, a tea shop with a spa, tea bar and tastings. Lovely! Fan Tan Alley, off Fisgard, is the tiniest street in town. I felt like Alice in urban-land, sneaking down the alley with its eclectic shops and a noodle store serving straight from the kitchen. I picked up an Om necklace at Triple Spiral, a goddess shop, and scooted around the corner to Herald Street, touted as the Design District. Josephine's, a must for Martha Stewart-wannabees or Victorian types, is filled with everything from pillowcases and furniture to perfume, lingerie and culinary treats. A feminine heaven.

Victorians, largely Canadians from other parts of Canada, have sophisticated taste and really champion the little guy, from shops to restaurants. On every corner is one unique coffee shop after another. Beans Around the World, Habit and Café Mela are spots that inspire you to write and reflect.

I love when a city leads me. On my way home, I was pulled down another alley to a Portuguese tapas bar. An older man, Luis Merino, was seated outside with a decanter of red wine, cigarettes and a journal; it was a quiet and inspired site. Merino, one of the city's top artists, asked me to join him. A glass of wine, and I was good to go.

With a style similar to Picasso, Merino's paintings—all of sexy and intriguing women, some from his native Mexico—

adorned the tapas bar's wall; others hang in some of the best restaurants in town. You can't plan an afternoon like that. Just get out of the way and allow serendipity to come into play.

The next day, Kathy from Travel With Taste took me to local boutique wineries on the Saanich Peninsula. Starling Winery, run by three couples, is a slice of heaven with a greenhouse, great grounds, a tiny dog named Buttons, and five peacocks that wandered around. The yummy Ortega was a nice end and great beginning to winemaker Jacqueline's gardening.

Up the road, Winchester Cellars, a certified-organic winery, served a spicy pinot. The winemaker likes to add a twist, a 5 percent surprise, into the mix of his wines. Perfection! We ended our early-morning wine tour at the famed Butchart Gardens, Victoria's Versailles. For lunch, we had a bison burger and potato bisque soup, paired with local wines, before hitting Bob Marley's cousin's winery, Marley Farms, known for its fruit wines.

After my day away, I hit the Sapphire Spa for a seaweed body treatment and Shirodhara, an ancient method for clearing the mind, which caused a series of prophetic dreams that night. Before bedtime, I had dinner at Pescatore's, a local institution. I had the best carpaccio, fresh halibut caught that day, topped with crab.

My final day, I rented a bike and rode along the water for hours. It brought me back to another time. In the suburbs of Philly, I would get on my big Schwinn and take off for hours, all but crossing state lines. That was my first taste of independence and travel. Coming full circle, I felt independent out of the car, free from my routine.

I had a late lunch back at Magnolia Hotel at Sanuk Restaurant, where I had the dreamiest buttered chicken pizza that I'm still craving. I was so happy. Somebody should have slapped me.

I called Kathy, my now friend from Travel With Taste, and asked her to meet me at the newly opened Bon Rouge. The decadently high-end French bistro is black and white with red accents, so feminine, so French.

It was a trip fit for a queen, decadent, relaxing and truly delicious from start to finish. ■

For more information, visit tourismvictoria.com.



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