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## **Victoria**

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In 2003, Penny and I were rounding out a most pleasant cruise to Alaska. The penultimate part of the voyage, on the homeward leg, took us into the Canadian port of Victoria. We were docked briefly so the visit itinerary was no more than a hello/quick walk/goodbye. But, and a huge but, we fell in love with the town and the harbor and vowed, "We shall return."

So, last July we planned on a 21-day holiday to be based in Victoria. Twenty-one makes one think of a 21-gun salute fired off - at least in terms of the British Empire and Commonwealth - to salute royalty and, indeed, Victoria was named after Great Britain's Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901. The town became capital of the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island and British Columbia in 1868. The city's population today is around 320,000.

We sailed to Victoria, a seaport that nestles on the most southern part of Vancouver Island (about the same land mass as Denmark) in western British Columbia, on a perfectly named catamaran, "Victoria Clipper."

This sea link has been in operation for exactly 20 years and the 71-mile voyage between Victoria and Seattle takes less than three hours. The streamlined, all-enclosed vessel - more like a glorified super-powered speedboat - skims over the water at 30 knots (35 miles per hour).

That being said, next time we visit I am going to opt for a sea-plane. Small, medium and large float planes make regular flights to Victoria from Seattle and Vancouver. They are obviously prop aircraft so speeds are moderate, and the big bonus is that they keep to low altitudes, allowing glorious views of mountain, coast, islands and water.

Penny's sleuthing on the Internet resulted in us staying at the Delta Ocean Pointe Resort, on the fringe of the Inner Harbor, but well removed from the hustle and bustle of the downtown and town center area. We reveled in a most luxurious room, and during our whole stay the service had to be graded A.

One of our favorite projects was to walk out from the Delta and promenade along a beautifully designed series of walkways that circled the Inner Harbor. By going out and back - north, south, east and west - one could stroll leisurely for a few miles and soak up the sea breezes, the sound of seagulls, and watch the ever-changing aquatic stage of soaring seaplanes, canoe paddlers, fishing boats, yachts and tourcraft.

All of this was enjoyed despite a record Victorian heat wave. Locals complained when the temperature crept up to 80 degrees. And with the coastal environment there was never a hint of humidity.

On one of these harbor walks going east, we came upon a pub called **Spinnakers**. It was a pioneer of the North American craft-brewing renaissance and is Canada's oldest "brew pub." It has received awards from both Epicure and Travel Magazine for best pub food. Our specialty was a pint of Merrydale apple cider. **Spinnakers** have built their reputation on the fact that they have their own ales brewery, a vinegar brewery and an artesian well. Artisan breads and their own herb gardens make for a place where the eating and drinking is about as good as it gets.

Walking, even middling distances, is not for everyone - including us! We found it magical that with Victoria's Inner Harbor walkways, we would tramp just as far as we wanted and then do a homeward hop onto a Victoria Harbor Ferry. These adorable miniature boats (there are 13 of them) look like something out of a Dr. Seuss children's narrative. They bobbed along the top of the water and scooted us across and around the Inner Harbor and its surrounding waterways.

They are available for a 45-minute Harbor Tour or a 55-minute mini-voyage to the Gorge. Best of all, for a mere \$4 they pattered along at a speed of no more than 5 knots, and transported us to and from all manner of special places.

On one day we "ferried" back from Esquimalt, a Victoria suburb and passed a cul-de-sac called Dingley Dell, named after the farm in Charles Dickens' "The Pickwick Papers."

Another ferry boat journey introduced us to the steam yacht "Northwind" at anchor in the Inner Harbor. It has teak decks and a mahogany interior, and in its life as a charter craft has been home to luminaries such as Winston Churchill and John E. Kennedy.

Perhaps its greatest claim to fame was when it was one of many courageous boats that crossed the English Channel in the early stages of World War II, to rescue the thousand Allied troops trapped on the beach at Dunkirk.

On one early evening when we had a hunger attack, we caught a ferry and crossed from the Delta Point to Fisherman's Wharf, a delightful waterside café surrounded by brightly colored house boats.

The apotheosis of the ferry experience has to be the 10:30 a.m. Sunday "fandango" in the Inner Harbor. Five of the boats - seeming more like pretty plastic tug boats in a giant sized open-air bathtub - do a water ballet.

The nautical choreography is both charming and captivating as the dear little boats cavort and sputter across the water. An aesthetic cynic might find it incongruous to watch dancing boats, in precision patterns, being serenaded by Richard Strauss's The Blue Danube. We just loved it. And it was free!

A case can be made that Victoria's most well-known attraction is the Butchart Gardens. We opted for a Gray Line bus that took us there from downtown Victoria.

Prior to exploring the gardens we toured a nearby butterfly garden. It was an extraordinary commercial tourist operation designed and built specifically for the hosting and breeding of butterflies and moths from all over the world.

The Butchart Gardens are 55 acres of blossoms and fragrance and the many paths that meander through the four main gardens allow the visitor a series of spectacular views. One could easily spend a whole day soaking up a place, where the colors and the groomed landscape help to explain how the grounds are recognized as a National Historic Site of Canada. Penny marveled at the Sunken Garden, which was created by reclaiming a quarry and transforming it into a horticultural gem.

Vancouver Island is home to more than 30 wineries and courtesy of Marlisa Hollands (Crush Wine Tours) we had a private tour visiting - and, of course, sampling - a variety of wines. Penny bought one of their reds and thought it nice and unassuming, albeit, not memorable. We also checked out the Marley Winery. The blaring reggae music and wine bottles with Caribbean colored labels were the clues that a relative of Bob Marley, the influential West Indian pop musician, ran the venture. While the décor was dazzling the wines were not! Just as Victoria harbor has its quaint ferry boats, Vancouver Island is home to a most quaint railway. We spent a delightful day traveling north to the town of Nanaimo, 117 kilometers from Victoria. The train was one solitary motorized carriage and the speed a plodding 30-40 miles per hour.

The reason for visiting Nanaimo was to touch base with Madge and Gerry Redmond. He and I studied at the same English college quite a few years ago.

While staying in a luxury hotel is fine and dandy, nothing beats being invited into someone's home for a "cuppa" and then being hosted - as if celebrities - and escorted around a foreign country. The Redmonds gave us stellar hospitality and as we waved goodbye to them from the toot-totting train we gave two thumbs up to Nanaimo and to any/all travel opportunities to make social connections with good people.

The Art Gallery of Victoria is attractively welcoming and cozy. It can be visited, and sounded out, in a couple of leisurely hours.

We fell under the spell of Emily Carr, British Columbia's foremost historical artist. Born in 1871, she drew energy and inspiration from First Nations (Native Canadians). She died in 1945, and in the Drury Gallery there is a collection of her work.

Near to downtown Victoria is the Emily Carr House, the artist's birthplace and childhood home, which has been turned into a museum.

A well-known landmark is the Fairmont Empress Hotel. We did explore the Empress and, yes, it is grand and stately. Some of the mouldings, wooden floorways and chandeliers positively ooze elegance.

But we eschewed the afternoon tea. It seemed overly expensive and the sheer volume of people pressing to partake of the afternoon tea runs counter to my sense of style and grandeur.

While Victoria is known as the City of Flowers, it could just as favorably be subtitled the Town of Tap Rooms. As already indicated we liked apple cider at Spinnakers and, in downtown Victoria, we had sausages and mashed potatoes at the Irish Times (every sort of Irish libation known to man, and nightly Celtic folk singers), and fish dishes at The Sticky Wicket (a wonderful nostalgia inn if your passion is cricket, and your heroes the great English and Australian batsmen and bowlers from the 20th century).

As we age we do scour the world for that one special place that could be a retirement Shangri-la. The Redmonds struck it lucky in Nanaimo.

Victoria has it all. A very low crime rate, an idyllic climate, a pedestrian/cycle friendly communication network, and a plethora of good things to do and better things to eat and drink.

The huge caveat is that real estate prices have not just surged, they have gone through the roof. Nevertheless, when we do win the multi-million lottery the Crawfords will not waste one second. In the blink of one eye we will be the proud owners of a villa in Oak Bay (a Victoria suburb) overlooking the scenic Beach Drive offering incredible views of the Olympic Mountains and the snow-capped Mount Baker.

To be honest, though, we know that vacation versus living gives an unrealistic view of a place.