

A grand dowager no more; 48 hours in Victoria -- how to make the most of a weekend; [Final Edition]

Amy Rosen. The Ottawa Citizen. Ottawa, Ont.: Apr 7, 2007. pg. L.4

The southern tip of Vancouver Island boasts Victoria, British Columbia's capital city: a big-shot coastal town with a small- potatoes population. This metropolis of just 75,000 often triples in size in the high season, owing to its temperate climate, ocean sides, old-growth rainforests and mountain vistas. An outdoorsy lifestyle is de rigueur, albeit here it's tied to a decidedly aging community. This means favoured pastimes of gardening and traditional tea. But young scamps reside here, too, and you'll find plenty of cool-vibe restaurants, pubs and shops.

Here's how to spend a weekend featuring the best of both:

Day 1

Morning: Fuel up at Rebar (50 Bastion Sq.; 1-250-361-9223) with a healthy brunch. This colourful hub of mismatched furniture and baked goods features morning specials such as buttermilk corncakes with blueberry almond butter, juice-bar fixes and not-so-ordinary huevos rancheros, where the farm-fresh eggs come wrapped in grilled, organic sprouted wheat tortillas. Lunches and dinners range from tofu and watercress salad to "botanical burgers." Get the picture?

Statistics Canada says Victoria is the fittest city in the land, with 36 per cent of the adult population leading active lives: nearly double the national average. So, do as the locals do and go for a jog (or walk). A stunning route is the Scenic Marine Drive, which follows the coastline from downtown Victoria. Your run begins at the Ogden Point Breakwater on Dallas Road at Dock Street. Views include the Olympic Mountains and Juan de Fuca Strait. You'll spot baby strollers, Frisbee throwers, paragliders and, if you're lucky, a dog wearing sunglasses. Continue to Dallas Road and Douglas Street, which meet at the southwest corner of Beacon Hill Park and the Checkerboard Lookout. Here you'll find Mile 0: the beginning of the Trans-Canada Highway.

The Running Room (runningroom.com) and Front Runners (victoria.frontrunners.ca) offer free running groups several days a week. And check out Fly Victoria Paragliding School (flyvictoria.com).

Afternoon: Just past the legislature is Fisherman's Wharf, which provides moorage for recreational craft, floating homes and fishing vessels. It's also a great place to buy fresh crab, shrimp and fish. Have it cleaned and take it home, or, if you can't wait, head to Barb's Place (Fisherman's Wharf at Erie Street; 1-250-384- 6515; open March to October), famous for authentic English-style fish and chips, served hot and crisp on the dock.

The Royal British Columbia Museum (675 Belleville St.; 1- 888- 447-7977; royalbcmuseum.bc.ca), located at the centre of the Inner Harbour action, is a place of

natural and historical wonders. Honestly, where else in the city can you find a grazing woolly mammoth? The museum recently launched the Natural History Gallery, which has a permanent exhibition on climate change that features dropping temperatures, thunder crashes and lightning flashes. Other highlights include the IMAX theatre, the First Peoples exhibit, with its totem poles and pit house, and all the cute comments from curious kiddies.

Evening: The Island Chefs' Collaborative is a non-profit group of young chefs committed to promoting Vancouver Island cuisine. This means locally grown, high-quality ingredients turned into delicious victuals. Perhaps the best example is Brasserie L'Ecole (1715 Government St.; 1-250-475-6260), where Chef Sean Brennan dishes out perfect brasserie fare such as cognac-and-chicken-liver mousse with Saanich red currant preserves, Quadra Island mussels and Sooke trout. The food is flawless, as are the prices: Starters average \$8, and all mains are \$19.

Later, debauch at **Spinnakers** Brewpub (308 Catherine St.; 1-250-386-2739; **spinnakers.com**), with choices ranging from organic nut-brown ale to the copper-coloured Mitchell's Extra Special Bitter. The tall bartop porcelain-and-brass handles operate piston pumps that draw the ale up from the cellar. Drink, watch soccer, discuss curling. Still parched?

O de Vie also bubbles up here, from some 70 metres beneath the brew-house

Day 2

Morning: Rise early and go for a half-day kayak trip with one of the city's organized outfitters (such as Island Adventure Tours; 1- 866-812-7103; islandadventuretours.com). They'll fetch you from your hotel, whereupon you'll drive 30 minutes through the farm-flanked Saanich Peninsula and into Sidney-by-the-Sea, a teeny township known for its quaint bookshops and marinas. Sun's shining and the water's sparkling as you slice through bays and inlets, spotting sea lions at play and bald eagles soaring above. Even the egrets seem to have no regrets.

No use heading right back into Victoria proper, as you're spitting distance from the famed Butchart Gardens (1-866-652- 4422; butchartgardens.com). You may even be early enough to bypass the tour-bus masses. Even if pretty flowers aren't your cup of tea, these 22 hectares of pristinely maintained gardens are a sight to behold, especially the fairy-tale-like Sunken Garden.

Afternoon: For lunch back in Victoria, head to Mo: Le (554 Pandora Ave.; 1-250-385-Mole), where young owner Cosmo serves up healthy island food.

"I'm from here and I know what people here like to eat," he says. Think omelettes stuffed with local Galloping Goose turkey and sage sausage, Tony's organic kale, tomato and feta, served with toast and pesto hash browns. Or the Pro Vita Meal, which incorporates Tony's organic green salad (who is this Tony, anyway?), sunflower seeds, alfalfa, sauteed tofu and organic flaxseed oil, along with other good-for-you foods.

After lunch, drop into Johnson Street's independent stores, such as Still Life and Smoking Lily (hello, cute panties!), then grab a stash of vanilla creams from Rogers' Chocolates (founded in 1885).

For such a small city, Victoria has an inordinate number of spas, so much so that there's even a so-called Spa Route. Two of the best are the Willow Stream at the Fairmont Empress (721 Government St.; 1-250-384-8111, willowstream.com), and Silk Road Natural Spa (1624 Government St.; 1-250-704-2688; silkroadtea.com) in Chinatown. While Silk Road is home to the best gender-neutral manicures and pedicures around (as well as an excellent tea bar), if you've got the time and dough, book the 90-minute Find Your Energy treatment at the Willow Stream, in a lovely room full of fresh rose petals.

Evening: For cocktail hour, hit the Fairmont Empress's Bengal Lounge. (Might I suggest the signature Bengal Tiger cocktail of rum, apricot brandy, lemonade, pineapple juice and grenadine?) Built circa 1912 as a reading room for gentlemen residents, it's filled with leather club chairs and couches, fretted woodwork and endangered tiger hide: a much-loved gathering spot for B.C.'s policy makers.

For dinner, Temple (525 Fort St.; 1-250-383-2313) is a new school restaurant in an 1890s heritage building serving small and larger plates such as butter-chicken brochettes and togarashi-spiced black cod with bonito butter sauce. It's also an area favourite for into-the-night cocktails in the sexy Velvet Room. Besides, where else can you drink in a temple?

For general information and to find out about side trips to French Beach Provincial Park, Sooke Harbour House and farm and wine tours in the Cowichan Valley, go to hellobc.com or tourismvictoria.com