

Modern Victoria

Discover a little bit of England in the City of Gardens

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Victoria, British Columbia was once thought of as a town for “newly weds and nearly-deads,” where they roll up the sidewalks at night. It has been described as quaint, sleepy, pretty and boring – with nothing at all to do.

Well, not anymore. Victoria today boasts street performers, vendors, bars, nightclubs, tours and museums. And if you arrive by boat, you can tie up right in the center of it all.

TIE UP IN STYLE

Victoria could also be just the relief you need if you’ve been getting a pounding in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Steer around the light at the end of Ogden Point breakwater, and things will begin to calm down. If your boat is less than 65 feet, keep to the south shore of the harbour and to the right of the yellow channel markers.

Victoria harbour is a beehive of activity with floatplanes, whalewatching vessels and numerous passenger ferries that travel to various ports in Washington State. When the big car ferry *Coho* comes in, she looks like she isn’t going to fit through the narrows at Laurel Point.

There are several options for moorage in the harbor, but the most central (and the “classiest”) are the Government St Wharves. Here, you share the street intersection with the stately Fairmont Empress hotel, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia and the Royal British Columbia Museum.

No reservations are accepted for vessels less than 65 feet, and rafting may be required. Call the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority on VHF66A on your way in for berth assignment. Power and potable water are available.

CULTURE AND CRUMPETS

Once your boat is secured, you can walk up the ramp to the inner harbor seawall, where you’ll immediately notice the excitement. Whether it’s a fire juggler, a mime or a

musician, there is usually a busker performing here. You might also get a portrait of yourself sketched or buy some local crafts or a cappuccino from a street vendor without even leaving the dock. In fact, an entire tour of the city can be done without straying very far from the harbor.

Once up at street level, you will find the Royal British Columbia Museum kitty-corner to the wharves. This is a must-see. Unlike many other museums, which simply house artifacts inside glass cases, this one feels alive. There is a simulated fogged West Coast shoreline, complete with sounds of gulls and crashing waves. There is also a mock-up of an early 20th century village, with a Model T in the garage and Charlie Chaplin movies playing at the cinema, complete with bits of popcorn on the floor. There is also a National Geographic Theatre here.

If you're feeling a little weary after your tour of the museum, high tea at The Fairmont Empress hotel across the street is the perfect remedy. Designed by Francis Rattenbury, this hotel opened in all its grandeur in 1908 and has been the haunt of many high society celebrities, including British royalty, ever since.

In 1989, more than \$45 million was spent restoring the Empress to its original Edwardian magnificence. Call as early as you can to make advance reservations for afternoon tea. After all, tea is served here to more than 75,000 visitors annually. Seatings are at 12:30, 2 and 3:30pm.

‘ROUND THE SQUARES

A stroll up Government street from the Empress will take you along wide sidewalks past boutiques, gift shops, and cafes. A few blocks along on the left side is the entrance to Bastion Square. This was the original site of Fort Victoria in 1843. Additionally beautifully restored Victorian buildings are here, as are more sidewalk cafes, where you may choose to simply idle the day away.

The Maritime Museum of British Columbia, originally Victoria's first courthouse, is also located at Bastion Square. Nautical enthusiasts will want to have a look at the rich history of the area.

Located a couple of blocks down on Johnson Street is Market Square. During the Cariboo gold rush, this was a center for opium dens and prostitution. Today, the warehouses have been restored and house restaurants, a nightclub and numerous shops, many selling local arts and crafts.

If you walk through Market Square and exit onto Pandora Street, you will find the very

narrow Fantan Alley. In fact, it is the narrowest street in Canada. This was part of the old Chinatown, which was a network of streets, alleyways and courtyards separate from the rest of Victoria. Walk along Fantan Alley to Fisgard Street and you are in the center of present-day Chinatown. This is the second-oldest Chinatown in North America, after San Francisco's.

Only a block or so back along Store Street is the Johnson Street Bridge – The blue bridge. This accommodates cars, trains and pedestrians, and opens to let marine traffic through into the upper harbour. Once you've crossed the bridge, a pleasant, 20-minute walk along a seawall will take you to Catherine Street, and Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub and GuestHouses.

DOWN BY THE DOCKS

Spinnaker's is Canada's oldest brewpub, and it has come a long way since its beginning in 1985. There are now gourmet meals available in the restaurant downstairs, or pub fare and numerous beers that are brewed on-site upstairs. All this includes beautiful views of the harbour. Try the unique beer and chocolate pairing, with chocolates also crafted on-site.

If you're a little tired of walking, it's only a few steps to a stop for the Victoria Harbour Ferries. These little tubs scoot around, making stops at numerous places around the harbour. Just a short jaunt across from here is Fisherman's Wharf.

This is still the home of a much-reduced fishing fleet, and also of Barb's Place fish and chips restaurant. Barb's place opened on the dock in 1984 to feed hungry fishermen unloading their catches. The reputation of its battered halibut soon spread, and tourists and locals alike began arriving in droves.

Barb's has been featured in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times and on the Food Network.

Finally, another 20-minute walk along a seawall will return you to your boat at the Government Street Wharves, or you can hop on another Victoria Harbour Ferry.

SEE FOR YOURSELF

This has been just a whirlwind tour – far too fast for Victoria. The city moves at more of a saunter, and that is the best way to see it. You'll have to spend a couple of days at least. After all, we haven't even mentioned a walk through Beacon Hill Park or a tour of

the Parliament Buildings.

However long you stay, make a point of walking up the ramp from the dock at the north end of the Government Street wharves by the tourist information center at night. Look back at your boat tied up among the others with the fairy-tale castle – The B.C. Legislature – lit up in the background by thousands of tiny lights. This is a view of Victoria you will want to embed in your memory.