

Island Time

Get a head start on spring by wintering on Vancouver Island BY ROB & WENDY LINDSAY

SPRING ARRIVES on Vancouver Island while the rest of Canada is still shovelling snow. The lure of a milder climate and earlier spring is attracting Canadians who also want to winter on an island where their dollar is really worth a dollar and cross-border health concerns are non-existent.

Our late fall arrival began with a roar and a splash. We flew to Victoria with Harbour Air Seaplanes, a change from sailing with BC Ferries as we usually do. It made for an exciting arrival in Victoria's Inner Harbour, and the aerial view of the Gulf Islands en route was spectacular. We had always wanted to give it a try and were glad we did.

Victoria's Inner Harbour is a bustling place full of buskers and tourists all summer, but come fall, it has a quiet serenity. It takes on a special magic each evening when

small lights switch on to outline the famous parliament buildings. And nearby, the Empress Hotel is floodlit, giving it a grand appearance, as befits the dowager hotel where afternoon tea has become famous.

The next day, we searched out Victoria's Craigdarroch Castle. With its turrets towering above the trees on Joan Crescent, it's easy to locate. This impressive mansion — situated close to Government House, the official residence of the lieutenant-governor — was built for the family of coal baron Robert Dunsmuir in the late 1800s. It's worth a visit just to see the elaborate woodwork, intricate stained glass and fascinating architecture. A surprising number of original pieces are among the room furnishings.

The castle put us in the mood for an elegant lunch, which we found at the White Heather Tea Room on Oak

Bay Avenue. Luckily, we had been advised to reserve ahead, because the melt-in-your-mouth Scottish scones and pastries are extremely popular. A tandem bike ride around Beacon Hill Park afterwards made us feel a bit less guilty about those calories.

We've discovered that Victoria is a very walk- and bicycle-friendly place. For example, you can bike or hike 55 kilometres out toward Sooke along the Galloping Goose Trail, or stroll along the David Foster Way section of the Trans Canada Trail. The ocean-side walk toward Ogden Point is popular, too — especially on a stormy day with waves crashing in.

There's no shortage of things to do around town off-season. Victoria's eclectic restaurant scene has shorter wait times at the best restaurants, and some even offer early-bird specials. The Royal BC

Museum usually brings in another fascinating exhibit, and the vibrant winter theatre scene has plays at the Langham Court, Royal & McPherson, and Belfry theatres.

But in our books, no stay in Victoria would be complete without at least one trip out to the fabulous Butchart Gardens on Brentwood Bay. What began as a limestone quarry 110 years ago was gradually converted by Jennie Butchart into a sunken garden. Over the years, three more splendid collections were added — a rose garden, a Japanese garden and a Mediterranean garden. The gardens now draw nearly a million international visitors annually. There's wondrous beauty to experience every season of the year, and with over 900 plant varieties tended by 550 gardeners, there's surely something to appeal to everyone, from novice

to experienced gardeners. It must have greatly pleased the Butchart family, who still own and operate the gardens, when they received a National Historic Site designation on their 100th anniversary.

Next, it was time to explore other parts of the Island. We departed Victoria and headed up-island along Highway 1 toward the city of Duncan. The day was clear and sunny and the view spectacular along the section of road known as the Malahat Drive. Many say that it provides one of the most scenic panoramic ocean views in the world.

From there, we took the side road toward Lake Cowichan and the Cowichan River Wilderness Lodge, where we had a reservation. We had happy memories of a previous visit to the splendid rustic lodge, during which we had enjoyed the delicious

With more than 900 species, tended to by 550 gardeners, Victoria's family-owned Butchart Gardens has something for everyone.

meals and spent an exciting day on the river. It had been a perfect warm September morning — the second day of the salmon run. We remembered fondly the tranquil river amid tall cedars and firs and the 14 salmon that had taken our hooks. Two beauties had made the trip home to our freezer. With our guide, lodge co-owner Kenzie Cuthbert, who knows the river like the back of his hand, we sat by the fire and relived that fishing trip and our encounter with a black bear who had eyed our catch from across the river. Looking forward to spring fishing, Kenzie



(Left to right) Victoria's Craigdarroch Castle; Tofino Harbour; venerable 800-year-old tree in Cathedral Grove.

Photography, Lindsay Editorial; (below) bigstockphoto.com



Tofino, Vancouver Island

[TRAVEL]

said it would be trout season, with rainbow, cutthroat and brown trout running. The feisty, fighting steelhead would also be waiting. However, he cautioned that the chance of actually landing one was only about 45 per cent compared with the 70 per cent chance on that fall salmon run. However, if there were steelhead out there, we were confident that Kenzie would find them.

Next, we were off to Chemainus farther up-island to view its famous murals. There are 42 of them painted on the sides of buildings around town. They can be viewed by trolley car or horse-drawn carriage or on foot following a trail of yellow footprints. The murals depict the past in splendid colour — the First Nations, forestry, fishing, pioneers and colourful local historical figures. Lately, a tribute to B.C. artist Emily Carr has been added.

Just past the bustling port city of Nanaimo, we left the Island Highway and headed inland along Highway 4 through Port Alberni to Tofino on the west coast. Over the past five years, the quiet fishing villages of Tofino and Ucluelet have been drawing tourists to “storm watch” between November and March. The thrill of experiencing the unbridled fury and force of the pounding Pacific Ocean and the sheer power of the giant waves is a magnet for many.

We booked into the Long Beach Lodge Resort in Tofino, knowing that the view would be spectacular. It sits perched above an expansive sandy beach and offers an unrestricted view of the wild west coast surf from its great room.

Unfortunately, there were no storms during our stay, but we had a wonderful time just the same. We walked the beach, enjoying the wonderfully fresh sea air and watching surfboarders in the waves. We revelled in the incredible scenery, explored the town and wandered the paths of the Botanical Gardens. We also had some delectably memorable



One of over 40 murals in Chemainus.



Our guide, Kenzie, helped Rob land this fighting 13-pound salmon.

meals at the lodge and at Shelter Restaurant in town. Shelter features locally caught seafood and has unique entertainment: a view of the chefs at work in the open-concept kitchen one floor below the glass-walled dining room.

Too soon it was time to trek back across the Island. We planned a halt at MacMillan Provincial Park, which straddles Highway 4 approximately 16 kilometres east of Port Alberni. This is the location of the stand of giant old-growth trees known as Cathedral Grove. Some of these massive Douglas firs and western red cedars are more than 800 years old and nine metres in circumference. It's a humbling, awe-inspiring experience to stand by their trunks pondering what they have experienced over the years. The park is the only highway-

accessible protected old-growth forest in all of British Columbia and one of the few in the world, surely a treasure to be preserved.

Our final stop was the Tigh-Na-Mara Resort on the east coast of the Island near Parksville. The name *Tigh-Na-Mara* means “house by the sea” in Gaelic. But this “house” is actually a community of 192 handcrafted log cottages, suites and condos in a magnificent setting of arbutus and fir forest overlooking the sea. Owned and run by the Hirsch family for the past 30 years, it's grown and transitioned from rustic to world-class. The Grotto Spa is a beautifully designed building nestled within the resort. It offers a full range of treatments and, at its heart, a mineral pool grotto with a waterfall cascading into one end and a small island in the middle. While some spa-goers swim slowly in the soothing waters and others simply sit and soak, we enjoyed floating face-up listening to the tranquil water music, which is only audible underwater. After such pampering, a gourmet meal at the resort's Cedars Restaurant & Lounge is the perfect complement. All in all, Tigh-Na-Mara is one of those spots you just hate to leave, just like so many other Island destinations! ■

IF YOU GO

Destination BC: hellobc.com

Tourism Victoria: tourismvictoria.com