

The many faces of Victoria can keep visitors hopping

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Victoria excels as a destination. What impresses us most is that it appeals to a wide array of visitors, from history and culture buffs to nature lovers, adrenaline junkies, foodies, golfers, or those who simply like to wander around the stunning setting.

Two of the city's most iconic buildings face the central Inner Harbour. Appropriately, a statue of Queen Victoria guards the ornate British Columbia Legislative Assembly. Practically next door is the famous Empress Hotel, built in 1904-08 as part of the Canadian Pacific Railway's string of classic chateau-style hotels across the country. For years, the hotel, with its strong English heritage, has been famous as the top spot for afternoon tea.

It's easy walking distance to the Royal B.C. Museum, the Robert Bateman Centre, and Old Town with its historic buildings and clusters of restaurants. Just beyond is the oldest Chinatown in Canada.

An essential part of visiting Victoria is exploring the surrounding mountain and seaside setting. Hiking trails abound, everything from easy strolls to demanding treks. One we especially enjoyed was the hike up Mount Wells, located in a regional park just west of Victoria. It's fairly steep, with a bit of huffing and puffing, but with spectacular views from the summit.

If you like more adrenaline in your outdoor adventures, WildPlay Elements Park is an obstacle course that goes from tree to tree, and gets progressively higher and more challenging. Visitors follow a course that includes ziplines and walking on a narrow cable and across swinging logs and ropes. It sounds scary, and it is in places. But you wear a safety harness, are tethered at all times, and are supervised by guides. So even if you slip, you won't fall far. Ever fancied swinging on a rope from tree to tree, Tarzan-style? This is the place to do it safely.

Those who prefer their feet firmly on the ground can head to Victoria's famous golf courses. High on the list for avid golfers are the two Jack Nicklaus-designed courses at Bear Mountain Resort. One spreads along the valley while the other stretches higher into the mountains with fabulous views over Victoria.

The Saanich Peninsula, just north of the city, is home to parks, seaside communities, and famous Butchart Gardens with its elaborate floral displays. In recent years, the area has become increasingly known for food and drink. If tea time at the Empress isn't your cup of tea, perhaps another drink made for the historic hotel would hit the spot. Victoria Distillers makes a variety of spirits, but is known for its Empress Gin, made specially for the hotel. Its distinctive indigo colour comes from infusing butterfly pea flowers. Apparently the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Nothing says Victoria like the city's iconic Inner Harbour and Empress Hotel. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

Hiking Mount Wells is one way to get above it all while visiting Victoria.

The obstacle course at WildPlay Elements Park keeps visitors on their toes.

British Columbia's Legislative Assembly building is spectacular at night.

This totem pole is located on the grounds of the B.C. Legislative Assembly.

combination was discovered by accident, but turned out to be a winner. Visitors can tour the small distillery, followed by tastings of gins and rums.

A pleasant surprise was visiting Sea Cider Farm and Ciderhouse where they produce award-winning apple ciders. Their cider varieties are almost as diverse as differ-

ent styles of wine. On a tour of the facility, you see the differences between cider apples and eating apples. Not only are cider apple trees smaller, but here they keep them trimmed short for ease of handling.

No trip to Victoria is complete without getting out on the water. Whale watching is especially popu-

lar, since the area has both resident whales and others that migrate through. Sometimes whales are spotted nearby, but the day we took a trip it was necessary to go a bit farther, which was fine because it was also a chance to travel around some nearby islands. We eventually caught up to a group of five migrating killer whales. No matter

how many pictures or videos you see, nothing compares with the thrill of finding these magnificent creatures in the wild.

For more information, visit www.tourismvictoria.com.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.