

# Three Perfect Days: Victoria, B.C.

*Once a rugged outpost, the serene and surprisingly balmy city of Victoria, British Columbia, is an island home to bicycle trails, whale pods and Native American culture.*

**Author** Melissa Nix

**VICTORIA IS QUIET. ALMOST TOO QUIET.** Stand near the grandiose Parliament building at the Inner Harbor, and it's impossible to imagine that this perfectly mannered island city was once a rough-and-tumble gold mining hub, a sprawling carnival of disorder populated by industrious native Inuit and Métis traders, miners, Chinese opium smugglers, thieves and all manner of accompanying riff raff .

But today, all that remains of those times are the First Nations, descendants of the area's original tribal inhabitants. The carnival is gone, replaced by a town as charming and peaceful as it was once restless. As for the riff raff, let's just say they retired. In fact, of today's 78,000 resident Victorians, a disproportionately large number are seniors, drawn by the region's remarkably mild weather, which allows for year-round gardening and golf. Some call Victoria "the Boca of Canada," but anyone who expects swarms of battery-powered Rascal scooters and blue-hairs lining up for the early-bird special will be surprised. The city exudes youthful energy. Cyclists, kayakers and avid joggers abound. And if there is an early-bird special to be found, chances are it's made with organic, locally grown produce.

Victoria still retains some of its frontier town DNA. Sure, the tempo is a touch more subdued, but First Nations people remain an integral part of Victoria's community and cultural life, and the area's roots can be seen in its raw, breathtaking surroundings: the jagged Olympic Mountains, the dramatic Strait of Juan de Fuca and the rolling Pacific beyond. There are still pioneers here; they're just better fed and *far* more civilized.

**DAY ONE |** You awaken in your room on the top floor of **1 The Oswego** , a sleek boutique hotel in the quiet neighborhood of James Bay. From the balcony you breathe in the warm air and scan the snow-crested Olympic mountain range and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, a 95-mile passage that connects Puget Sound with the Pacific. In the O Bistro café downstairs, have a coffee and some fresh strawberries, then saunter down to the harbor and the core of Old Town.

Victoria is the capital of British Columbia, a fact that's impossible to overlook as you reach the waterfront. Towering above you, the iconic copper-domed **2 Parliament** is an exemplar of Baroque and Romanesque architecture, so well wrought it could serve as the backdrop of a bodice-ripper. Francis Mawson Rattenbury, a star-crossed English architect, moved to Vancouver in 1891 and designed the legislature,

which was completed seven years later. (Perhaps he should have retired in Victoria: His second wife's lover murdered him in London in 1935.)

Seagulls scatter as you descend Parliament's steps to the Inner Harbor's long promenade. Hawker stalls sell First Nation–inspired feathered dream catchers and beaded jewelry and generally bad art. You do the right thing and walk on past it.

A century ago, steamships were tied up along docks now crowded with yachts. Back then, members of the British royal family visited regularly, arriving by boat and climbing the nearby steps to the grand **3 Fairmont Empress Resort Hotel**. An ivy-clad classical chateau with turrets and other gothic touches, the Fairmont was also built by poor Rattenbury, whose ghost is said to haunt its hallways. (See “Ghostly Victoria,” page 83.)

Follow Queen Elizabeth's footsteps up toward the Fairmont and then make your way down Wharf Street to **4 Willie's Bakery & Café**, British Columbia's oldest bakery. Willie's is often patronized by celebs taking breaks from film shoots in Vancouver— high-watt personae like Pamela Anderson, Colin Firth and Bill Nighy (who even has a special jar of jam kept for him under the coffee counter).

Have a shot of espresso; you're going shopping. In **5 Lower Johnson Street (a.k.a. LoJo)**, a hip enclave peppered with independent shops, you find Hemingway, a girly boutique filled with silky dresses, perfectly cut shifts and necklaces heavy with charms. A few doors down is Hemp & Company, which makes everything out of you guessed it, and beyond that is Flavour, a vintage clothier that'll tempt you with such gems as \$15 Doc Martens (a perfect gift for your nephew, the one who recently discovered eyeliner).

You've done your family duty; now it's time for some culture. Make a left at Government Street and step through the ornate Gate of Harmonious Interest and into the oldest Chinatown in Canada (and the second oldest in North America, after San Francisco's). Bypass the bustling dim sum joints and head to **6 Fan Tan Alley**, officially the continent's narrowest commercial lane, to take in the locally produced artworks at Studio 16 ½. Next door on this wee thoroughfare is the highly esoteric Triple Spiral Metaphysical Store, the proprietor of which is a practicing Wiccan. It's said that the city has more witches per capita than anywhere in Canada. Spooky.

To calm your nerves, you'll want something hearty for lunch. Try Fort Street, home to several eateries and still more antique shops. **7 Choux Choux Charcuterie** catches your eye, and the hearty pheasant paté sandwich with caramelized onions and tangy Dijon will set you back only \$6.

Double back down Fort Street and stop in at **8 Silk Road Aromatherapy & Tea Co.**, where you can sip some hand-blended pu-erh tea while you wait your turn for a signature green tea facial. (You, too, guys. Good skincare knows no gender.) Then make your way to The Fairmont Empress for a predinner drink on

the veranda. Try the Empress 1908 Cocktail, or, if you're in the mood for something spicy, Rattenbury's Bloody Caesar, made with housemade tomato and clam juice.

Hail a taxi to **9 Spinnakers**, a brewpub opened in 1984—Canada's first—and dig into grilled line-caught Pacific salmon. Spinnaker's has a 280-degree view of the harbor and a lively after-dinner scene. After downing a couple of powerful Canadian brews with your festive new Victorian pals, it occurs to you gauzily that the remaining 80 degrees are taken up by the massive brewing vats.

**DAY TWO** | Begin your day with an omelet, smoked salmon and deliciously fresh blueberry muesli and yogurt in the Empress Room. Dillon, the highly capable concierge, suggests you visit Beacon Hill Park for a sense of why Victoria is called the "City of Gardens." He arranges for you to pick up a bike rental from **1 Cycle BC**, and you join the steady stream of riders wheeling their way through the powerwalking grannies to the leafy embrace of **2 Beacon Hill Park**. You pass weeping willow trees and hundreds of rose bushes on your way to the Children's Farm, where you befriend a chatty baby goat. As you leave, nod to the suspicious albino peacock that guards the exit, who gruffly displays his dazzling ivory plumage. You bike back to the harbor promenade, ringed with flowers and the scent of ocean air, for a gander at the handmade First Nation totem poles on display there. Victorians wander past walking their dogs and tossing breadcrumbs at pigeons. Watching the jade water crashing on the rocks below, you think seafood, and as it happens, the best fish and chips in town are a quick ride away at **3 Barb's Place** on Fisherman's Wharf. Gaze longingly at the fishing boats and houseboats lining the wharf as you wolf down fresh fried halibut and fries.

Thus fortified, you're ready to head out to sea. But first, stop in at The Strath Ale, Wine & Spirits Merchants and pick up a bottle of a local riesling. The hills on the peninsula are crawling with vineyards, and the regional wines are surprisingly good. Park your bike at the **4 Prince of Whales** whale-watching company. Three resident orca pods call the Straits home, and your mission is to meet each one. For the next three hours, you watch from the deck as the killer whales flap their tails to attract mates and make a meal of a seal or two. (Sorry, but they don't call them killer whales for nothing.) You pop the cork, sip luxuriantly, take in the steep cliffs nearby, and toast your luck for having been born more or less atop the food chain.

Back on dry land, you feel the need to wash off the salt spray before dinner. Pay a visit to The Fairmont Empress' **5 Willow Stream Spa** for a quick respite in the Finnish dry sauna, the steam room and the magnesium-enriched thermal pool—a perfect antidote to your mild sea-sickness and that whole seal business.

Victoria's farm-to-table culinary scene rivals that of northern California. For a sample, take a taxi 10 minutes east to Fernwood, the city's most ethnically diverse neighborhood, and take a seat at **6 Stage**, a small-dish wine bar and Victoria's culinary epicenter. The grilled haloumi cheese with heirloom tomatoes and the fried octopus drizzled with lemon are divine. As you sip a digestif, you discover your dining mates are the chefs and sommeliers of the most acclaimed restaurants in town, always a good sign.

**DAY THREE** | As you breakfast on perfectly flaky croissant and café latte in the Fairmont's Empress Room, you decide to beat the crowds with an early visit to the highly regarded **1 Royal British Columbia Museum**, a quick walk from the hotel. There, you peruse a cast of the Rosetta Stone and an eerily captivating set of 12th century Lewis chessmen, carved from walrus ivory. You even get to handle the forefather of the Swiss Army Knife, a lava rock ax made in Africa's Olduvai Gorge some one and a half million years ago.

Time to see the countryside. Make your way back to the Fairmont, and have the concierge obtain a rental car. Soon enough, you're rocketing out of town to visit the lush farmland of Saanich, just north of Victoria. The turn-of-the-century **2 Butchart Gardens**—just 30 minutes from downtown (less if you don't drive like the locals, who seem to have an aversion to accelerators)—are 55 acres of rhododendrons and roses and eerily gorgeous blue poppies from the Himalayas. It's easy to get lost on the paths through the flora, and you'll be tempted to take a dip in the lake. But you've got miles to go.

After you've gotten your fill of those blue wonders, drive south to **3 Victoria Spirits and Barking Dog Vineyard**, a boutique distillery on Old West Saanich Road. Master distiller Peter Hunt's Victoria Gin is made from a neutral grain spirit and 10 botanicals, including handpicked local juniper, orange and lemon peel. It's a smooth concoction, but you're driving, so resist the urge to indulge. Instead, have just a taste and wander the rolling vineyards.

You've already made dinner reservations at the four-star **4 Aerie Resort & Spa**, which is a 25-minute ferry ride from Brentwood Bay to Mill Bay in the Cowichan Valley. Perched 1,000 feet up on a hill of evergreens, the decadently rustic Aerie looks over the Finlayson Arm fjord.

The restaurant specializes in plates of fantastically fresh scallops, spot prawns and lobster fished straight from the fjord below. Like Victoria itself, the Aerie isn't the hottest nightlife scene in the world, but it's a place to find an easy moment of serenity and beauty, and that's increasingly rare.

Though you're not eager to leave this fine view, you return to the city by Highway 1 and have a nightcap at the Empress' Bengal Room. The swankiest venue in town, the room features an actual Bengal tiger hanging above the fireplace and a Casablanca vibe. Ordering a 1908 Cocktail, you favor the stranger on the next barstool with a sample of your Bogie impression: "Of all the gin joints..."

## ***GHOSTLY VICTORIA***

Victoria is known for its abundance of spooky lore, and while apparitions are said to inhabit some of the city's top tourist spots, they don't appear to be troubled by guests—so long as they mind their manners.



**THE FAIRMONT EMPRESS**

### **THE LORE**

Francis Mawson Rattenbury, the hotel's architect, was murdered by his second wife's lover in 1935.

IF YOU LISTEN CLOSELY, YOU'LL HEAR...

The cuckolded ghost walking the parquet floors of this luxe haven, rata-tatting his cane along the way.



**ROGERS' CHOCOLATES**

### **THE LORE**

The oldest chocolate maker in Canada

IF YOU LISTEN CLOSELY, YOU'LL HEAR...

The disembodied sound of a little girl laughing, as well as the clacking of high heels striking the ceiling above. Manager Mark Harrison reports chocolates thrown at him, lights going out and cabinets closing by themselves.



**BASTION SQUARE**

### **THE LORE**

Once the city's gallows, bodies of the condemned were buried beneath it—and remain there still.

IF YOU LISTEN CLOSELY, YOU'LL HEAR...

Echoes of muffled footsteps and dragging chains. The ghost of the city's hanging judge, Sir Matthew

Baillie Begbie, has been spotted on numerous occasions in Bastion Square, which is considered the most haunted part of Victoria.



**DEADMAN'S ISLAND**

#### THE LORE

In 1867, teenagers swim here and set fire to a First Nations' burial ground.

IF YOU LISTEN CLOSELY, YOU'LL HEAR...

Otherworldly howling resounding from the island and crossing the Upper Harbor. Fishermen have also reported seeing flashes of light through the island's trees.

#### **LOCAL HAUNTS**

Illustrations by **Esra Croline Røise**



**BILL COWEN**

OWNER, STUDIO 16

"I love the culture here. It's creative, welcoming and optimistic. Something not to miss in Victoria: Street Level Espresso at 714 Fort Street. The café is run by an amazing local artist named Ken Gordon. And the espresso will wire you."



**DANIELA CUBELIC**

CO-OWNER, SILK ROAD AROMATHERAPY & TEA CO.

"It's a great walking city, and the buildings have a sort of heritage charm, and that's incredibly visually appealing. I'm also a huge foodie, and the culinary community here is amazing. On Fort Street, one of my favorite places, I'll visit Plenty, an epicurean pantry."



**PETER HUNT**

DISTILLER, VICTORIA SPIRITS

“For a quick meal downtown, my favorite place is Ferris’ Oyster Bar & Grill. They have, like, dozens of different oysters.”



**TIFFINY DOBSON**

CO-OWNER, HEMINGWAY

“In Victoria, you’re surrounded by woods and water. I often go down to Dallas Road to walk along the harbor. It feels like you are nowhere near the city of Victoria, yet you’re just blocks away. When I’m in town, I usually go to Darcy’s at Wharf Street and Bastion Square. There are tons of young people and great cocktails.”

### **KAYAKETY-YAK**

*Victorians get exercise—lots of it.*

New York has cabs, Venice has canals, and Amsterdam has...um, it has canals, too. Victoria is crawling with bicycles, but residents’ true love is the humble kayak, which is appropriate, since it was the native Inuits who first developed this little kazooshaped craft.

One look at scores of locals paddling in the harbor and it’s obvious why Victoria is one of Canada’s fittest cities. Even those kayaking commuters linger on their paddle home to enjoy the orcas, seals, sea lions and eagles. Feel like getting your feet wet? Try Ocean River Sports ([www.oceanriver.com](http://www.oceanriver.com)), which offers tours of the area.

## TEA PARTY



Tea at the Fairmont  
Empress Hotel

*Get classy with a storied afternoon break*

Few places outside of the stuffy antechambers of Notting Hill take their afternoon tea as seriously as Victoria. Every day at around 4 p.m., residents engage in a ritual dating back to the days of King Charles II. Choose from a variety of brews, then pluck snacks from a three-tiered trivet, including finger sandwiches, scones with clotted cream, and chocolates. A number of Victoria's restaurants and cafés vie for the distinction of best afternoon tea, but the top purveyor is the singular Fairmont Empress Resort Hotel, the reputation of which is borne out by its list of tea-takers: Barbra Streisand, Mel Gibson, John Travolta, Bob Hope, Queen Elizabeth II, Rita Hayworth, Spencer Tracy, Shirley Temple and the King of Siam have all raised their pinkies in the hotel's famous tea lobby. Good show, old chap.