

Pleasure island

From dense forests to diverse city streets, British Columbian capital Victoria offers a softer side of Canada adventures, writes **SJ Armstrong**

Off the edge of Canada's western coast, British Columbia's scattered Pacific islands are truly wild. Thickets of ancient trees tower over dark forest floors, deserted beaches lie coated in low mists and the population mostly consists of wild animals.

The key exception is Victoria, a cosmopolitan city on the southern tip of Vancouver Island – the largest on Canada's west coast, just across the water from its namesake city. The British Columbian capital is my comfy basecamp for a gentle adventure through the rugged Canadian west, taking in gastronomy, horticulture and even ocean expeditions.

INTO THE WILD

In the early 20th century, humpback whales in the Pacific Northwest's Salish Sea had been virtually wiped out, skewered by sharp-speared whalers. For 70-odd years, the meandering pods of sea giants never strayed back into the Salish, but today, standing on the deck of a whale-watching ship, I see they have well and truly returned. It's impossible to keep track of the number of whale tails peeking out between the thrashing waves.

On a trip with Eagle Wing Tours (half-day excursions from around £85), I watch as a new generation of humpback whales breach the chilly surface of the sea. Along with another four species ➤

The 10-storey
Malahat Skywalk
by Hamish Hamilton



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Race Rocks Lighthouse; The Butchart Gardens; a seal; Malahat Skywalk's Overhang
PICTURES: Ben Johnson; Destination Greater Victoria; Destination Canada



ASK THE expert

"Often described as quaint, Victoria offers sightseeing opportunities for visitors of all ages. It's walkable, with much activity around the picturesque Inner Harbour – boats of all sizes include ferry services to Washington state in the US, whale-watching vessels, pleasure boats, water taxis and floatplanes. Victoria retains much of its colonial heritage, including the Parliament Buildings and iconic Fairmont Empress Hotel. Deep ties to its Indigenous culture are evident on a visit to Thunderbird Park."

Denise Hunn,
Canada programme
manager, Prestige Travel



of whales in the deep-water harbour of Victoria, more than 500 humpbacks now thrive in the strait that sits between Vancouver Island and Seattle. Chasing glimpses of the giants, the boat follows in the wake of their lunging breaches and flicking tails to the protected waters around Race Rocks Ecological Reserve, accessible only via an authorised tour.

Accompanied by a canopy of swooping bald eagles, we approach the rocky outcrop that appears stranded in the middle of the sea. Discernible from afar by its solitary lighthouse, as we draw nearer it's clear that the rock isn't as lonely as it seems. A colony of barking seals is strewn across the sunbaked shore. The sound is close to roaring, emanating from both the enormous Pacific harbour seals and fearsome northern fur seals. However, the elephant seals are the ones who rule the rocks; they can measure up to five metres, and equal Canada's charismatic grizzly bears in their ferocity.

Away from the wind-whipped seas, I familiarise myself with Canada's other ancient giants in the forests outside Victoria. Approaching the spiralling column of the Malahat Skywalk, a year-round attraction that combines a boardwalk through the forest canopy with the 10-storey tower, I'm dwarfed by colossal red cedars, spindly Douglas firs and the rust-red trunks of the native arbutus tree. Yet their soaring branches start to blend into the canopy as I climb the path to the summit, where I soak in the panoramic views over a quintessentially Canadian scene: thick forests that cling to quiet mountain ridges along the Saanich Peninsula. The Skywalk's Overhang

“Elephant seals rule the rocks; they can measure up to five metres, and equal Canada's grizzly bears in their ferocity

opened in May, inviting visitors to step over the edge into a glass cube suspended 250 metres above sea level, with a dizzying view of mountains, forests and ocean below.

GARDENS AND GHOSTS

Victoria is known as Canada's 'city of gardens', with carefully curated estates surrounding the city. I trade wild woodlands for meticulously manicured parks at The Butchart Gardens, a 13-mile drive from downtown. Strolling through its winding laneways, the scent of pine is superseded by soft, fragrant flowers. These blooming flowerbeds lead me through the shade of the Japanese garden, where moss clings to gnarled tree trunks, until the pebbly paths culminate at the gently flowing Tod Inlet.

Back in Victoria, rose petals also perfume the air on the gated, garden-flanked path to Craigdarroch Castle, a Scottish baronial pile bordered by pinstripe lawns. This 'mini-Balmoral' has stood on the hilltop since 1890, a relic of the British nouveau riche who designed the city's colonial sites. Guide Johnny Brenneman recounts stories of family feuds at the castle as we continue our journey on his touring pedicab (Journey by Johnny tours start from ➤

DESTINATIONS

CANADA | VICTORIA



ABOVE: Victoria's Parliament Building is a legacy of the city's British colonial heritage BELOW: Chinatown PICTURES: Ben Johnson; Destination Canada

GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights from the UK to Victoria, but there are daily non-stop services from Heathrow to Vancouver with British Airways and Air Canada. From there, travellers can board a 90-minute BC Ferry sailing to Swartz Bay, Victoria's nearest ferry port, then drive south for half an hour. Alternatively, soar over the islands on a 25-minute flight, or even take a floatplane (a type of seaplane) or helicopter ride from Vancouver. Harbour Air also launched its first direct seaplane service from Seattle to Victoria's Inner Harbour in June, running daily until September 30, with one-way fares from about £79.



about £32 per hour). Traversing Victoria's convenient bike lanes, we follow the story of the city through both its British-inspired architecture and Indigenous artworks.

Exploring some of Vancouver Island's oldest colonial communities, we zip past quaint houses with painted awnings shadowed by monkey-puzzle trees. They give way to peaceful parks where intricately carved totem poles made by Indigenous communities stand sentinel.

To discover more of the city's storied past, I spend my evening wandering through back alleys in Chinatown with another guide, John Adams, on Discover the Past's Ghostly Walks tour (from £14 per person). Under the glow of golden streetlights and neon restaurant signs, Adams spins tales of jilted lovers, ill-fated fortune seekers and gruesome Jack the Ripper-like murders.

CREATURE COMFORTS

As morning breaks over Victoria, the smell of freshly ground coffee fills the air, along with the buzz of locals out for a decadent brunch. Inspired, I set out on my own quest to sample Canada's signature dish – poutine. Thankfully, there's an entire menu dedicated to these cheesy chips at OEB Breakfast Co. Adding its own west coast flair, plates include avant-garde additions such as lobster, seared scallops and salmon lox.

Seafood dominates Victoria's cuisine, and it's a speciality in my next port of call, the harbourside Red Fish Blue Fish restaurant. A classic fish-and-chip joint, its crispy, battered cod pays homage to Victoria's British heritage.

This western province is also known for another pub staple: cider. Alongside Kevin Bélanger, owner-operator of Alset Tours, I venture to Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse.

Sipping my way through an extended flight of delectable house-brewed ciders, I can taste the signature fruity and floral flavours of Vancouver Island in each sip.

Capping off my indulgent retreat with a relaxing finale, I go for a total refresh at Aerth Saunas near Victoria's Inner Harbour. Though I may not be scaling glaciers or swimming the Rockies' numbing lakes, I get a taste of Canada's biting cold as I plunge into the bone-chilling icy pool. But unlike in the country's wild mountains, I have instant relief: it's always warm in the sleek sauna rooms. After skimming the waves in search of wildlife or soaring to new heights in search of scenic views, it's proof that Victoria offers a gentler kind of adventure. **TW**

BOOK IT

Prestige Travel offers a 10-night Vancouver Island Small Group Tour from £4,474 per person, based on two sharing. Includes daily breakfast, select excursions, ground transport and flights departing May 21, 2027. prestigettravel.co.uk

Kuoni's 13-night Best of British Columbia Road Trip ends in Victoria and costs from £3,849 per person, based on two sharing. Includes car hire, select excursions and flights departing September 22. kuoni.co.uk

Newmarket Holidays has introduced a 13-night tour, Canada's Pacific Coast Wildlife and the Rockies, starting from £4,829 per person, based on two sharing, room-only. The itinerary includes two nights in Victoria plus ground transport, whale watching, Butchart Gardens entry and flights departing October 4, 2028. newmarketholidays.co.uk