

TAKE IT

Canada's laid-back smaller cities offer a breath of fresh air for second-time visitors, says **Sasha Wood**

As gateways to a vast country that's almost the size of Europe, Canada's big cities are among its most popular destinations. But the smaller cities offer a more digestible slice of the action for repeat visitors – and they make even easier jumping-off points for the wide open spaces that travellers have been craving.

At Prestige Holidays, Denise Hunn, director of Canada tour operations, says the operator is already noticing an uptick in bookings for next summer, partly due to pent-up demand.

Premier Holidays reports similar interest. Product manager Tim Greathead says: "Canada has sold

really well for 2022 with a healthy number of bookings. I really think it's one of the countries people have been dreaming of during the pandemic because of the visually stunning landscapes and wildlife.

"We've had a lot of interest in the smaller cities in Canada: Victoria, as part of larger itineraries exploring BC; and St John's, because of its isolation on Newfoundland, is usually their main base to visit the rest of the island."

For travellers in search of a compact city base from which to explore, there are some fantastic alternatives to the big hitters. Here we highlight three of the best small cities for clients who want to switch-up their next trip.



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VANCOUVER

Set between the mountains and ocean, this green metropolis is a springboard for most journeys into British Columbia. While it's a vital stop – and its parks and arts scene are well worth exploring – travellers should consider hopping over the water to sister-city Victoria on Vancouver Island. According to Premier Holidays product manager Tim Greathead: "It has the same cosmopolitan feel as Vancouver but on a much smaller and more intimate scale."

VICTORIA

A beautiful urban base with British Columbia's natural bounty right on its doorstep, Victoria's waterfront, winding alleys, historic squares and old buildings make it a very walkable city. It also has a thriving food scene. Among its plentiful bars and eateries are microbreweries, artisan chocolatiers and bakeries, which can be explored on food tours. For Brits, the double-decker buses and tearooms are a little slice of home. Around the corner from the historic Inner Harbour, picturesque Fisherman's Wharf is the perfect spot for people-watching, with colourful floating homes, unusual boutiques and food stalls. The historic Butchart botanical gardens are well worth exploring, especially in the summer and holiday seasons when visitors can catch concerts, illuminations and fireworks in the 100-year-old grounds. Venturing out of the city is an absolute must for wildlife lovers, as Vancouver Island is a haven for grizzly bears and rare spirit bears, with world-class whale-watching just offshore.

BOOK IT: A 12-night self-drive tour based in Victoria starts at £2,599 based on two people sharing, including Air Canada flights, car hire and grizzly bear viewing, departing May 16. trade.premierholidays.co.uk



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HALIFAX

Atlantic Canada's chief city, Halifax sits on the world's second-largest natural harbour and is the main hub for the Maritime Provinces. It also offers the shortest flight time between North America and the UK, at just over six hours. Its small downtown core and vibrant harbour are easy to explore on foot. New waterfront district Queen's Marque, featuring luxury hotel the Muir, is due to debut soon.

ST JOHN'S

For a quirky city break on the edge of the North Atlantic, Canada's most easterly outpost is an enticing option. The brightly coloured clapboard capital of Newfoundland has a mix of Irish and European influences, with friendly pubs, restaurants and galleries clustered around a historic harbour. Standing out above St John's sloping skyline, the Rooms culture centre and art gallery, which opened in 2005, is a creative hub and portal into the island's past. Meanwhile, the largest cathedral in Canada, the Basilica Cathedral of St John the Baptist, built in 1855, towers above the streets nearby. Clients can head out to Witless Bay Ecological Reserve to kayak alongside whales or stride up scenic Signal Hill for cliff-edge views. More-active travellers shouldn't miss a chance to hike sections of the East Coast Trail close to St John's such as Sugarloaf Path or The Spout to spot waterfalls, wave-powered geysers and bald-headed eagles.

BOOK IT: Five nights in St John's at the four-star Jag Boutique Hotel starts at £1,456 on a twin-share basis, including Air Canada flights via Halifax, a Historical St John's & Cape Spear Tour and a Puffin & Whale Watch Excursion, for a June 10, 2022, departure. prestigecanada.co.uk



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QUEBEC CITY

The quintessential Acadian city enchants all who visit, with its French flair, storybook architecture and cosmopolitan centre. Myriad ways to experience the city include food tours around its boulangeries and boutiques and walking tours of the cobblestone streets in the atmospheric Champlain Quarter. Through it all runs the majestic Saint Lawrence River, but the magic of Quebec extends far beyond the city's bounds.

GASPÉ

The Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec's southeastern corner is the province in microcosm and a great place to sample its culture on a smaller scale. Getting there by ferry is half the fun, with whales often spotted feeding where the St Lawrence River meets the sea. Its mini-city, Gaspé, boasts the same Canadian-French mix as Quebec City but without the crowds. A natural base from which to explore the peninsula's coastal routes, it's known for its fresh lobster and seafood, with ample bistros and bars such as the cheerful Brise Bise restaurant, a must-visit on the waterfront that often hosts live music. Standout attractions include the Musée de la Gaspésie, which charts the peninsula's history. Keen walkers can hike five miles from Gaspé to the lighthouse at Cap Gaspé – a start point for the International Appalachian Trail – and spot whales, seals, gannets and even black bears. The peninsula is best explored in autumn when the maple trees across the four national parks explode into a profusion of golds and reds.

BOOK IT: A 14-night tour of the Gaspé Peninsula starts at £1,998, including British Airways flights and car hire, based on two adults travelling in autumn during fall foliage. purelycanada.co.uk



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