Fresh, wild and never dull: Vancouver, B.C., blends sophisticated urban scenes and natual bounties

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The sound of crashing waves at my back, snow-peaked mountains filling the far horizon, and in-between, a towering assemblage of gleaming high-rise glass and steel structures proudly proclaiming that here stands a 21st century city, albeit one that is suffused and surrounded by rugged nature. Vancouver, British Columbia, offers multiple levels of environmental interaction and adds in a stunning blend of sophisticated urban culture and bracing diversity.

This Northwest city, connected by highways and air service to the U.S. border, also forms the culinary nexus of one of North America’s most prolific, creative and sustainable food-producing regions. This abundance is led by a thriving fishing industry that extends from the roaring Pacific to the tranquil bays and inlets of hundreds of small waterside settlements.

Starting at the top

As if to demonstrate that you can have it all, the upscale, state-of-the-art Fairmont Pan Pacific hotel is high on creature comforts with outstanding floor-to-ceiling scenic views from many of their spacious rooms and suites overlooking Vancouver’s Burrard Inlet. That’s the harbor where most of the cruise ships pull in and pontoon sea planes take off for nether regions of British Columbia.

On the Pan Pacific’s second level, the bounteous yields of British Columbia go edible at executive chef Hector Laguna’s open-kitchen Botanist restaurant, which premiered just last year. Nearby, a Champagne Lounge overlooking the lobby’s sushi restaurant and piano bar is surrounded by planters filled with greenery indigenous to British Columbia. An adjacent indoor garden lures guests into a glass-walled area filled with 50 different plant species that include rare fruit bushes and edible growth such as green tea camellia, cardamom and ginger.
Once seated in Botanist, I was tempted by Chef Laguna’s tasting menu, which featured seared sablefish (also called black cod or ling cod) and bison tenderloin, but instead could not resist the oven-roasted halibut with spring vegetables followed by herb-crusted lamb saddle with fava beans and shallots. Content with my surf and turf, my companion went totally maritime, with charred octopus and Nova Scotia lobster tail.

And beyond ...

Within half-hour strolls from the Pan Pacific, I found a wealth of fascinating day-out activities. Canada Place exhibition and events hall is just across the street. They have a ticketed ride called “FlyOver Canada” where you strap yourself into feet-dangling seats, then “fly” by way of a 360 degree, 65-foot spherical screen that takes you on an eight-minute helicopter adventure traveling east to west across our northern neighbor nation. The 4-D ride includes being bathed in forest smells, rushing wind, sea spray and waterfall mist as the seats gently turn and bank to match the movement on the screen.

Victory Square and Gastown, with its famous steam clock, represent the oldest section of Vancouver. Lovely Stanley Park and Coal Harbour are great for hiking or biking and hold delights like a brilliant outdoor collection of First Nations (in the U.S., we’d say “Native American”) totem poles.

Other parts of the city are wonderful to visit for their alluring boutiques, fascinating architecture and lively shopping malls. Those types of venues may not seem especially unique, but not so predictable were chance encounters out on the street. I passed by as an ultra-hyped sports fan was being interviewed by a TV news team regarding a big hockey game that night. Then, on a side street, I saw a camera crew filming a science fiction movie. One of the actors playing a humanoid alien kindly joined me for some quick selfies. I soon got the feeling Vancouver is never dull, with surprises on every corner.

As if to verify that, a big vintage 1940s-style yellow taxi pulled up to take me to a chic dining venue called Nightingale that lies between the Fairmont Pan Pacific and the prestigious four-story Vancouver Art Gallery. The Nightingale restaurant is a joint effort between head chef Phil Scarfone and owner David Hawksworth, who spent a decade in Europe working in Michelin-starred kitchens.
Just inside Nightingale’s entrance was a large hearth with a roaring fire, and the wood-paneled walls added just the right amount of cozy. Their menu is known for its fresh crudo fish and charcuterie, creative housemade pastas, crisp salads, seasonal veggie dishes, such as roasted cauliflower with smoked sunflower seed, cilantro, and turmeric dressing, and a dozen different pizzas, including one topped with lamb sausage, broccolini, feta, and mint. All of the above are paired with local craft beers, wines, or on-tap gin and tonics.

**We can see Asia from here**

Many of Nightingale’s dishes hint at Asian influences, but the Chinese presence in Vancouver is legend, with both an old Chinatown downtown and a sprawling new one in the south Vancouver suburb of Richmond, also known as “Little Hong Kong.” In the older location, a classical Chinese garden and beautifully restored historic home named in honor of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen are cultural treasures.

Vancouver had welcomed a huge influx of Asian citizens around the time China took over Hong Kong, back in June 1997. Then about a decade ago, many of those entrepreneurial immigrants organized a Night Market and live music festival in Richmond that runs every weekend evening throughout the warmer months. It features hundreds of vendors shouting greetings in nine Asian languages and selling everything from miniature pagodas to clothing to giant panda dolls. Naturally, it’s the food most people come for, and you’ll find multi-ethnic offerings of items like moo shu barbecue pork, Thai satay sticks, veggie sushi and bubble tea.

In winter, most of that action moves indoors to the giant Asian-themed shopping malls that dominate this area. But in Richmond is not all business. The nearby south arm of the picturesque Fraser River fronts an estuary habitat that is home to abundant wildlife, including many species of birds as well as sea lions and river otters. Visitors regularly spot herons, eagles, snow geese and mallards splashing in the salt water marshes, as well as raccoons and coyotes in nearby fields.

**Keeping it fresh**
About 15 minutes away by car, a huge Buddhist Temple can be found in Steveston town, home port for Canada’s largest commercial fishing fleet. Consisting of more than 600 vessels, you sometimes can buy fresh, wild seafood directly off these commercial boats. At one time, Steveston sheltered an amazing 15 fish canneries, although today only one, the Gulf of Georgia Cannery, remains as a museum.

Inside this National Historic Site, a girl named Arden, costumed as an 1800s salmon packer, was finishing up one of her tours. “And don’t miss London Heritage Farm,” Arden was encouraging visitors. “It’s a snug place to enjoy hot beverages and pastries in a historical 1880s farmhouse setting. Their ‘Lady London Tea Room’ sells homemade scones and sweets that are famous locally, and in an adjoining barn, antique farming equipment and vintage hand tools are on display.”

She also recommended the neighboring Britannia Heritage Shipyard, with its refurbished boatyards, historic residences and stores. Volunteers act as docents there on weekends all year round, explaining the ongoing restoration projects along the Fraser River. Strolling along the shipyard’s waterfront park, I saw a bride and groom posing in front of the restored Murakami House, a reminder that most of the workers here back then were Asian immigrants.

In the center of Steveston, lots of small shops and cafes keep visitors intrigued and well-fed. There’s the expected seafood palaces such as Dave’s Fish & Chips, but bread-makers in this region are also exceptionally good. Nicolae Constantin runs Romania Country Bread, a bakery with a huge brick oven, and Rose Concepcion creates award-winning artisan breads and desserts at MIX, The Bakery in West Point Grey, Vancouver. “It’s the ingredients,” Concepcion says, “all local, with no short cuts in preparation.”

Her words inspire me to discover more about B.C.’s natural food sources, so I venture out to Fraser Valley, 90 minutes east of Vancouver. The Agassiz-Harrison route I choose is one of five self-guided Circle Farm Tours that include 61 farms, hazelnut groves, cheese dairies, produce markets, antique shops, potters’ studios and wineries.

First stop is the Limbert Mountain Herb farm owned by Trudie and Claude Bouchard. “Our great-grandparents settled this land in 1902,” Trudie says. “We made it fully organic in 1978, and except for electricity, we’re totally self-sufficient. We raise heirloom vegetables, garlic, and chestnuts, teach cooking classes, and provide meals that include wild herbs.”
After a satisfying lunch there, we meet Kate Onos-Gilbert, who invites us to return in spring for her spectacular Tulips of the Valley festival, reminiscent of Oregon’s own Wooden Shoe Tulip Fest held annually in Woodburn.

The next day is overcast and rainy, but we still enjoy thousands of brilliant flowering plants beside huge cedar trees, waterfalls and bubbling brooks in Minter Gardens. Visits to a coffee roaster and the Farm House Cheese shop complete this circle, and then it’s back to Vancouver proper.

Being in the city doesn’t mean we’ll miss the delights of a wild, fresh environment, however. In the VanDusen Botanical Garden, for example, diverse plant collections represent ecosystems ranging from tropical South Africa to the Himalayas and the Canadian Arctic.

Close to Stanley Park, alternative accommodation can be found in a vibrant West End neighborhood where it’s possible to secure an entire furnished apartment, complete with fully equipped kitchen and the chance to prepare your own meals. The Sunset Inn & Suites offers gated parking, free high-speed wireless Internet, and spacious rooms with king-size beds and private balconies.

**Adoring the exploring**

Other downtown landmarks include the former winter Olympic venues, and the geodesic dome of Science World. On the day I visited, it was looking mysterious, wrapped in fog. From a nearby wharf, I hopped onto a cute little Aquabus mini-ferry traveling down False Creek to Yaletown, a former warehouse zone that’s now a fashionable district where stylish condos rise high above the waterline.

Here, near the boat slips at the foot of Davie Street, I found delightful Provence Marinaside, co-owned by executive chef Jean-Francis Quaglia and his wife, chef Alessandra. Jean-Francis came naturally to the culinary world, as his mother, Suzanne Quaglia of Marseille, was one of the first celebrated female chefs in France. At age 8, Jean-Francis made his earliest Tarte au Citron from his mother’s recipe, and this same treat is still featured on Provence’s menu.

Other signature dishes include bouillabaisse, roasted rack of lamb, warm goat cheese salad, and Mamie Suzanne’s Fish Soup. I was intrigued by this broth-like soup made from roasted fish bones because the server cautioned me that, “It is bold — patrons either adore it or find it not
to their taste.” I was firmly in the “adore” camp, as the aroma reminded me of flavors learned at my grandmother’s table. Another splendid menu item was baked cannelloni filled with ground beef, loads of garlic, and Gruyère cheese.

After dinner, another short Aquabus ride brought me to Granville Island, a kind of waterside theme park for shoppers and diners, with performance studios, art galleries, fancy houseboats and a fresh produce market.

Attractions nearer to downtown include the Vancouver Maritime Museum and MacMillan Space Centre. On a peninsula west of the city, the campus of the University of British Columbia is home to a Museum of Anthropology with an outstanding collection of First Nations canoes, masks, objects of daily life, and actual long houses.

More contemporary versions of such art can be found downtown at the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art. Gallery keepers Paula Fairweather and Meredith Areskoug explained, “A member of the Haida tribe, Reid became quite famous specializing in large sculptures and fine jewelry depicting First Nation myths.”

Vancouver’s ethnic museums and galleries remind us that these locations have been a gathering place ever since the indigenous Salish First Nation people settled here thousands of years ago, to act as caretakers of the land. More recent waves of immigration have made this city one of the most diverse in North America.

The attraction to converge here is obvious. Lower British Columbia is blessed with a winning combination of mild winters and fertile farmlands, and with a long tradition of harvesting the fresh, wild things of the earth, forests, rivers, and seas.

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