



OCTOBER, 2022

Vancouver

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# Vancouver

Sure, a stopover is fun but staying a little longer reveals the lesser-known charms of this glittering Canadian city.



Is Vancouver the world’s most beautiful city? The question is subjective, of course, but on a clear summer day, with the snow-capped mountains and white yachts and green-glass apartment buildings shining in the sun, I struggle to imagine many convincing arguments otherwise. Built on the western half of a peninsula, encircled by rivers, inlets, bays and forest, its physical splendour is almost indecent. Walking around, I want to tell it to cover up.

Beautiful cities don’t need to try very hard and Vancouver could offer the absolute bare minimum of attractions and still be worth a layover. But not content to coast along on its gorgeous natural assets, the city’s stuffed itself with culture and curiosities. From a world-class **Museum of Anthropology** ([moa.ubc.ca](http://moa.ubc.ca)) to a bizarre

The Avocado Gimlet at L’Abattoir (above); Lions Gate suspension bridge, Stanley Park (right)



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(and delectable) “sushi donut” at **Uma Sushi** (umasushi.ca). A speak-easy provocatively named **Key Party** (narrowgroup.ca), where the 1970s never ended. An old motel that’s been converted into artists’ studios and covered in vibrant murals. Vancouver – or “Van” to locals – is a laid-back and loveable overachiever.

Classic Van

Whenever I’m in town, I inevitably find myself drawn to the same starting place: the **Fairmont Hotel Vancouver** (hotel.qantas.com.au/fairmontvancouver), which towers over the centre of Vancouver with its unmistakable crown of copper. Often referred to as the “Castle in the City”, the property has been a landmark since 1939, when it opened to cater to passengers on the Canadian railway. The guestrooms offer excellent views for orientation and a recently completed \$84-million renovation makes it fresh and luxurious as a home base. In the lobby, between the Dior

and Gucci and Louis Vuitton shops, I spot a model with blonde braids reading what appears to be the Bible.

From here, I hit a handful of classic spots that refuse to be predictable. The **Vancouver Art Gallery** (vanartgallery.bc.ca), right across the street, is just as likely to feature an exhibition on artificial intelligence as it is caribou skins hand-beaded by Inuit women. To my delight, I see both of those in one visit.

Walking east, Gastown is known for its paved brick streets with evocative names like Gaoler’s Mews (which once housed the city’s first jail), plus gift shops selling the familiar line-up of souvenir maple syrups. But it’s also home to the **John Fluevog** flagship shoe store (fluevog.com), where I’ve spent many an hour daring myself to try on fluorescent-green penny loafers with tassels. Gastown is filled with delightful Canadian weirdness and much of the pleasure of a neighbourhood like this comes from finding a bar and settling in for some people-watching. At chic





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The Fairmont Hotel Vancouver (left); Douglas Reynolds Gallery (above)

**L'Abattoir** (labattoir.ca), patrons snack on pan-fried sweetbreads, though I'm more inclined towards the Avocado Gimlet – “the house mascot”, according to the tattooed bartender.

Slightly buzzed, I wander into Yaletown and pick out which apartment I'm going to own when I become a multi-millionaire. The district is urban living at its finest – high towers, all windows and balconies – and isn't the point of travelling to live other lives? In my Vancouver fantasy life, I'd eat every week on Yaletown's Mainland Street at somewhere like **Minami** (minamirestaurant.com), with its exquisite oshi sushi. I'd also drink lavender lattes and run along the False Creek waterfront, trailed by a big dog, as the real residents do.

There are many other essential Vancouver places, like **Stanley Park** and **Capilano Suspension Bridge Park** and I'm always compelled to pop over to **Granville Island**. Perhaps it's because I wish that the **Public Market** (granvilleisland.com) existed near my house: an

emporium of gourmet delights offering everything from hot smoked salmon to salami infused with rice mash. Leaving without edible mementos seems objectively impossible; I've never managed it.

**Cool Van**

Just south of Granville Island is the **Douglas Reynolds Gallery** (douglasreynoldsgallery.com), which I check out on the recommendation of a friend who lives in British Columbia. The gallery specialises in historic and contemporary Northwest Coast Indigenous art. The building is difficult to miss because there's an enormous mural by Ts'msyen artist Phil Gray, entitled *Force of Nature* and depicting the supernatural Salmon Woman, on the side.

When I stop by, Doug himself takes me out the back to view two cedar totem poles that are sitting in the parking lot, wrapped in cling film to hold in the water as they cure, as part of the preservation process. In a private storeroom, there are also





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elaborate snarling masks and 100-year-old Tlingit baskets that Doug has been collecting and selling since 1995. It's an exciting reminder that the coolest stuff is often tucked out of sight.

That's also true for the city itself, where one precinct has emerged as a hotspot for everything edgy. The first thing I notice about Mount Pleasant are the murals: Bodhidharma dolls adorn the walls of apartment blocks, abstracts decorate boutique shops and one particularly striking sequence of two images – of an old man and a young woman – exhorts passers-by to remember that “The Present is a Gift”.

This is where Vancouver goes to let its hair down. There's a parkour gym and a bookshop that specialises in pulp fiction. **Sing Sing** (2718 Main Street; +1 604 336 9556), a beer and pho joint, sits next to **Lucy's Eastside Diner** (lucyseastsidediner.com), where milkshakes and poutine are the order of the day. **Red Cat Records** (redcat.ca), marked by a neon sign of a squiggly cat, somehow convinces me to part with far too much of my hard-earned money.

I have an experiment that I conduct to gauge the quality of a neighbourhood I've never been to before: I pick a random street off the main drag and walk its length as a test, much as a scientist might take an ice core to survey a glacier. In Mount

Pleasant, I turn down West 4th Avenue and come face-to-face with a giant painted octopus. Then I hear the unmistakable cacophony of a band rehearsing. Then I see a WeWork. Then I encounter the **Electric Bicycle Brewing Company** (electricbicyclebrewing.com) and people drinking IPAs. Then I see a ramen food hall. The fact that this isn't even a particularly significant side street shows the success of my experiment: Mount Pleasant is a certified marvel.

Also a wonder is **Riley's Fish & Steak** (rileysrestaurant.ca), back downtown, which recently opened to instant acclaim. It's a mortal sin to visit this city and not have good seafood and what executive chef Jérôme Soubeyrand serves up at Riley's is the best halibut I've ever tasted in my life. I go to sleep dreaming about it in my room at **The Douglas** (hotel.qantas.com.au/thedouglas), a hotel that's part Marriott and part *Twin Peaks*, with lots of wood and mirror-and-neon-filled psychedelic elevators.

The first time I visited Vancouver, I was prepared to write it off as a beautiful but shallow city. That was five trips and more than a decade ago. Looks, as the famous saying goes, can be deceiving. Vancouver is far more than just a pretty face – it has plenty of heart, too. ●

The steam clock in Gastown (below left); street mural on Main Street, Mount Pleasant



John Vicente