



Rugged and rural mix well in Vancouver

By MARK ATKINSON

Vancouver has always been on my radar. Whenever speaking with like-minded travel addicts, those who have been say that you just have to visit it. “One of the best cities in the world,” a friend recently told me. “The only city I’d live in outside of Edinburgh,” said another. And as my Instagram became increasingly flecked with stories from Vancouver, my jealousy – and curiosity – grew. What is it that makes it one of the most desirable places in the world to visit and live in? Especially as it is a long, long way from home. Some 4,387 miles, an eight-hour time difference and a flight across the whole span of North America. Vancouver is on the west coast of Canada in the state of British Columbia, not far from the US border. Canada itself is one of those countries blessed with riches but this part of it often trumps Montreal, Toronto and the rest when it comes to visitor numbers. There is a mystique about Vancouver that continues to lure in travellers. Geography clearly plays its part. Coming in to land, a window seat is essential. The view is absolutely incredible. Mountains everywhere. I’m immediately comparing it to the Highlands but the scale is grander. Islands litter the ocean. Boats of all sizes are dotting around in the water. The city glistens in the sunlight, a twinkling metropolis linked by bridges over Fraser River and the Burrard Inlet. For a city of such repute, Vancouver is actually quite small, with a population of roughly 630,000 people. Space is at a premium given the land constraints. It is

a gateway to nature. There are parks and forests everywhere, mountains within an hour’s drive. I don’t ski but I’m told Whistler, no more than 90 minutes away in a car, has slopes the envy of Europe. The sounds and waterways on the fringes of the Pacific Ocean make it a paradise for those who like a boat. I’m therefore expecting a city with high standards and Vancouver does not disappoint. My hotel, Shangri-La Vancouver, on West Georgia Street is in the heart of downtown. One of its entrances is underground, which makes me think people far more famous than me have resided here. Vancouver has a thriving film scene, after all. There’s a really discreet yet classy feel to this hotel. The rooms are very comfortable, the staff incredibly attentive and the Italian restaurant, Carlino, does very tasty food. I often think the mark of a high-end hotel is its spa offering and the treatment at Chi, which involved me being lathered in a salt scrub before spending 15 minutes in a steam shower followed by a massage, was unusual yet left my skin softer than the stereotypical baby’s bottom. You won’t go wrong staying here. Part of that is because Vancouver just oozes class from all of its pores. Wherever you look, you either see water or mountains. Most buildings are tastefully erected with glass to adhere to strict regulations on construction, allowing the light to bounce around the streets. The air is fresh. One resident tells me that everyone stays pretty strictly to their working hours so they can enjoy the city’s wares, be it bars, restaurants or – more likely – the plethora of outdoor



Top left, a seal safari is a popular choice for visitors; the Vancouver skyline across English Bay, top right; the Shangri-La lobby, above

activities on offer. In short, quality of life here is very good – even if the cost of land is exorbitant. Vancouver’s food scene is very diverse. Alouette, inspired by French cuisine, appears to be the most lavish place to dine in Gastown – the part of the city of most repute for foodies – and does not disappoint, but there’s as much joy to be taken from strolling through Chinatown and gobbling up proper dim sum and authentic food from the

east. Vancouver’s history with China is big. After all, it was one of the first settlements Chinese immigrants landed at when coming over for the “Gold Rush”. Word had spread of jobs along the river mining for gold or working on the Canadian Pacific Railway. A better life was hoped for but the Chinese were subjected to racism and poor wages, culminating in “Humiliation Day”, when an exclusion act against them was brought in from 1923, lasting 24 years before common sense prevailed. Nowadays, Chinatown plays a huge part in the rich tapestry of Vancouver. My tour, conducted by the fascinating Robert Sung, was tremendous – not least for the tastiest char siu pork I consumed along the way. Yet so much of enjoying Vancouver comes away from downtown. I’d never even heard of forest bathing, yet a morning spent in Stanley Park with Talaysay Tours getting to know nature that bit better was very enjoyable. I’ll admit, I took more joy from jumping on a bike – they are popular here – cycling around Stanley Park, with trees on one side and massive cruise liners and mountains on the other. Sewell’s Marina offers a great water tour of the city, diving in and out of coves, hobnobbing with seals and birds and gawping at the

landscape from the ocean. You get the best view, though, with a seaplane trip from Harbour Air. The most wobbly I felt, however, was not in the aircraft but on the Capilano Suspension Bridge, which crosses the river and jiggles every step you take across it. Worth it for the spectacular pictures, though, and only a 20-minute drive from the centre. On my last night in Vancouver, I ask the group I am with if they’ve ever seen a place quite like this, the most heady mix of chic urban and rugged rural life so close together. One suggests to me that Scotland is probably the closest you get. Perhaps so. The influx of visitors will continue for some time yet.



Shangri-La Vancouver has a spa and treatment rooms for guests to enjoy

GETTING THERE

Flights
Edinburgh to Vancouver via Toronto return adult fare: £629.21 per person
London to Vancouver return adult fare: £640.51 per person
Fares are inclusive of taxes/surcharges and 1x checked bag per person. Fare restrictions apply. Fare is subject to availability and valid for departures up to 30 Oct 23

Do Not Disturb

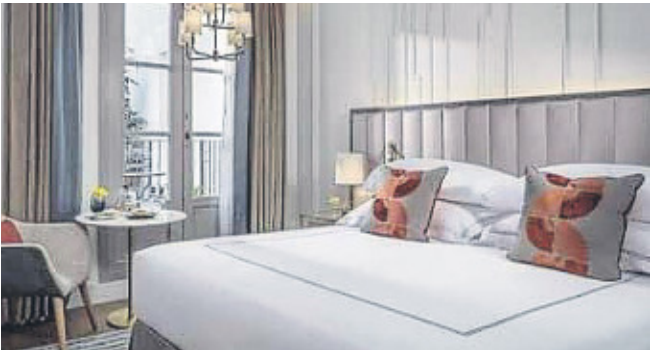
Janet Christie

Gran Hotel Inglés, Madrid

If the walls in Gran Hotel Inglés could talk they would tell tales of the times Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway visited in the 1920s on their trips to Madrid as this is where they checked in along with the fashionable visitors of the day. Today an air of history still pervades Gran Hotel Inglés, the city’s oldest hotel with its art deco bronze, marble and glass, along with an enticing scent that wafts along corridors and around rooms, but there’s nothing old fashioned about this elegant five-star hotel that oozes contemporary class, tucked away down a shady side street moments from the beating heart of Madrid’s Literary Quarter, or Barrio de las Letras. Black and white photographs show the spacious grand ground floor reception lounge and dining room back in the last century and the hotel has preserved its original elegance with columns and chandeliers, along with an area lined with leather bound books, nowadays updated and complemented by contemporary lighting and artworks. **Budget or Boutique** Boutique five star, with only 48 rooms and a spa that gives it an exclusive feel along with very attentive and friendly staff who make guests feel as valued as the literary luminaries as they escape the bustle of the capital. **Room Service** Like Virginia we had a room of our own where comfort and calm enveloped us as we stepped over the threshold. An off-white and rust palette give the room a tranquil feel and french windows invite the weary traveller on to a Juliette balcony to observe the comings and goings on the narrow pedestrianised street below and gaze up at what Woolf called the “hopelessly blue skies” of Madrid. Clever use has been made of the space to accommodate a king-sized bed and two easy chairs and table in front of one window and a free-standing bath in front of the elegant drapes of another, while an internal cube to one side of the room reveals



Outside the Gran Hotel Inglés



A bedroom at the elegant and comfortable Gran Hotel Ingles

a dressing area and jack and jill sinks leading on to an ensuite shower room. Fluffy bathrobes, slippers, a kettle and coffee maker, iron, well stocked mini bar and L’Occitane toiletries tells you comfort is a top priority. **Food and Drink** In the LoBbyto restaurant and lounge where sophistication meets glamour and dinner and cocktails are in demand, we sit down to tapas-style starters to share, including mini squid broche, acorn-fed Iberian ham with bread and tomato toasts and homemade Iberian ham croquettes, each an artwork on a plate packing a punch of flavour. Mains were perfectly cooked sirloin steak with foie and red onions and a fresh and smoky salmon salad followed by a traditional Spanish pudding of homemade torrija or caramelised brioche with vanilla ice cream which is a hug on a plate. Breakfast in the hotel’s charming Casa Lobo bar served up a vast array of pastries, deli meats and cheeses, fruit and cereals with hot options cooked to order. **Worth Getting out of Bed For** You’re in the heart of Madrid and it’s a ten minute walk along busy streets lined with shops and cafe bars to the grand portico-lined Plaza Mayor square and baroque Royal Palace and Armory in one direction and the Museo Nacional de Prado with its collection of Velazquez, Goya and El Greco masterpieces in the other, not forgetting the contemporary art including Pablo Picasso’s Guernica at Reina Sofia. If it’s hot, head for the shade of the 125 hectare Buen Retiro park or escape indoors at the quaint and historic Cine Doré Filmoteca Espanol. At night, entertainment nearby includes Teatro Español, or live flamenco by the table venues and a host of cafes and beer halls. If your aim is to relax and rejuvenate, curl up with a book from the towering shelves in the dining room/reception lounge, where leather bound volumes line the walls or wander down to the high tech gym, Sisley spa pools and jacuzzi to ease away your stress. **Guestbook Comments** Gran Hotel Ingles is an elegant, historic hideaway that oozes contemporary class in the heart of Madrid. **Gran Hotel Inglés, Echegaray 8, 28014 Madrid, (+34) 91360 0001, www.granhotelingles.com. Rooms start from around £375.**