



Vancouver, Whistler & Vancouver Island

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Gabriel's Gourmet Cafe (p410)
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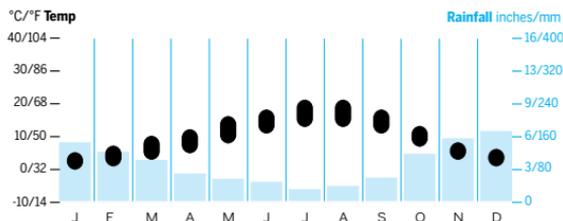
- ➔ Free Spirit Spheres (p412)
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Why Go?

Visitors to Canada's westernmost province are never short of superlatives when typing their travel blogs. It's hard not to be moved by looming mountains, wildlife-packed forests and uncountable kilometers of pristine coastline that slow your heartbeat like a spa treatment. But British Columbia (BC) is much more than just a nature-hugging diorama. Cosmopolitan Vancouver is an animated fusion of cuisines and cultures from Asia and beyond, while historic Victoria and resort town Whistler have their own vibrant, alluring scenes. And for sheer character, it's hard to beat the province's kaleidoscope of quirky little communities, from the rustic Sunshine Coast to the laid-back Southern Gulf Islands. Wherever you head, of course, the great outdoors will always be calling. Don't just point your camera at it. BC is unbeatable for the kind of life-enhancing skiing, kayaking, hiking and biking you'll want to brag about to everyone back home.

When to Go

Vancouver, BC



Dec–Mar Powder action stripes the slopes of Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains.

Jul & Aug Beaches, patios and a plethora of overlapping festivals enliven Vancouver.

Sep & Oct Great surfing and the start of storm-watching season lure many to Tofino.

VANCOUVER

☎ 604.778 / POP 603,500

Flying into YVR (Vancouver International Airport) on a glittering blue-sky day, it's not hard to understand the Lotus Land label that sticks to this region like a wetsuit. The calm ocean striped with boat trails, the crenelated shorelines of forest-green islands and the ever-present snow-dusted crags glinting on the horizon give this city arguably the most spectacular setting of any metropolis. But while the grand backdrop means you're never far from great outdoor pursuits, there's much more to Vancouver than appearances. Hitting the streets on foot means coming across a kaleidoscope of distinctive neighborhoods, each one almost like a village in itself. There's the bohemian, coffee-loving Commercial Dr; the hearty character bars of old Gastown; and the colorful streets of the West End 'gayborhood.' And that's before you get to the bustling artisan nest otherwise known as Granville Island or the forested seawall of Stanley Park, Canada's finest urban green space. In fact, if this really is Lotus Land, you'll be far too busy checking it all out to rest.

👁 Sights

Few of Vancouver's main visitor attractions are located in the downtown core: the main museums are in Vanier Park and at the University of British Columbia (UBC), other top sights are in Stanley Park or Chinatown, and two of the region's main outdoor lures are on the North Shore. Luckily, the majority of these must-sees are easy to reach by car or a transit hop from the city center.

👁 Downtown & West End

★ Stanley Park

PARK

(P ⓘ; ☑ 19) This magnificent 404-hectare park combines excellent attractions with a mystical natural aura. Don't miss a stroll or cycle (rentals near the W Georgia St entrance) around the 8.8km seawall: a kind of visual spa treatment fringed by a 150,000-tree temperate rainforest, it'll take you past the park's popular totem poles.

Stanley Park Seawall

WATERFRONT

(☑ 19) Built between 1917 and 1980, the 8.8km seawall trail is Vancouver's favorite outdoor hangout. Encircling the entire park, it offers spectacular waterfront, mountain-fringed vistas on one side and

dense forest canopy on the other. You can walk the whole thing in around three blister-triggering hours or rent a bike from Denman St near the park entrance to cover the route far faster.

Vancouver Aquarium

AQUARIUM

(☎ 604-659-3400; www.vanaqua.org; 845 Avison Way; adult/child \$31/22; ☀ 9:30am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm Sep-Jun; ⓘ; ☑ 19) Stanley Park's biggest draw, the aquarium is home to 9000 water-loving critters – including sharks, wolf eels and a somewhat shy octopus. There's also a small, walk-through rainforest area of birds, turtles and a statue-still sloth. The aquarium also keeps captive whales and dolphins and organizes animal encounters with these creatures, which may concern some visitors. Animal-welfare groups claim keeping cetaceans in enclosed tanks is harmful for these complex animals.

Lost Lagoon

LAKE

(☑ 19) This rustic area near Stanley Park's entrance was originally part of Coal Harbour. But after a causeway was built in 1916, the new body of water was renamed, transforming itself into a freshwater lake a few years later. Today it's a **nature sanctuary** – keep your eyes peeled for beady-eyed blue herons – and its perimeter pathway is a favored stroll for nature-huggers.

The excellent **Stanley Park Nature House** (☎ 604-257-8544; www.stanleyparkecology.ca; north end of Alberni St, Lost Lagoon; ☀ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun; ⓘ; ☑ 19) **FREE** provides exhibits and illumination on the park's wildlife, history and ecology. Ask about its fascinating park walks, covering everything from bird-watching strolls to artsy ambles around the park.

Second Beach & Third Beach

BEACH

(Stanley Park; ⓘ; ☑ 19) Second Beach is a family-friendly area on Stanley Park's western side, with a grassy playground, an ice-cream-serving concession and the **Stanley Park Pitch & Putt** course. In summer, there are free outdoor movie screenings – see www.freshaircinema.ca for listings – but its main attraction is the seasonal outdoor **swimming pool** (☎ 604-257-8371; www.vancouverparks.ca; cnr N Lagoon Dr & Stanley Park Dr, Stanley Park; adult/child \$5.86/2.95; ☀ 10am-8:45pm mid-Jun-Aug, reduced hours low-season; ⓘ; ☑ 19). Alternatively, head to Third Beach for one of Vancouver's best sunset-watching spots.