

THE FIRST MOVERS OF VANCOUVER

AS THE USA FINALLY GETS WITH THE PROGRAMME, NEIGHBOURING CANADA IS ALREADY CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF NATIONWIDE MARRIAGE EQUALITY. THE SKY HAS YET TO FALL, AND THERE IS NO PLAGUE OR PESTILENCE TO BE SEEN, AS WE FIND IN CHARMING, COSMOPOLITAN VANCOUVER

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085



FOUR SEASONS YEW RESTAURANT



BREAKFAST AT CAFÉ MEDINA



ENGLISH BAY



JOSH BLOOMFIELD'S CYCLE CITY TOURS



STANLEY PARK

From the comfort of a beautiful home among the rolling hills of southern England, one should count one's blessings on a daily basis. All about is a green and pleasant land, it's safe and secure and my semi-rural community has the smattering of village pubs, farm shops and artisan businesses that mark it out as an idyll of all that is Great in Britain. It's utterly lovely.

And yet the yearn to travel pulls on a recurring basis – to kick the dried mud from the boots in favour of sand or snow and find pastures new. In part to sate a wanderlust: as Robert Louis Stephenson had it, "I travel not to arrive, but for travel's sake." But also because, as human nature would have it, one can't help but wonder what lies just over the horizon. Something different? Most likely. Something better? Tantalisingly, possibly, definitely maybe. No matter your starting point.

And so to Vancouver, on the occasion of Canada's celebrations of a decade of country-wide equal marriage, at just about the same time as the noisy neighbour's Supreme Court agrees to play catch-up. Could this be Utopia? Could this beautiful city, squeezed between the Pacific Ocean and the Coast Mountains, and declared the world's 'most liveable' by the Economist Intelligence Unit, be that something over the rainbow we seek? Is British Columbia, which by itself has had equal marriage since 2003, the pot of gold?

First impressions are entirely positive – the sun is shining (David Duchovny, who as Agent Fox Mulder made *The X-Files* here, complained it felt like spending years in the shower) and it's not so much warm as into the realms of hot. The wider populace, a ready mix of First Nations, North American and Asian, is open, friendly and apparently in good spirits. Though our genial driver is incorrect, I sound nothing like Prince Charles. I can muster polite Thames Estuary on a good day, and drift to my father's native East End when relaxed through imbibing. I doubt the Prince of Wales is particularly familiar with either locale.

Moving through downtown Vancouver reveals a cityscape typical of much of the West coast – towers of glass and steel, a road network laid out like graph paper, the universal global High Street brands. But at intervals, horizontal or vertical, are glimpses of green parks or the flash of sunlight on water. This is a city by and of the sea, and there's no getting away from that,

metaphorically or physically. And nor would you want to. It shapes the temperate climate, a nutrient-rich ocean-based diet, a glorious outdoors lifestyle and even the buildings themselves – at Canada Place, for example, it's hard to know where the sail-shaped buildings end and the cruise ships they serve begin.

We start there, having first made home at the Forbes five-star-rated Four Seasons on West Georgia Street in the very centre of the city, as our new best friends at Destination British Columbia want us to ride FlyOver Canada, a \$15-million dollar attraction incorporating the latest virtual flight-ride technology. The work of a creative team including a former Walt Disney Imagineer, this breathtaking aerial journey takes place in what was originally an IMAX theatre and whisks 60 people into the air to embark on an amazing adventure among magnificent landscapes, through differing seasons, while feeling the full effects of wind, scents, mist and sound. In short, it's bloody amazing, and a fantastic introduction to a country at the end of a road less travelled.

We move to dinner at the Minami Restaurant in the vibrant district of Yaletown, for an innovative take on sushi pioneered by this venue's sister outlet, Miku. Simply put, though it doubtless sounds easier than it is, what is known as the 'Aburi style' amounts to a flame-seared technique using a blowtorch and bamboo charcoal, to create a smoky flavor that requires no dressing with soy sauce or wasabi. Instead special sauces are served to accentuate the flavour of each variety of fish.

You'll not be surprised to learn it works beautifully: a finely-honed specialism that delivers a series of small plates to delight the palette and mark a genuine point of difference. An absolute highlight – recommended to all-comers – was the most high-end 'surf and turf' you'll ever come across: an Aburi beef tenderloin medallion and half a lobster tail, finished with roasted Cipollini onions, asparagus, Aburi zucchini, truffle veal jus and yuzu beurre blanc.

Sleep comes easy as a consequence, amidst the Four Seasons' plump pillows and generously-sized beds, before an early start to enjoy breakfast at what's described as a beloved Vancouver brunch/lunch institution (since 2008). Robbie Kane's Café Medina moved to a new home in the Library District (on Richards Street) only last summer, but the bistro-style open plan

space delivers a bustling atmosphere in which a range of terrific Mediterranean-inspired cuisines can be found, as created by the hands of Executive Chef Jonathan Chovancek and his team.

A colleague's Harissa 'Burger' was a thing of beauty, formed of two fried eggs, preserved lemon and Harissa-spiced beef in a grilled pita, Parmesan, tomato salsa, spiced hummus and baba ganoush with seasonal greens. My own tagine, in the meantime, comprised two poached eggs, spicy Merguez sausage, a seasonal vegetable stew of chickpeas, black olives and preserved lemon with grilled focaccia. Hearty doesn't begin to cover it, but it was the promised breakfast with a twist for sure, especially when accompanied by the lightest of lattes flavoured with lavender, of all things. I wasn't sure either, so I had two – just to check – before being seduced by what I was promised were the city's best Belgian waffles. Only the promise (threat) of exercise to come cleared my conscience.

Next stop was to be Josh Bloomfield's Cycle City Tours on Burrard Street, for a two-hour ride around the beautiful (but vast) Stanley Park, Vancouver's green lung, as it were. There were to be stops right around the West End neighbourhood – home to a large and vibrant gay community – on account of both the sights and the need to clear an oxygen debt. Though, to be fair, much of the romp was either on flat ground or, gratifyingly, downhill, and the pace was relaxed and the guide an absolute pleasure to spend time with. I didn't need to know where his ex-boyfriend lived so I could heckle him with the rest of the group, but I'm somehow better for it. What can you do? Call it peer pressure, and enjoy my weakness.

Tours can run to more than four hours, should you wish, and, after a couple, I certainly had the appetite for a longer stint, but however much time you have to spare in the city, you should absolutely spend some time on two wheels with these guys. You see and hear more than you would pretty well any other way, and a calorie burn, however gentle, atones for sins against the body past and previous. There's a network across the area of some 186 miles of dedicated bike routes and both the SeaBus and SkyTrain allow you to take bikes for free, while many buses are fitted with racks you hook your bike on, too. So, no excuse really.

Though we had one, as we were to be aboard a bus heading further out into the suburbs, to Burnaby, a leafy enclave boasting

forests, parks, golf courses and a ton of arts and culture. The jewel in the crown is Deer Lake Park, a hub around which are gathered Burnaby's galleries, museums and outdoor activities. Our ultimate destination, however, was the famed Hart House Restaurant, a former Tudor mansion that's a hotspot for fabulous summertime weddings in an idyllic garden and waterfront setting.

None among our number were to be betrothed, but we took advantage of both the natural beauty and the terrific cuisine (with matched British Columbian wines so good there isn't sufficient volume to export beyond the Province, alas) and enjoyed a superb *al fresco* lunch. Expect to find the likes of snow crab cake or a chilled summer vegetable soup on the menu, followed by charcoal-grilled game hen or a *sous-vide* wild Sockeye salmon. Finish with a pistachio panna cotta or a cherry puree with fresh berries and meringue. Well, they've had 12 years in BC, and the full ten in Canada, to perfect a wedding menu for boys who like boys and girls who like girls, so why wouldn't it be just perfect?

It felt like time to loll awhile on the immaculate lawns and gaze upon the water in a state of calm reflection, but our lovely hosts insisted, to paraphrase John Lennon, that life could continue while we were making other plans. So we were whisked back to the city for a genuinely interesting insight into Vancouver's booming craft beer scene, to the Brassneck Brewery on Main Street courtesy of Vancouver Brewery Tours. The area hereabouts is a hipster enclave, they'll tell you, in which case put me down for some facial topiary and a plaid shirt. Because cool is what it is. And laid-back to the point of levitating, if you know what I mean.

Save for one key grammatical issue that rather dogged the ensuing couple of hours. Being of British stock, I swallowed the first encounter whole, as one might an entire orange, the only signs of my discomfort being eyebrows embedded in the hairline, slightly watery eyes and a fixed jawline. Our brewery guide, after all, wasn't to know that the North American term for a refillable, returnable flagon to allow direct brewery sales at the most advantageous prices was also a rather tatty slang term for, ahem, a lady's parts. In rougher London parlance anyhow.

And perhaps it doesn't matter if the extent of that is to be encouraged to eschew a single-use bottle in place of reusable



TOP ROW: BRASSNECK BREWERY GROWLERS; CATCH 122 MIDDLE ROW: SCENIC RUSH ON THE SEA-TO-SKY HIGHWAY. CARS LEFT TO RIGHT: LAMBORGINI GALLARDO, AUDI R8, FERRARI F430 SPIDER; SKY PILOT SUSPENSION BRIDGE BOTTOM ROW: MAIN STREET BREWERY; CAFÉ MEDINA'S FAMOUS WAFFLES

“THE AURAL THRILL, THE LIGHT, THE COLOUR, THE ADRENALINE: IT'S AS CLEAR TO ME NOW AT THE KEYBOARD AS IT WAS IN THE MOMENT. YOU MOVE THROUGH EACH MODEL AT INTERVALS, INSTRUCTION IS CLEAR, RULES FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY ARE SENSIBLE AND ALLOW YOU TO DERIVE MAXIMUM ENJOYMENT WITHOUT FEAR BECAUSE OF THEM, RATHER THAN IN SPITE OF THEM. IT'S A SCENIC RUSH ALRIGHT

growler. We're grown-ups, after all. And maybe I clung on as the merits of progressively bigger growlers were explained. Generally speaking, the larger growlers make more sense, I was assured. But I'm only human. And when happening upon signage that implored returning customers to offer up only growlers that had been washed – 'no stinky growlers' – I'm afraid the lights went out.

Decorum returned eventually, with apologetic explanations offered up, but that, then, didn't help the rest of the tour as now everyone was struggling with the definition of growler. Including the guide, whose career I now assume to be in tatters. His part-stoic, part-rictus grin when we left suggests he has subsequently endured a difficult summer running three or four tours a day across five different breweries. Truly, good luck with all that. Though, in terms of solace, Vancouver's standard of craft beer on the basis of this cross-section (eight types across two establishments) is at an artisanal zenith. Good enough to play strongly in the UK, in fact. Though, again, levels of local consumption have put paid to any export need or opportunity. And you can't knock that.

Some soul-searching, a shower and change later and dinner was a short walk from the redoubtable Four Seasons, at the eponymous Homer Street Café. Set in the historic Homer Building (and the new Beasley building alongside) in the Yaletown district, the star here is the kitchen's rotisserie in fire engine red. To a private dining room, divided from the main restaurant by reclaimed factory windows, was brought all manner of proteins as one might offer up a feast of Roman decadence.

The chicken, most notably, was sublime, all succulence and flavour, but beef, lamb and fish varieties hit the table with examples of every side order you could think of. Awash with cocktails, too, our dining table groaned beneath the weight shortly before we did, but this is comfort food to a high standard, and on less clement days there'd be no better hideaway. And so to bed...

Our last day begins with another breakfast of the kind Michael Winner would have described as "historic", at Catch 122 on West Hastings Street. In a century-old building in the Shoreditch-esque Gaslight district, owner Brent Kyle's Catch 122 features original, bare brick walls, reclaimed lumber and exposed steel and iron and enjoys a great ambience. And the menu, with its home-made breads, house-smoked meats and local ingredients is a lot to take in

at the start of the day. So let me save you some pain. Duck prosciutto eggs benedict. That is all. Possibly the greatest twist on the greatest breakfast that exists. For that alone, Vancouver I thank you.

We eat in the company of Angus Praught, owner of www.gayvan.com and publisher of the *Gay-friendly Vancouver in-town Guide*. In print or online, Angus' publications offer a helping hand in discovering Vancouver from a gay perspective, though as he himself admits, he acts more as a curator than a guide as "you can go anywhere you want and be whoever you want right across this beautiful city." Gay, for Canadians in general and in BC in particular, is a non-issue. And isn't that a beautiful thing?

Akin, in fact, to the sparkling orange Lamborghini Gallardo supercar with which I am to become acquainted an hour or so later. It's the property of Scenic Rush out on Marine Drive in West Vancouver, a company that offers exotic driving experiences on the extraordinary Sea-to-Sky Highway that connects Vancouver to Whistler some 110 kilometres north. This remarkable ribbon of tarmac twists, writhes, crests and dips at God's own hand and is a veritable playground for a collection of cars that also includes a Ferrari F430 Spider, Audi R8, Porsche 911 Turbo, Nissan GT-R and a Tesla Model S.

Under instruction and in convoy, with Managing Partner Thom Boecker taking the lead and in touch with each car via two-way radio, over three hours (split by lunch) we get to drive these magnificent cars against a series of backdrops so awe-inspiring as to appear as painted scenery. The aural thrill, the light, the colour, the adrenaline: it's as clear to me now at the keyboard as it was in the moment. You move through each model at intervals, instruction is clear, rules for your own safety are sensible and allow you to derive maximum enjoyment without fear because of them, rather than in spite of them. It's a Scenic Rush alright.

The drive is broken by a mountain-top lunch after a ride on the Sea-to-Sky Gondola on Highway 99 at Squamish. 885 metres above sea level you enjoy sweeping views of Howe Sound, the coastal forest, the sub-Alpine meadows surrounding Squamish and the Coast Mountains themselves. If you are so minded (I wasn't, but they made me), you can cross the Sky Pilot Suspension Bridge or stand atop cantilevered viewing platforms to see more, or just stroll the hiking trails and enjoy some backcountry (as it's called here). It's



CAFÉ MEDINA



VIEWS FROM SUMMIT LODGE



CHEF JONATHAN CHOVANCEK

a splendid insight into the wilderness without having to venture too far or go hardcore.

We play with the cars one last time en route to the city and our farewell dinner at the Yew Restaurant and Bar at the Four Seasons. It proves to be the meal of the trip, the dramatic space and open kitchen delivering a great atmosphere and some killer cocktails alongside a fabulous menu.

We start with the delightfully-named Ned's Tackle Box (sashimi of Yellow Fin Tuna, Albacore Tuna and Wild Salmon Tataki), some BC Spot Prawns and salt and pepper chicken wings. A duo of crispy pork belly and halibut are a surprisingly effective main, with spring asparagus, charred onions, Pink Lady apples and sweet and salty nuts, and dessert is multi-faceted little plates. We graze vegan chocolate torte, matcha and kelp pavlova, a banana milk chocolate pave and a chocolate cheesecake mousse. If this wasn't an outdoors city with health and fitness opportunities aplenty the locals would be walking spheres, I swear.

Then, in the quest for knowledge on your behalf, we close out the programme on Davie Street in the area known as Davie Village, to be among friends. Celebrities nightclub features the largest dance floor in these parts, so we dabble, the PumpJack Pub is rammed and jumping, but it's at the 1181 Bar and Lounge we find the right measure of cocktails, co-habitants, hot barmen and enough sound for an atmosphere but at a level that allows conversation. We draw breath. It's all very civilised.

As might be said of Vancouver, British Columbia and, indeed, Canada as a whole. Oh Canada. This, my friends, might be the true land of the free. A country that didn't need to be told to sort the whole equal marriage thing at the end of a pointy stick, but did it for itself when very few had the gumption or the guts. Because it was the right thing to do.

For that, for the people, for a city that offers seascape, cityscape and landscape, for a cosmopolitan outlook that's truly multi-cultural, that sees no colours bar those of the rainbow, I'd as well leave my sanctuary in the Great British countryside. And it's the only place in the world of which I've ever said that. So who knows, in the words of George Eliot: "It's never too late to be who you might have been." Which includes married. ■

VANCOUVER UNCOVERED

Tourism Vancouver
Suite 210
200 Burrard Street
www.tourismvancouver.com

Tourism Vancouver
LGBT section
www.tourismvancouver.com/vancouver/gay-friendly-vancouver

GayVan
www.gayvan.com

STAY
Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver
791 West Georgia Street
www.fourseasons.com/vancouver

EAT
Minami Restaurant
1118 Mainland Street
www.minamirestaurant.com

Café Medina
780 Richards Street
www.medinacafe.com

Hart House Restaurant
6664 Deer Lake Avenue
Burnaby
www.harthouserestaurant.com

Home Street Café
898 Homer Street
www.homerstreetcafebar.com

Catch 122
122 West Hastings Street
www.catch122.ca

Yew Restaurant and Bar
Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver
791 Georgia Street West
www.fourseasons.com

VISIT

FlyOver Canada
201-999 Canada Place
www.flyovercanada.com

Cycle City Tours
1344 Burrard Street
Between Pacific and Drake
www.cyclecitytours.com

Brassneck Brewery
2148 Main Street
www.brassneck.ca

Vancouver Brewery Tours
425-2008 Pine Street
www.vancouverbrewerytours.com

Scenic Rush
5775 Marine Drive
West Vancouver
www.scenicrush.com

Sea-to-Sky Gondola
36800 Highway 99
Squamish
www.seatoskygondola.com

PARTY

Celebrities Nightclub
1022 Davie Street
www.celebritiesnightclub.com

PumpJack Pub
1167 Davie Street
www.pumpjackpub.com

1181 Bar and Lounge
1181 Davie Street
www.1181.ca

FLY

Air Canada
www.aircanada.com

HART HOUSE RESTAURANT

