

## Discover Vancouver Island

Enjoying a whale watching tour is a very different way of spending a day or two on your vacation, but many have found watching these beautiful and incredible creatures a simple escape from the traditional family holiday day out. Seeing close-up a sleek animal of several tons play like a child in his ocean habitat and feeling the spray, foam and power of these creatures close-up-and-personal is a much more adventurous way to spend a day and get educated about marine life. For information on these incredible animals you must head to the Alberni Valley Heritage Center's Maritime Discovery Center open during the summer. They have educational programs a museum and a winery of all things!

Whale watching tours regularly cruise from Victoria and the Gulf Islands where the resident Killer whales (or Orcas more correctly) live. You can also catch a tour from Port Hardy, Alert Bay and Telegraph cove as well as on The Pacific Rim on the west coast.

The familiar Orcas can be seen regularly but there are also Humpback, Minke and Gray whales which can be seen from time to time. These mammals ply the peaceful Pacific waters and perform their watery ballet in front of you. A quick tip for you, morning trips are generally less choppy and you will need sunglasses sun-block a hat and something to keep cameras dry, also if you are going out on a dingy or zodiac, consider a change of clothes to be kept in the car.

You could also enjoy a further aspect of this whale watching community on your holiday. The Pacific Rim Whale Festival, traditionally celebrated by the Islands natives, takes place in Ucluelet and Tofino in March when migrating whales pass through the area.

Of course, whale watching is a huge tourist attraction on Vancouver Island and it has been the central feature of the islands tourist literature for many years, but there is a lot more to Vancouver Island than meets the eye. Already mentioned is The Pacific Rim Whale Festival but there are many other festivals celebrated on the Island. The similarly-named Pacific Rim Summer Festival for example which is also held in Ucluelet and Tofino. The first half of the month of July includes many concerts and a celebration of multiculturalism. You can buy all manner of native art from sculptures and painting to trinkets. If you want to stay for a night or two then Tofino makes for the prettiest base.

The Cowichan Wine and Culinary Festival is held in the small town of Duncan which is situated to the North West of Victoria in the Cowichan Valley. The delicious celebration takes place late September through early October and is a must you visit at this time. While you are visiting you can take in the many Totem poles which are situated by the roadside in and around the town adding to the colorful charm of the area.

The Vancouver Island Jazz & Blues Fest takes place in July. This is an amazing spectacle featuring jazz, blues, gospel and world beat music of the highest caliber. Over 250 musicians perform, at over 60 performances in venues around Victoria, the capital city of British Columbia.

Victoria sits on the southern most tip of Vancouver Island it is a small friendly city of just 300,000 inhabitants with a beautiful and picturesque inner harbor. Victoria's city centre has been restored to its former glory over many years and is truly a wonderful city to see and enjoy. Victoria started out as a trading post but it really came to life in the 1850's and 60's during the Fraser River gold rush where the town was the only port and was used for supplies. After the rush the town became an administrative centre. Because of its age and small layout the best way to see it is by foot. Like many smaller towns and cities Victoria is a very safe and friendly place, the streets are well lit and very clean crime is almost non existent. It is a most family orientated town and children are most welcome at restaurants and venues, some accommodation facilities even allow pets.

Victoria holds on fiercely to its British colonial traditions, Double Decker buses can be seen roaming the streets and if you glance into the towns many parks you may catch a glimpse of the occasional game of cricket or bowls!

Nestled between the Empress hotel and the Parliament Building is the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM). Vancouver Island is stocked with museums, but the RBCM is considered as one of the premier museums in Canada. Tourist flock to see the displays all year round and it must be said that they have an incredible collection. The museum was the first to be built on the Island, and this was completed in 1886. It is rated in the top 10 museums in North America. Covering the Islands history from prehistoric times through native inhabitation, right up until the first settlers arrived. The section dealing with the province's cultural history has some of the best and most fascinating displays giving a realistic and incredible glimpse into the past.

On the east side of Vancouver Island sits Nanaimo, it is another harbor city, found 70 miles north of Victoria. It was founded as a thriving coal mining area and this remembered at the Nanaimo Centennial Museum a small model mine in town. Also in the town is The Bastion Museum. Built in 1853, it is the oldest structure of its kind in North America. Recently restored to it's original condition the museum displays a three canon-firing ceremony daily at noon for the benefit of the many tourists who flock to see the spectacle (summer only). The Bastion was originally built by the Hudsons bay company in 1853, its design is that of a small fortress in which the inhabitants could defend themselves against a possible attack by the natives. The museum focuses on the period 1850-1880 and has many period photographs of the area and people who occupied the town and made it their home.

The variety of parks and lakes in and around the town give ample opportunity for those of an outdoor nature to pursue their pastimes quietly and those with a more adventuresome leaning can head off to Departure Bay where windsurfing equipment can be rented for a great afternoon's enjoyment.

Fishing canoeing and all manner of outdoor fun can be had on Vancouver Island and the nearby Gulf Islands. It really is a place which has something for everyone.

### About the Author

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