

Victoria offers visitors a royal experience

Vibrant West Coast city filled with British charm

By Mansoor Ladha

As someone born on an exotic island, Zanzibar, Tanzania, a visit to Victoria, British Columbia, an island city, has brought lots of memories and fascinated me with plenty of similarities during a recent visit.

Described as “very British,” it specializes in royal glamour and English charm, combined with seafront parks and endless ocean adventures. It is perhaps the most British city in North America, ornamented with flowers and colonial architecture. Victoria is a tourist’s paradise where a tourist can appreciate the beauty of the ocean and reflect on the area’s history.

Tourists who are bikers will be at home as they will be impressed by the number of people who use bikes to get around. I was told that this vibrant city is one where students and politicians alike get around by bike.

Like a typical English city with British culture and tradition, Victoria has abundant gardens and seafront parks, stately hotels and museums, avant-garde eateries, and craft breweries. As a gateway to southern Vancouver Island, it is a destination for food, wine, whale watching and ocean sports of all kinds. Appropriately called the City of Gardens, Victoria offers a year-round mild coastal climate, making gardening its residents’ top hobby.

Overlooking Victoria’s Inner Harbour is the city’s iconic Fairmont Empress Hotel, one of the top 21 landmark hotels in the world, according to National Geographic. Other travel magazines such as Travel + Leisure and Conde Nast have also named the Empress as a top Canadian hotel. A few years ago, I was able to have rice, Madras curry and chutney at its famous Bengal Lounge, but unfortunately the lounge is only used now for private functions.

However, a visit to the 464-room Empress, which has undergone a \$60-million restoration, should be on every visitor’s itinerary who wants to be treated in British royal fashion. The Empress has ruled Victoria for years and its reign still dominates the city. As the British would say, any time is tea time in Victoria and especially at the Empress, which has continued England’s most beloved ritual of afternoon tea for over a century in its



PHOTOS BY MANSOOR LADHA

Apartments and condos have sprung up to take advantage of the beautiful Victoria harbour.

sophisticated Lobby Lounge. Tea at the Empress, which is reported to have served more than half a million cups of tea each year, is a unique Victoria experience.

Another unique experience awaited us when we stayed at the Chateau Victoria, which features the city’s only rooftop hotel on the 18th floor and is home to Clive’s Classic Lounge, the place for classic cocktails with a twist. Vista 18 has an extraordinary menu and provides breathtaking views of the city’s Inner Harbour, the snow-capped Olympic Mountain range and beautiful downtown Victoria.

At Clive’s Lounge, bartender Alisha, who was busy mixing drinks for evening crowds, shared her passion for creating highest-quality cocktails for patrons. Alisha, who has worked in several quality bars, has a wealth of experience and knowledge in mixology. While making “Loosen Your Tie,”

a mixture of brandy, lemon juice, lavender syrup, liqueur and chartreuse for me, she talked about her job.

“At Clive’s, we make all of your favourite classics and take pride in our menu where we try to have fun and create a wide range of cocktails to please every palette. When people want something different, we are always down to create something custom off the cuff for them. In fact, more than a few menu cocktails have been born this way.

“Basically, we want to make everyone as happy as we can so if you have travelled the world looking for the perfect gin martini — great! We’ll make you one with local gin and our favourite vermouth. If you have never had a cocktail before or are feeling a bit afraid to venture out beyond your comfort zone, it’s all good, we’re going to make you something you never would have thought

to order and next you know you’ll be ordering Clover Clubs, Jack Roses and White Ladies like a seasoned pro.”

“We want everyone to have fun and feel welcome at Clive’s,” she said, adding that this is achieved by their attitude to cocktail making and is applied to every aspect of the business.

Clive’s Classic Lounge has become not only one of the top cocktail lounges in Victoria but has been recognized in the global cocktail community as one of the top 10 cocktail lounges in the world.

Within walking distance from most downtown hotels is Beacon Hill Park where one can either stroll or take a horse-drawn carriage to explore landscaped gardens and ponds. Beacon Park is also home to raccoons, squirrels, swans, turtles, ducks

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