

VICTORIA

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and geese.

The Greater Victoria area, nestled in beautiful, rugged West Coast terrain, is home to dozens of gardens and provincial, regional and municipal parks, including some of the most famous in Canada, the most notable being Butchart Gardens. As early as February, blooms spring up across Victoria while much of Canada is still covered in snow. The city also has a colourful annual hanging basket tradition to welcome the summer season that dates back 75 years.

Another fascinating place for tourists to visit in Victoria is the Fisherman's Wharf, just around the corner from the Inner Harbour. Here, you'll find food kiosks, kayak adventures and whale watching agents ready for your business. One can buy seafood fresh off the boat here and watch the commercial fishing vessels unload.

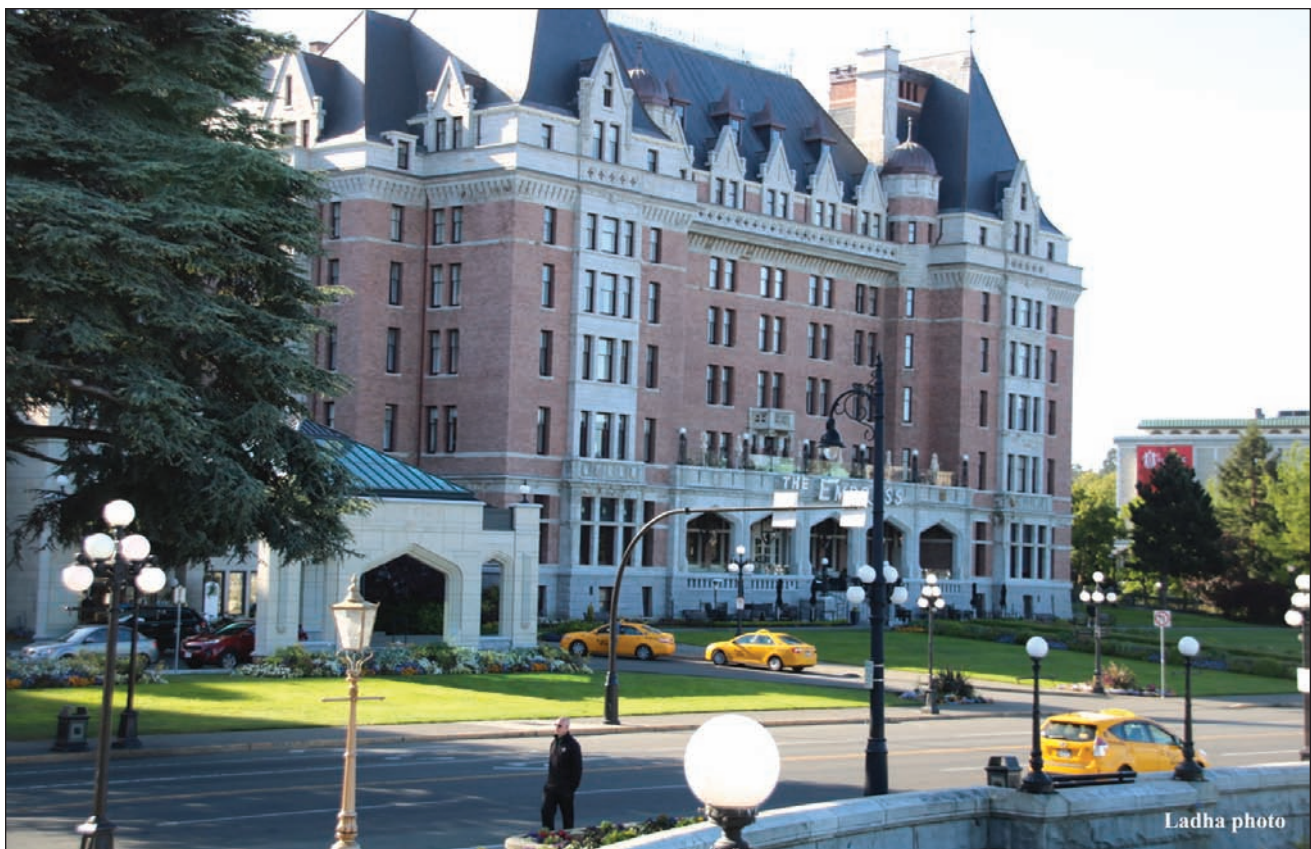
A trip to this part of British Columbia presents an opportunity to learn about the province's unique sea life and ecology. Barely half hour drive from Victoria is The Ocean Discovery Centre in Sidney which has floor to ceiling viewings highlighting local marine life.

But nothing beats going out into the ocean for miles and miles for whale watching in Sidney, which is strategically located in the middle of the orca feeding grounds. The company, Sidney Whale Watching, is so confident of guaranteeing their patrons seeing whales at 95 per cent of the time that they offer a second trip free if one doesn't see a whale. True to their statement, we were able to watch plenty of whales during our trip.

Whale-watching in B.C. is a huge industry and every time you go for it, you'll find several other vessels in the whale watching area, each boat respecting the gentlemen's rule of not going too close to the whales. Sidney is considered to be the best place in the world to have a whale-watching adventure because of its moderate climate and because it is located in the middle of orca whale foraging grounds.



A whale makes a dramatic entrance above the ocean surface.



The iconic Empress Hotel, above, is one of Victoria's best-known attractions. At right, Fisherman's Wharf is a popular destination for tourists and residents.



Victoria is gaining popularity as a favourite destinations for cruise liners. During my brief stay in Victoria, history was made when Norwegian Bliss, the largest cruise ship — 1,094 feet long — docked at Ogden Point. The ship, which carries 4,004 passengers, will be a regular sight in Victoria as it is scheduled to pull in every Friday as it serves the growing Alaska cruise market.

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based travel writer/photographer and author of "Memoirs of a Muhindi: Fleeing East Africa"

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