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ARTFUL LIVING

BRUCE MUNRO WRIGHT'S TREASURE-FILLED HOME

AHHH, SPA!
BATHROOMS
UPDATED

IDS VANCOUVER
INSPIRES, DELIGHTS
AND INTRIGUES

BEAUTIFUL
BULBS WITH
BRIAN MINTER



The brightly coloured shops of Lower Johnson Street in Victoria.

HOW THE VANCOUVER ISLAND CITY KEPT ITS COOL WHILE EMBRACING IT

By JOANNE SASVARI

Getting there, they say, is half the fun. But it's rarely true. These days, getting there is almost always a miserable journey in-out-of fun. Unless, that is, you're travelling to Victoria, where the journey has become just one of the things that makes visiting B.C.'s capital city such a joy.

It is a beautiful morning, sunny and warm. As we stroll aboard the new V2V ferry in downtown Vancouver, smiling staff whisk our bags away so we barely have to lift a finger before settling into seats that are actually comfortable. For one thing, they have tables, so when the servers bring us our food and drinks, we don't have to balance them on our laps. Did I mention: Servers bring our food to us. We don't have to race, Hunger Games-style, to join a lineup for cafeteria fare.

IT'S A PLACE WHERE BOOKSTORES ARE COOL AND SO ARE CRAFT COCKTAIL BARS, CYCLING AND PADDLING THE INNER HARBOUR

Already it's been a great trip and we're only halfway across the Salish Sea.

Once we get to Victoria, things get even better. Like the Clipper from Seattle and Harbour Air's floatplanes from Vancouver, the V2V lands right in Victoria's Inner Harbour. We simply grab our bags and amble over to our hotel.

Right away, we Oh, sure, then carriages line the same haw beaded brace for pictures in Buildings. Bu somehow, Pei gone from the top of the har optimism that

Victoria, you s

It still retains grand Edwardian quaint Victor rambling gar polished shier renovations i making it a di range from o tech startups



TOP: Kayakers paddle in the Inner Harbour past the B.C. Parliament Buildings. ABOVE: The refurbished Fairmont Empress Hotel in Victoria.

are cool, and so are craft cocktail bars, where the arts can still draw a crowd, where kayakers paddle in the Inner Harbour and cyclists join the Pedaler's craft beer tours.

And yet it could all have gone in a very different direction.

In the 1850s and '60s, prospectors stopped here to load up on permits and supplies for the Cariboo gold rush. In the process, they turned Victoria almost overnight from a sleepy village into a thriving commercial boomtown. What's now known as Old Town, the neighbourhood around Market Square, teemed with hotels, saloons and brothels. At one point, 10,000 people lived crammed just in the few blocks of Canada's oldest Chinatown, which was also home to opium factories and fan tamar parlours.

By the 1960s and '70s, though, Old Town had become rundown and derelict. The city discussed tearing it down, but decided instead to revitalize. How fortunate that they did.

Chinatown has had a rebirth in the last decade, with chic boutiques like Even Fan Tan Alley, the new Canada, once riddled with now filled with independent boutiques. Nearby on Lower Johnson Street, nicknamed Lolo, gaily painted storefronts that once sold pickaxes and work boots now display handcrafted soap, home décor and designer clothing. Market Square, once so dark and foreboding, has had a facelift, too, and is open for business. Still, as we pass through pedestrian-friendly alleys, we catch mysterious glimpses of the past: here, a metal rim designed to protect a sidewalk from carriage wheels; there, a road surface made of wood blocks, unchanged in 100 years.

Meanwhile, up on busy Douglas Street, the Belle Époque beauty that once housed the Hudson's Bay department store has become stylish condos and a public market. Every-



TOP LEFT: Pulling a pint at Spinnaker's Gastro Brew Pub. TOP RIGHT: A dragon guards the gateway to Chinatown. ABOVE: The new V2V ferry at the dock in Vancouver's Coal Harbour.

where we go, we find exciting new eateries and wine bars, cocktail lounges and pubs.

And then there's the recent renovation of the Fairmont Empress. The grande dame has had a massive \$60-million makeover. Gone are the two rose-patterned carpets and all the trapped-in-the-'80s pink and green. Instead, it glimmers with cool silver and regal purple. The tea lobby still serves an afternoon cuppa with finger sandwiches and scones, but the room is newly glamorous and elegant. The new Q Bar not only features grand Warhol-esque portraits of Queen Victoria, but views of all the action in the Inner Harbour.

Perhaps most remarkably, modernizing the hotel has somehow managed to reveal the beautiful heritage features that were lost before in all the chintz and dark oak. It could be a metaphor for his whole city: The younger and more vibrant it becomes, the more gracefully it seems to age.

It's something to ponder as we slip award-winning Sea Star rose on our return trip via V2V. (And yes, the ferry serves local wine and craft beer.) Aging well is something Victoria has mastered. If only we all could do the same. ■

IF YOU GO

Getting there:

BC Ferries sail hourly most days from Tsawwassen to Swartz Bay, while major airlines serve Victoria International Airport in Sidney. If you want to arrive right in or near the Inner Harbour, however, opt for Harbour Air's floatplanes (harbourair.com), the HeliJet (heli.com), the Clipper If you're coming from Seattle (clippervacations.com) or

Staying there:

For grand historic luxury: The Fairmont Empress Hotel. fairmont.com/empress-victoria/

For opulent boutique charm: Magnolia Hotel. magnoliahotel.com

For value and vividly hued fun: Hotel Zed. Hotelzed.com

few places to try include: Agrius (agriusrestaurant.com), Spinnaker's Gastro Brewpub (spinnakers.com), Zambri's (zambri.ca), 10 Acres Kitchen (10acreskitchen.ca), Stage Wine Bar (stagewinebar.com), Veneto (venetodining.com) and the new Fox Whisky Tango cocktail lounge in the DoubleTree by Hilton (FTWbar.com).

For more information:

To plan your trip, visit victoriatourism.com.