

Weekender Travel Report

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The Star, Saturday, May 21, 2011

West coast Vancouvers itself in glory

MY travel book told me, curiously, that I should hope for rain on at least one of the days I was in Vancouver.

As many of my past holidays have been a wash-out, I had no doubt I would experience rain while a guest in this west coast city, which celebrates its 125th anniversary this year.

I wasn't disappointed – rain was a common thread through my days there, although it certainly didn't put a dampener on my enjoyment.

Everyone is prepared for it. Both The Listel and The Loden hotels, where I was lucky enough to stay, had sturdy umbrellas at the ready for guests, and even the dogs had rain macs to don.

And it made those rare moments when the rain stopped and the cloud lifted even more spectacular, as the imposing mountains that surround the city were revealed in all their glory, and the sunshine twinkled on the ocean around the harbour of Canada Place and along the seawall through the sprawling Stanley Park – both must-sees on a good weather day.

The street scenes, which combine towering skyscrapers and flashing 'Walk / Don't Walk' signs with glimpses of passing boats and snow-topped peaks, are unlike anywhere else, giving you the impression of truly 'having it all' in one place.

On a clear day, take the Sea Bus towards the mountains from Waterfront and hop on a bus to the base of Grouse Mountain (www.grousemountain.com) where you can take the Sky Ride cable car to the top. The hefty \$40 price tag probably reflects its use primarily as a ski resort where people go to spend the whole day. But if you

The sea, the city, the mountains - they all come together in Vancouver. Travel writer **Sarah Dunn** took a road trip along the west coast of North America and, in the second of two features, discovers Canada's Winter Olympic wonderland

are feeling frivolous, the views at the top are spectacular – as is the journey gliding through snow-dusted pine trees.

A must at the weekend is a trip to Granville Island (www.granvilleisland.com) – accessible from downtown via a nippy rainbow-coloured Aquabus. Here you find a sprawling hotch-potch of food stalls, craft shops, art galleries and a brewery – the perfect place to wander on a lazy Sunday morning.

A great way to get an overview of the city is via a hop-on hop-off bus tour. The Old Trolley Bus Company (www.vancouver-trolley.com) give it a unique twist by using an old San Francisco tram on wheels, but be sure to check your map for pick-up points as they're not easily identifiable on the street.

The top choice on a wet day has to be the Dr Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden (www.vancouverchinesegarden.com), where you'll be wowed by the beautiful plants, ponds and pavings and the hidden symbolism they hold. In a downpour, the sound of the rain coming off the roof drip tiles makes the place even more magical.

Eating, drinking and even sleeping are also a treat in Vancouver. One of Canada's best boutique hotels – The Loden – offers the

you find impressive paintings and sculptures from a host of local and international artists. It's also connected to the O'Douls restaurant and bar – the perfect place to fuel up for the day with a top-notch breakfast, or finish off the evening with a cocktail and some live jazz.

You can't go to North America and not tuck into a good steak – and I found one of the best of my

life at the Glowbal Grill restaurant in the trendy district of Yaletown (www.glowbalgrill.com), where even in March you can enjoy dinner al fresco thanks to the heavy duty outdoor heaters. The satays are immense too – the perfect starter to share as you nibble your way through delights including grilled king prawn and coconut chicken.

This was the perfect choice for our first night in the city, when we were in need of somewhere to simply sit back and relax, following a marathon road trip from San Francisco.

We took a route that combined both the beautiful Oregon coastline, and some of the more speedy Interstate 5.

One of our stops was close to the cute town of Florence, where our home for the night was the Heceta Head Lighthouse, located down a dirt track off the Pacific Coast Highway 101.

Spectacular doesn't do this place justice. Arriving at night, our hosts encouraged us to take a walk up to the lighthouse in the dark. It certainly blew away the cobwebs after a day cooped up in the car, the wind and the rain swirling together in the intermittent beam which lit up the stormy sea below.

The cottage was gorgeous too – in particular the Mariner's Room which looked directly out to sea, the sound of which was the perfect lullaby – and a six-course breakfast overlooking

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the crashing waves was a treat to start the next day.

Another of our stop-offs was in the Oregon city of Portland, where we stayed at the opulent Hotel De Luxe, where everything is designed to celebrate the glitz and the glamour of 1940s and '50s Hollywood. The marble and chrome lobby was magnificent – complete with a huge screen showing a loop of black and white movies – while the attached bar continued the theme with an impressive cocktail list named after film stars. The bedrooms were a treat too – including a pillow menu and a Do Not Disturb sign advising: 'All Quiet On Set'.

Portland was a refreshing break from the faceless American towns full of chain restaurants and stores we had passed through on our drive north. There's an 'al-

ternative' scene which includes the likes of Powell's book store – so big it takes up a whole block – as well as vintage shops, record stores and the indulgent Voodoo donuts which attracts queues every day of the week.

Nursing a beer in a bar that night, we got chatting to a local Anglophile.

"Portland's a bit like your Sheffield," he told me, and straight away I could see what he meant. No airs and graces, but an appreciation of the cool and the quirky – there's even a tram to a district called Hillsboro!

And although the wet weather had remained a constant in Portland, throughout our travels and during our time in Vancouver, it couldn't detract from the wonder of the west coast and all it has to offer.