

City by the Sea

The Pacific is Vancouver's natural element — and the life force that has shaped its history, geography, wildlife and people **BY DORIS ECKER**



Marina Mecca

Vancouver's ritzy marinas exude an aura of adventure and luxury. Supersized motor yachts, speedboats of futuristic design and seductively sleek fibreglass sailboats are berthed within spitting distance of an impressive glitz-and-glass skyline. The city's namesake, Captain Vancouver, would not have considered these modern maritime marvels seaworthy. In much the same way, the beamy wooden three-masted sloops of the first Spanish explorers were an enigma to coastal First Nations, who felt bewildered by the floating "ghost islands with three dead trees" arriving on their shores over 200 years ago. Maritime exploration may be ancient history for the international jet setters who mingle in this urban boating playground. However, like the city's glass façades, their fancy yachts reflect Vancouver's maritime wealth and legacy.



By Sea We Prosper

For ringside seats at Vancouver's port, head for Canada Place or take a trip on the SeaBus. Nothing symbolizes the city's role as a maritime gateway to the world better than the ultra-luxurious cruise liners, super-sized cargo ships, sturdy tugs and nimble fishing boats that share the natural-harbour waters of Canada's largest port. They follow in the footsteps of their historic predecessors, from the dugout canoes of First Nations and early fur traders, to the proud wooden sailing ships of explorers and the emblematic Empress steam liners. They epitomize the maritime trade, transport and tourism that have always been the name of the game in the waters that surround, inspire and define this city. The iconic five-sails roof at Canada Place, overlooking the bustling cruise-ship terminal and commercial cargo port, is a modern maritime ode to Vancouver, the sea and its vessels.

Life's a Beach

Stunning stretches of blond sand, a global hotchpotch of people sunbathing, swimming, paddling, playing and picnicking, the maritime horizon and mighty mountains reflected in the City of Glass — you could easily be fooled into thinking that Vancouver's urban beaches are an utterly contemporary phenomenon. A quick dip into the city's history reveals that the shores of Ay-Yul-Shun ("soft under feet", as the Squamish First Nation referred to English Bay Beach) have been a seaside hot spot for almost 150 years. It's true that back then a large boulder separated male and female bathers and strict rules required "bathing dress covering the body from the neck to the knees." But all the English Bay beaches are where locals congregate for rest, relaxation and recreation. The south shore even takes centre stage in one of the city's cultural tributes to history, the annual Bard on the Beach Shakespeare festival — proof that, then as now, in Vancouver all life's a beach.

Wild at Heart

Water too frigid? Weather too wet? Vancouver's marine birds and mammals couldn't agree less with the couch-potato attitude of modern humans who share their coastline. No matter the season or meteorological challenge, a motley assortment of loons, cormorants, scoters and seals bob around in the waves. Screeching seagulls and bald eagles circle the skies searching for fresh sea-food. Canada geese and colourful mallards parade the grassy edges of the shore. Whales and porpoises have made themselves scarce in the bay, preferring to stay further offshore nowadays. After a near-fatal turn-of-the-last-century fashion fad for fancy feathers and thick furs, sea otters once again frolic in False Creek and blue herons have re-established themselves in a vibrant Stanley Park seaside colony. Time has shown that cohabiting a limited stretch of coastline isn't always easy, but Vancouver's marine wildlife manages to accommodate the human urbanites who, like them, like to be "beside the seaside." ■



