

Vancouver Vitals

Everything you need to know to survive in the city

BY JANE MUNDY

As you're settling into life here, you'll be far too busy to worry about the rain. What with finding a place to live, a bank, a job, a grocery store, and, of course, essentials like nearby restaurants and movie theatres, you won't spend a lot of time worrying about the wetness. And by the time you've got it all figured out, the sun will be back. In the meantime, here's some essential information for newcomers to B.C.

Alcohol

The drinking age in B.C. is 19. Alcohol is purchased at Liquor Control and Licensing Branch (LCLB) stores throughout the province (www.bcliquorstores.com). There are also licensed private retail stores, commonly called "cold beer and wine stores." Specialty wine stores offer Vintner's Quality Alliance (VQA) bottles.

Banks

Canada's major banks include Bank of Montreal (BMO), Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), Toronto Dominion Canada Trust, Scotiabank, and RBC Royal Bank. Hours are generally Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Some are open later, and on Saturdays; all are closed Sundays and national holidays. Credit unions, which provide the full range of services, serve 139 different communities in B.C., including 40 that have no other financial institution. For details, visit www.creditunionsofbc.com.

To open an account you need two pieces of ID – one must be a Canadian driver's license, birth certificate or passport, a Citizenship or Naturalization Certificate, a Permanent Resident or Citizenship card or a Social Insurance card. For details, visit the Canadian Bankers Association at www.cba.ca.

Business Hours

The average B.C. workday is 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Some government offices close at 4 p.m. Smaller stores, shops and supermarkets are usually open Monday to Saturday from 9 a.m. to at least 6 p.m.

Larger stores, including major malls, keep later hours with many open until 9 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays. Sunday hours are usually noon to 5 p.m. Some convenience stores are open around the clock.

Drugstores

You'll find many smaller pharmacies in B.C. but the two major chains are London Drugs (www.londondrugs.com) and Shoppers Drug Mart (www.shoppersdrugmart.ca).

Electricity

The electrical standard is 110 volts/60 cycles AC. Dual-voltage appliances require an adaptor to convert the plug into one with two flat parallel prongs.

Emergency

Dial 911 for immediate police, fire or ambulance assistance.

Employment

In 2007, unemployment was the lowest it had been since 1978, particularly in the hospitality and construction sectors.

Work requirements for those coming from outside Canada are found on the Government of Canada Services for Non-Canadians website at www.canadainternational.gc.ca.

A Human Resource Centre of Canada is a good starting point for your hunt. There, you can apply for a Social Insurance Number (a requirement to work in Canada), access the job bank, or research workplace and employer information. Visit www.hrsdc.gc.ca or

call 604-872-7431 or 1-800-206-7218 outside Vancouver.

B.C. WorkInfo Net (<http://workinfo-net.bc.ca/>) provides a variety of resources for job, education, career and labour market information.

There are many organizations in Vancouver helping newcomers familiarize themselves with the job market, brush up on job search skills and find employment. These services are often free and include referrals, placements, help with English language skills, and provide computers and Internet access:

- S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Foundation: 604-608-1636; www.success.bc.ca
- Mosaic Employment Programs: 604-254-9626; www.mosaicbc.com
- Career Axis at Immigration Services Society of B.C.: 604-684-2123; www.issbc.org
- YWCA Career Zone: 604-605-4666; Focus at Work, 604-688-4666; www.ywcajobseeker.org

Other job websites for the Vancouver area are:

- www.workopolis.com
- www.jobshark.ca
- www.hotjobs.ca
- www.bcjobs.com
- www.employmentinvancouver.com
- www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/humanresources/jobs/

Grocery Stores

Save-On-Foods, Safeway and Market-Place IGA are the province's largest chains. The Real Canadian Superstore is a big-box chain offering food, toys, electronics, home décor, clothing, gardening supplies, an in-store pharmacy and photo lab. In Vancouver, a variety of stores sell organic and gourmet foods, including Capers Community Markets, Choices Markets and Whole Foods. Urban Fare (two locations) is a trendy, upscale grocery store with in-house wine bar and restaurant. Online options that will deliver include Stong's Market (www.stongs.com) and Small Potatoes Urban Delivery (www.spud.ca).

Housing

Whether you decide to rent or buy,

the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) provides valuable information online. Homebuyers will find tips on purchasing a home, hiring an inspector and calculating a mortgage. Renters will find information on landlord and tenant responsibilities, deposits, and rental agreements, payments and increases. Visit www.cmhc.ca.

You can find a listing of properties for sale by region at www.mls.ca but it's a good idea to enlist a real-estate agent, especially in Vancouver's frantic market, especially as agents get the listings a few days before they're posted online. Prices vary greatly depending on neighbourhood and dwelling type. For details, refer to page 24.

Renters should start with the classified section of the newspaper. You can search online at <http://classifieds.canada.com/vancouver>, www.rentbc.com and <http://vancouver.craigslist.ca/>.

In Vancouver, where vacancy rates are low, many landlords post signs in windows or on front lawns. A walk around a neighbourhood that appeals to you could land you an unadvertised apartment.

Average rents are high for Canada, though slightly less than in Toronto: \$695 for a bachelor, \$823 for a one-bedroom, and \$1,160 for a two-bedroom.

Holidays

National holidays are New Year's Day (January 1), Good Friday and Easter Monday (late March/early April), Victoria Day (Monday before May 25), Canada Day (July 1), Labour Day (first Monday in September), Thanksgiving (second Monday in October), Remembrance Day (November 11), Christmas Day (December 25) and Boxing Day (December 26). The Civic Holiday, also known as B.C. Day (first Monday in August) is a day off for most.

Immigration Assistance

The B.C. government's Newcomers' Guide to Resources and Services (www.ag.gov.bc.ca/sam/newcomers_guide/index.htm) covers issues of government and citizenship, health care,

finances, finding a home and job, child-care and education. It also provides a listing of immigrant settlement agencies in your area.

Immigrant Services Society of B.C. (www.issbc.org) also offers a range of services, including language training, family and youth services, job placement and housing.

YMCA Connections is a program helping immigrants settle in Canada by matching them with volunteer hosts. For details, visit www.ymcaconnections.org or call 604-685-8066.

The Citizenship and Immigration Canada website (www.cic.gc.ca) provides general information and a list of where to get help in your community.

Language

English is the most-spoken language here, with Chinese a close second. Over 70 languages are spoken, including Canada's other official language, French, as well as Punjabi, German, Italian, Tagalog (Filipino) and Spanish. More than half of Vancouver's school-age children have been raised speaking a language other than English.

The Canadian government offers free language training for adult permanent residents through English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) in B.C. Visit <http://www.elsanet.org/> for a training centre near you.

Newspapers

Vancouver has two major dailies – *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province*. Canada's two daily national papers, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, are also available. As well, there are free dailies, including *24 hours* and *Metro*. *The Georgia Straight* (published Thursdays) is the authority for entertainment listings, in-depth features and alternative points of view. The online newspaper *The Tyee* (www.thetyee.ca) is another alternative publication.

Restaurants

Vancouver has one of Canada's most exciting food scenes, in large part because of its multicultural population.

From African to Vietnamese, Vancouver serves it all. The large Asian and South Asian populations here make for popular Chinese, Japanese, Thai and Indian dining experiences. Sushi is available in every neighbourhood. A variety of websites provide listings and food reviews; two good ones are www.dinehere.ca and www.vancouverrestaurantguide.net. *Vancouver* magazine (www.vanmag.com) also regularly publishes restaurant reviews.

Taxes

You'll pay a goods and services tax (GST) of five per cent (as of January, 2008) on almost everything you buy, except for basic groceries and some prescription drugs. There is also a provincial sales tax (PST) of seven per cent.

Telephones

There are two area codes in Vancouver: 604 and 778. Local calls require dialing all 10 digits. In surrounding areas, 604 is also used, but it's necessary to dial 1 before the 10-digit number; long distance charges apply. Area code 250 is used for Vancouver Island and the rest of B.C.

For long-distance calls, dial 1 plus the 10-digit telephone number. 1-800 or 1-888 numbers are toll free. For operator assistance, dial 0. For directory assistance for local and other North American telephone numbers, dial 411; there is a charge of 75 cents for this service.

For International calls, dial 011, followed by the country code (listed in the telephone book's front pages; Canada's is 1), then the local number. To have an operator assist you, dial 0 and ask for the overseas operator.

Weather

Vancouver's climate is one of the mildest in Canada. Temperatures average 0 to 5C (mid 40s Fahrenheit) in January and are in the low 20sC (high 70s Fahrenheit) in July. Winters are wet (the average annual precipitation is 1,219 mm) but it rarely snows, except on the local mountains. **MTV**