

Top Honours

From its quality of life to its award-winning restaurants, Vancouver earns top marks on the world stage

BY JANE MUNDY



Though legendary for its rare combination of mountains, rainforests and ocean views, Vancouver's beauty is far from skin deep. In 2007, Vancouver took the honour of "most livable city" for the fifth consecutive year from over 132 cities worldwide, according to *Economist* magazine, scoring a livability index of 1.3 per cent (where zero indicates exceptional quality of living).

Its complex heritage is one of Vancouver's most compelling aspects. First Nations lived here for thousands of years before the Spanish sailed into Burrard Inlet in 1791. One year later, the British followed, with Captain George Vancouver giving the city its name.

In terms of architectural history, some of the city's oldest buildings are in

Gastown, the downtown neighbourhood snuggled closest to the inlet. Once shabby, Gastown is slowly being gentrified, as fine restaurants and chic boutiques edge out less glitzy tenants. Still, it borders Vancouver's gritty downtown Eastside, so despite its name, Gastown can't get too full of itself.

Lined with famous shops and high-end eateries, Robson Street attracts Vancouverites and visiting celebrities alike. A few blocks southwest is English Bay, a popular place to stroll or sit and watch the sailboats drift by, be it winter or summer. On select summer evenings, it hosts the HSBC Celebration of Light, an international fireworks competition.

When the crowds and clamour of downtown overwhelm, many Vancouverites escape to Stanley Park, a 1,000-acre oasis of trees, flowers, lagoons, streams, lakes, playgrounds and sports fields. Totem poles remind visitors of the area's roots, while the ships chugging past are proof Vancouver is one of North America's biggest ports (trading \$53 billion in goods annually), boasting one of the world's finest natural deep-water harbours.

Vancouver's image is one of liberal politics and strong environmental activism – it's no accident Greenpeace was founded here. Tree-hugger or not, Vancouverites tend to dress casually and treasure the West Coast lifestyle that somehow justifies their relatively high rents and mortgage payments. They usually enjoy outdoor activities, no matter the weather, from sailing, kayaking and scuba diving to golfing, skiing, hiking, and mountain biking.

Since over a third of its population is between the ages of 25 and 44, Vancouver has a large, young workforce, with an average individual working income of \$39,351 and a median family income of \$57,926.

Vancouver is known as Hollywood North because of its thriving film industry. Many directors choose to film in the area because of the variety of backdrops provided by its terrain. Other crucial local industries include those based on natural resources, creative and corporate

operations, biotechnology, software development, forest and mining products, trade and financial services, and tourism.

A city of newcomers, Vancouver boasts one of the world's highest percentages of foreign-born residents. Approximately 40 per cent of the City of Vancouver's 578,000 residents claim to have emigrated from outside Canada. Over one third of the city's half million residents are of Asian descent, not surprising considering Vancouver is Canada's gateway to the Pacific Rim. Its Chinatown is North America's second largest. The population is truly diverse, with Japanese, Greek, Indo-Canadian, Italian, Iranian and Jewish immigrant communities, to name just a few.

This diversity makes for a rich cultural landscape – and great restaurants. Vancouver has a burgeoning and influential culinary scene. The city's best chefs, blessed with an abundance of local produce, meats and seafood, use and promote organic, regional and local products with award-winning results.

Maybe great food is one of the

region's lures – certainly people keep on coming. Over 34,000 people migrated to Metro Vancouver (which now numbers at almost 2.2 million people) in 2006, many of them now calling the City of Vancouver home. Many areas are being rezoned to accommodate housing and more housing is being created through higher density redevelopment. In 2006, 18,705 housing units were added.

With such an influx of newcomers, it's not surprising housing costs in the city are Canada's highest. The average price for a home in 2007 was \$705,000; that's predicted to reach over \$1 million by 2010 if the market continues to grow at its current rate.

The 2010 Olympic Winter Games will bring many improvements to the city, from transit boosts to new recreational facilities. Still, it will be Vancouver's lush beauty that captivates visitors and viewers from around the world. They'll enjoy it for a couple of weeks. You, however, will get to experience it year-round. Welcome. **MTV**

