

The V2V *Empress* in Vancouver's inner harbour, with Stanley Park and the North Shore Mountains in the background

PHOTO BY PAUL CORDICK





Ocean Getaway

Set sail in style for Victoria on nearby Vancouver Island

BY SHERI RADFORD

British Columbia Parliament Buildings. (Top R) Outdoor benches on the ship's upper deck. (Bottom R) Premium Class seating



A trip to the West Coast just isn't complete without a visit to Victoria. Fortunately, V2V Vacations (page 83) can get you there in style. The company's luxury high-speed catamaran whisks passengers from downtown Vancouver to downtown Victoria every morning, then makes a return trip each afternoon. Snacks and beverages from a BC-focused menu keep hunger at bay during the 3.5-hour cruise.

Start the day by settling into a comfy leather seat and watching the hustle and bustle of Vancouver's inner harbour, as seaplanes, kayaks, dragon boats and SeaBuses glide by. Each seat has a USB port and power outlet, and the entire ship has free Wi-Fi, but you'll be too busy admiring the scenery and the wildlife to bother with any electronic devices. Keep an eye out for orcas, dolphins, seals, blue herons and eagles as the V2V *Empress* meanders between the Gulf Islands. An outdoor viewing deck on the top level lets you feel the wind in your hair and breathe in the crisp ocean air—and take some pretty spectacular photos.

Upon arriving in Victoria, the sightseeing possibilities are endless. V2V can arrange a variety of outings, such as a culinary walking tour that shows off the city's food scene while explaining local history, or tea at the Fairmont

Empress Hotel, to experience a bit of the area's British history. A cycling tour includes stops at landmarks such as Craigdarroch Castle and the world's tallest totem pole, while a trip to Butchart Gardens is a must for any flower aficionado. Other options include a hop-on-hop-off bus tour, a brewery-and-distillery tour and a trip to the Royal BC Museum.

If you'd rather explore on your own, Victoria's downtown core is easily walkable. Wander the grounds of the impressive British Columbia Parliament Buildings. Marvel at all the tiny wonders in Miniature World, including the world's smallest operational sawmill. Munro's Books is a haven for bibliophiles, filled with bestsellers and esoteric tomes alike. Fisherman's Wharf has some of the best—and freshest—fish 'n' chips you'll ever taste. The oldest Chinatown in Canada is home to exotic stores and cafes, as well as Fan Tan Alley, which is one of North America's narrowest alleys (you might recognize it from a chase scene in the Mel Gibson film *Bird on a Wire*).

There's so much to see and do that you might need to stay an extra day or two. If you must return to Vancouver quickly, you can select a sail-and-fly package that lets you experience the ship in the morning then fly back with Harbour Air on a seaplane. Whichever you choose, it's sure to be a trip to remember. **W**