

## **Spectacular by nature**

**Vancouver has just been voted the world's best place to live. But what is it like for visitors? Tim Jepson reports.**

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Is Vancouver the best city in the world?

Yes, at least according to the the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), which earlier this month named it the world's best place to live in a survey that aimed to assess the quality of life in 127 cities.

The results were based on an analysis of environment, culture, healthcare, education, infrastructure and stability. London ranked 47th.

But not only the statisticians rate the city.

Two weeks ago, in the Telegraph Travel Awards, the UK's largest independent travel survey, readers of the The Daily and The Sunday Telegraph rated Vancouver their fifth favourite city. Fifth may not sound impressive, but those above it were predictable major cities (Cape Town, Sydney, Venice and New York).



**Beautiful Vancouver: "the combination of sea, mountains and city skyline is unbeatable"**

More to the point, Vancouver entered the Telegraph's rankings from nowhere, having not been placed at all in 2004.

Readers and pollsters are only saying what locals have known for years.

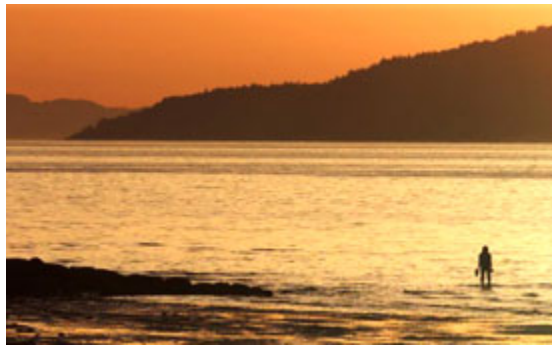
Vancouver has always been an extraordinarily beautiful place to live in and visit - the combination of sea, mountains and city skyline is unbeatable - but over the past decade the city has boomed, fuelled by the raw materials of the Canadian interior pouring through its port (the largest on North America's west coast) and, latterly, by a position on the Pacific Rim that makes it a natural beneficiary of the burgeoning economies of China and the Far East.

However, facts, figures and booming economies are dry stuff.

What of the city itself? Do the things that make it a glorious place to live also make it a glorious place to visit?

Without a doubt. Hopefully you won't have to test the city's healthcare, and its fine education provision will pass you by, but aspects of the EIU's other touchstones - environment, culture and infrastructure - all conspire to produce a perfect holiday destination.

As a city, it has plenty to offer, even at this time of year, and if you wait a month or so, skiing and other winter activities become available.



**Vancouver beach: only Rio has a beach so near**

Below are 10 reasons why Vancouver is not only the world's best city in which to live, but also one of the best to visit.

- Tim Jepson is author of 'The Rough Guide to Vancouver' (Penguin, £10.99). The telephone code for Vancouver from the UK is 001 604.

### **Spectacular setting**

Vancouver's setting is the clincher: I can think of no other city that has the combination of ocean, beach, forest and mountains.

Among its scenic rivals, San Francisco has the bay, but not the backdrop; Sydney the harbour, but no mountains; Rio, to be sure, has beach, mountains and ocean, but there's not a lot of skiing in the Brazilian hinterland.

Never mind the outdoor activities, Vancouver's scenery makes it eternally easy on the eye, even if you never venture beyond the downtown streets.



**A perfect place for romantic holidays: walking in Vancouver**

One of the great pleasures of walking in the city is constantly turning a corner to catch a view of the Pacific framed by snow- or forest-swathed mountains.

### **Superlative food**

Vancouver's culinary allure owes much to its natural bounty (you'll never eat better wild salmon, for example), but also to its ethnic diversity, a diversity that has ensured outstanding Chinese, Italian, Greek and Japanese food, and latterly, Vietnamese, Korean and Thai.

In North America, only New York has a bigger choice of cuisines and fine restaurants.

Vancouver's West Coast ethos means it excels at so-called fusion/Pacific Rim/Californian cuisine, which in practice means lots of restaurants offering modern cooking that combines sublime natural ingredients with Italian, French and Asian influences.

For Italian, I like CinCin, an old favourite at 1154 Robson Street (688 7338; [www.cincin.net](http://www.cincin.net)) or Villa del Lupo, 869 Hamilton Street (688 7436); for Chinese, Pink Pearl, 1132 East Hastings (253 4316; [www.pinkpearl.com](http://www.pinkpearl.com)), is an institution - and highly authentic - as is Floata Seafood, 400-180 Keefer Street (602 0368; [www.floata.com](http://www.floata.com)), especially for dim sum.

For the best of the contemporary West Coast, treat yourself at Bishop's, 2183 West Fourth Avenue; Chartwell, 791 West Georgia (844 67150); or Diva at the Met, 645 Howe Street (602 7788).

Best for fish and seafood are the Blue Water Café in the trendy Yaletown district at 1095 Hamilton Street (688 8078; [www.bluewatercafe.net](http://www.bluewatercafe.net)); The Fish House, 2099 Beach Avenue (681 7275; [www.fishhousestanleypark.com](http://www.fishhousestanleypark.com)); and C Restaurant, 2-1600 Howe Street (681 1164; [www.crestaurant.com](http://www.crestaurant.com)).

The best places for good, but inexpensive food in relaxed surroundings are Earl's, 1185 Robson Street (669 0020), well-placed for shopping, and the Water Street Café, 300 Water Street (689 2832), an oasis in the otherwise rather touristy Gastown district.



Cycling in Kits Point

## Stanley Park

As if Vancouver didn't have enough scenery, in Stanley Park it has North America's largest urban park - 20 per cent larger than Manhattan's Central Park.

A vast area of temperate rainforest, it was set aside in 1888, only a few years after Vancouver emerged as little more than a clearing in the woods.

As a result it includes swathes of "first-growth", with grandiose stands of Douglas fir, cedar and hemlock, many with colossal trees more than 1,000 years old.

Amazing to think that all this is on the edge of downtown, a few minutes from the ranks of mirrored skyscrapers.

Only the fringes are developed, with gardens, walkways and three popular beaches: the rest is dark and secret, or criss-crossed by trails, home to herons, coyotes, eagles, owls and more.

## Breathtaking views

The city's best view comes from the top of 4,000ft Grouse Mountain ([www.grousemountain.com](http://www.grousemountain.com)), reached by trail or by North America's largest cable-cars.

The panorama extends across the snow-covered mountains of the BC interior, across the islet-scattered waters of the Pacific to Vancouver Island, and south across the city, past the downtown skyscrapers and the lazy meanders of the mighty Fraser river to Mount Baker and Washington State, more than 160 miles away.

Many high-rise hotels also have good views, as does the The Lookout! at the 40-floor Harbour Centre ([www.vancouverlookout.com](http://www.vancouverlookout.com)), where an inexpensive - and stomach-turning - thrill is provided by the all-glass elevator that runs up the outside of the building.

The SeaBus ferry, which connects the downtown peninsula to the mountain suburbs of North Vancouver, also offers great (and cheap) views of the bustle of the port, Stanley Park and the downtown skyscrapers.

I'd also splash out on a seaplane trip from downtown, either a city tour or as part of a day trip to Victoria on nearby Vancouver Island. The flight takes 30 minutes, costs around £40, and offers more glorious views. Contact Harbour Air (274 1277; [www.harbour-air.com](http://www.harbour-air.com)).



Skiers have a choice of three slopes close by

## Culture

Culture was one of the EIU's five "likeability" categories, and in this area the city delivers on all fronts - whether you want classical music (the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra is world class), avant-garde dance (the Karen Jamieson Dance Company) or an utterly deranged repertory cinema (The Blinding Light: sample screening - Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter).

These days, Vancouver also ranks third behind New York and LA in terms of film and television production (The X-Files, for example, was filmed here for its first few series), thanks to its lower costs, varied scenery and fabulous old-world alleys and cityscapes (which can, and do, double for any number of "foreign" locations).

One knock-on has been the Vancouver Film Festival, North America's third largest, and one of many, many festivals in and around the city: barely a week goes by without an event of some sort.

The best forthcoming shows are the Vancouver Snow Show (from next Friday) and VanDusen Festival of Light (November), when one of the city's many gardens is illuminated by more than 20,000 lights.

## Great places to stay

Any world-class city worth its salt must have a choice of luxury, boutique and good-value central hotels.

Vancouver delivers on all counts. If money's no object, the grande dame is the historic Fairmont Hotel Vancouver (684 3131; [www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com); doubles from £121 in November).

Celebrities and business people often use Sutton Place, but the Four Seasons (689 9333; from £270) is just as good, more discreet, and better located.

To guarantee glorious views, try the high-rise Pan Pacific (6628111; [www.panpacific.com](http://www.panpacific.com); from £204) on the waterfront above Canada Place: rooms are a touch small by five-star standards, but the panorama more than makes amends.

The best-known boutique hotel is Opus (642 6787; [www.opushotel.com](http://www.opushotel.com); from £106), not well located for downtown, but at the heart of Yaletown, a funky new warehouse/eating/nightlife/chic shopping neighbourhood.

Similarly distant from downtown is the Sylvia (682 3551; [www.sylviahotel.com](http://www.sylviahotel.com); from £46), an ivy-covered city landmark on the fringes of Stanley Park, with a snug bar, friendly service and old-world charm. Best of the other budget choices is the Kingston (684 9024; [www.kingstonhotelvancouver.com](http://www.kingstonhotelvancouver.com); from £47).

B&b options are numerous: the main Tourist InfoCentre (683 2000; [www.tourism.vancouver.com](http://www.tourism.vancouver.com) or [www.hellobc.com](http://www.hellobc.com)) offers an excellent accommodation-finding service. Best value is the superb, modern YWCA (663 1424; [www.ywcahotel.com](http://www.ywcahotel.com)), open to all, with doubles from around £25.

## Granville Island

If I had an hour in Vancouver, or was only allowed one sight, then it would be Granville Island ([www.granvilleisland.com](http://www.granvilleisland.com)).

Thirty years ago, this area just south of downtown was a virtually derelict, semi-industrial wasteland.

Today, it is a dynamic and beautifully located collection of galleries, theatres, bars and shops, any whiff of preciousness or trendiness offset by the deliberate juxtaposition of working boatyards and light industry.

Best of all is the astounding public market, with its incredible displays of fruit, veg, meat, fish and speciality foods. It's a fabulous place to browse, shop and people-watch.

## **World-class museums**

All cities have museums, and no-one's pretending that Vancouver's - taken en masse - are world-beaters. But it does have one world-class offering, the Museum of Anthropology ([www.moa.ubc.ca](http://www.moa.ubc.ca)), a superb modern complex that presents North America's finest collection of totems, sculpture, jewellery and other artifacts (535,000 in all) of the Pacific Northwest's indigenous cultures.

Among the quirkier museums, I like the Police Centennial Museum, devoted to the oddities of Vancouver policing over the years.

The chief attraction is the autopsy room (the museum is in the former Coroner's Court Building), where, among others, Errol Flynn (who died in the city in the arms of his 17-year-old "personal assistant") was autopsied, losing in the process, it is said, a part of his penis, kept by a junior coroner as a souvenir.

## **A wealth of activities**

When it comes to activities, what can't you do in Vancouver?

At this time of year, its lucky inhabitants are gearing up for winter. If they want a few hours' boarding, downhill or cross-country skiing (or even sledging, snow-shoeing, ice-climbing or other snowy activities), then the city has three hills less than 30 minutes' drive from downtown: Mount Seymour (visit [www.mountseymour.com](http://www.mountseymour.com) for ski-pass and other information); Grouse Mountain ([www.grousemountain.com](http://www.grousemountain.com)), and Cypress Bowl ([www.cypressmountain.com](http://www.cypressmountain.com)).

Note, though, that weather in the city remains mild. Then there's Whistler, one of the world's great resorts, around 90 minutes' drive, or Mount Baker across the border in Washington State (75 miles away).

Walking varies from a pleasant stroll on the waterfront around Canada Place and along Coal Harbour, to hiking on the many trails in the mountains above the city.

Trail information is available from the InfoCentre or at [www.gov.bc.ca/bcparks](http://www.gov.bc.ca/bcparks). Dozens of mountain-biking trails are also available (visit [www.cycling.bc.ca](http://www.cycling.bc.ca) for more information).

In Stanley Park, half the city seems to turn up on Sunday mornings to walk, Rollerblade or cycle (bikes can be rented at numerous outlets), but the park

is so big and wild that a few steps take you into secret glades where you'll only have 1,000-year-old trees for company.

On the water you can canoe, kayak, fish, sail or scuba dive (and lounge on several great city-centre beaches in the summer), either on your own or as part of tour.

There are numerous rental and charter outlets. A dozen golf courses lie within an hour's drive of the city centre, plus white-water rafting opportunities in the mountains: one-day tours are available with several Vancouver-based companies, including Reo Rafting ([www.reorafting.com](http://www.reorafting.com)) from £55.

## Onward destinations

A great city should stand alone, but how much nicer for residents and visitors alike if just beyond its margins is a world of further travelling opportunities.

In Vancouver you are spoilt for choice. For a start, the mountains and other many scenic delights of British Columbia, Canada's most beautiful province, form the city's back garden.

Then there's Whistler, of course; the bucolic San Juan Islands (easily reached by ferry from the city or Vancouver Island; Vancouver Island itself, reachable by seaplane (in 30 minutes) or car or bus and ferry (90 minutes), a beautiful world unto itself; and Victoria on Vancouver Island, the dainty, Anglophile provincial capital, worth at least two days' sightseeing.

Finally, Vancouver is incredibly well placed for onward travel to superb destinations, not least trips up Canada's famed Inside Passage to Alaska - numerous Alaskan cruises start from, or stop off at the city.

It is also the start (or conclusion) of train trips through the Rockies (or across Canada), and an obvious starting point for a fly-drive tour that takes in the interior of British Columbia and the Canadian Rockies: Banff, the Rockies' main centre, is about nine hours' drive from Vancouver.

## World's best cities

### **Economist Intelligence Unit Telegraph Readers' Poll**

<b>1</b> Vancouver	Cape Town
<b>2</b> Melbourne	Sydney
<b>3</b> Vienna	Venice
<b>4</b> Geneva	New York

5 Perth

Vancouver

## World's worst cities

### Economist Intelligence Unit Telegraph Readers' Poll

1 Port Moresby	Brussels
2 Algiers	Bangkok
3 Dhaka	Las Vegas
4 Karachi	Dubai
5 Lagos	Amsterdam

## Vancouver basics

### Getting there

Air Canada (0871 220 1111; [www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)) flies non-stop daily to Vancouver from Heathrow (journey time is 9hr 40min) from £393 return in November.

Other connections and fares are available if you fly via Toronto or Calgary.

A good option is to fly to Vancouver and out of Calgary, having seen the city and toured British Columbia and the Rockies.

### Tour operators

You could easily spend a week in Vancouver, even in autumn and winter.

Many tailor-made specialists can organise stays in the city combining cruises with train journeys and/or other mainland BC, Vancouver Island and Canadian Rockies itineraries by car or camper van.

Tailor Made Travel (0845 456 8006; [www.tailor-made.co.uk](http://www.tailor-made.co.uk)) will create a package, or you can select a themed itinerary: the 14-day Canadian and Alaskan Odyssey, for example, with four days in Vancouver, a seven-night Alaskan cruise and two-day Rocky Mountaineer rail trip to Calgary costs from £1,489, excluding flights.

Bales Worldwide (0870 752 0780; [www.balesworldwide.com](http://www.balesworldwide.com)) offers tailor-made and escorted holidays featuring Vancouver, including the 12- night Beautiful British Columbia tour (from £2,670) and 11-day Canadian Rockies (from £2,598) and 13-day Trans-Canada Rail Adventure (from £1,990).

Titan HiTours (01293 455345; [www.titanhitours.co.uk](http://www.titanhitours.co.uk)) also has many tailor-made and escorted options based in, or incorporating Vancouver.

A good seasonal choice is the 13-day Winter Rail Spectacular, which includes Toronto, the "Canadian" train across the country, Jasper in the Rockies, and four days in Vancouver and Victoria: from £1,465 fully inclusive for December 3 departures.

The company's 14-day Canadian Rockies and Vancouver tour (from £1,245 in April, 2006) includes four days in the city. Canada Travel Specialists (0871 226 0474; [www.canadatravelspecialists.com](http://www.canadatravelspecialists.com)) has many Canadian winter breaks, including a five-day Vancouver Lights for £449, including flights and three-star room-only accommodation.

Canada specialist Frontier Travel (02 8776 8709; [www.frontier-travel.co.uk](http://www.frontier-travel.co.uk)) also offers tailor-made year-round breaks to the city and BC, with extensive skiing options (including Whistler) and wildlife, golf and motorhome holidays.

Rocky Mountaineer (01622 832244; [www.winterrailvacations.com](http://www.winterrailvacations.com)) offers special two- to 10-day winter rail trips to and from Vancouver, including two days to Banff from £262, excluding flights.