

The Province

TRAVEL

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a boater's
dream **D2**



B.C.'s
capital
turns 150

Victoria rules

A city's cultural melting pot is celebrated **PAGE D3**



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Taking a historic tour of venerable Victoria

Many cultures melded in city's 150-year existence

Catherine Roscoe Barr
FOR THE PROVINCE

We board the last B.C. Ferries sailing on a Friday after work and make our way to Victoria from Vancouver, watching the sun set behind the horizon from our seats.

Once in Victoria, my husband and I turn onto well-treed Humboldt Street and into the driveway of the Beaconsfield Inn, where we climb three flights of stairs to the Beaconsfield suite, which takes up the entire third floor of the historic Edwardian hotel, and get straight into the antique four-poster bed with goose-down bedding for an incredibly restful slumber.

The next morning we sit down in the bright conservatory, with sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows, to an incredible breakfast of freshly-made croissants with fruit preserves, plum clafoutis, and eggs in a cloud with mushrooms, prosciutto and Hollandaise sauce.

We're here for some historical sightseeing in light of the City of Victoria's 150th year, and begin our weekend adventure with historian and guide John Adams.

I have to admit that history hasn't always intrigued me, but coming from Adams, an expert storyteller who offers walking tours through his company Discover the Past, it was captivating.

As we make our way around Victo-

ria's Inner Harbour, Adams paints a vivid picture of what we'd see, standing on the same spot, when the town-site of Fort Victoria was incorporated as the City of Victoria on Aug. 2, 1862.

Now known as a haven for retirees, a quaint tourist town and our province's capital city, Victoria was once the gateway to Western Canada and the bustling commercial hub of British Columbia.

We start our tour along the Inner Harbour, across the street from the iconic Fairmont Empress hotel, built in 1908, with its two Dr Seuss-like trees flanking the path up to the veranda, and dozens of visitors, pinkies up, enjoying afternoon tea in the grand lobby.

Aside from Victoria's British sensibilities, a number of cultures collided to make the city what it is today, says Adams, and as we make our way along the harbour and towards Old Town he points out things I'd walked past numerous times but never noticed — like one of seven spindle whorl monuments, part of an interpretive walkway recognizing the founding inhabitants of the area, the Lekwungen First Nations people, and a double line of bricks running through Bastion Square, marking the former boundary walls of the original Hudson's Bay Company fort, erected in 1843.

The bricks are engraved with the names of figures from Victoria's beginnings, from British expats to French Canadian settlers, and Hawaiian and Chinese immigrants.

Victoria's Chinatown is the oldest Chinatown in Canada, dating back to the 1880s, and the second oldest in North America next to San Francisco.

The most recognizable landmark in Victoria's Chinatown is probably Fantan Alley, the narrowest street in the world, named after the Chinese betting game once played in gambling dens throughout the neighbourhood, but Adams takes us through an old curiosity shop nicknamed the "never-ending store" because of its endless crooks and crannies, points out one of the oldest Chinese temples in North America which we climb a long and narrow staircase to explore on our own later, and finally leads us to our next stop at Silk Road organic tea shop



The Silk Road organic tea shop and spa serves tea-infused cocktails featuring Victoria Gin, from local distillery Victoria Spirits. PHOTOS: CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR/FOR THE PROVINCE



High tea served on Royal Doulton china at the stately Fairmont Empress hotel, built in 1908, is a major attraction for tourists.

and spa, which turns 20 this year.

I was happy to sip tea-infused cocktails made with Silk Road's Victoria 150 tribute tea blend of rose petals, lavender blossoms and black teas from around the world (including a secret location near Victoria), cranberry juice, grapefruit juice and Victoria Gin, from local distillery Victoria Spirits.

We directed our pinkies to the Empress for afternoon tea, a classic Victoria experience and one of my favourite indulgences, that's been a constant fixture for over 100 years.

The Empress's endlessly upbeat executive pastry chef D'Oyen Christie offers a selection of classics, like smoked salmon pinwheels and egg salad sandwiches, and new favourites like the mango chicken curry sandwich on rye and the dainty pear cheesecake, for afternoon tea service, which is served on china made exclusively for the Empress by Royal Doulton, and originally used in 1939 when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited.

Another thing Victorians have in common with the Brits is a love of

beer. That night we sat at the bar of Canada's oldest brew pub (with a youthful 1984 birthday), Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub and Guesthouse, for some beer tasting and dining.

Spinnakers has a large selection of staple beers and seasonal beers, including the commemorative Hoptoria IPA celebrating Victoria's 150 birthday — but the five-course chef's table menu, which we watched being prepared from our perch at the bar looking into the kitchen, knocked it out of the park. Executive chef Alison Ryan's seasonal menus are sourced almost entirely from local and organic suppliers, and nearly everything is made on-site.

Many of Victoria's historic homes have been converted into guest houses and bed and breakfasts, the Beaconsfield Inn being one of them. Our last breakfast at the Beaconsfield was another marvel — sausage and cheese scones, cardamom-spiced fruit salad, and blueberry crême brûlée French toast topped with fresh strawberries — and we lingered in the bright conservatory before heading back home.