

Explore Canada Culture

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Residents and visitors line the streets for a Chinese New Year parade in Vancouver.

Three Canadian cities—Vancouver, Toronto and Halifax—entice American travelers with reinvigorated culture and outdoor excitement. Get FREE information to help plan your next Canada vacation.

Several cultures comprise the song of Canada. From the coasts to the cities to the remote reaches, each region of this vast nation sings in a voice of its own—each one distinct, but part of a grand chorus.

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Nestled among the evergreen forests and majestic mountains of the Pacific coastline, Vancouver fuses the symphony of nature with an eclectic metropolitan rhythm. In Toronto, arts and urban energy jazz up the country's cultural center. Far to the east, Halifax hums with Old World charm, and the mellifluous patois of its residents melds with the soulful lullaby of the sea.

Together, these three distinct destinations combine for a cultural blend that can be found only in Canada. Set your sights on one—or all three—and sing along.

VANCOUVER

Whether your tastes run to outdoor adventure or the arts, spa escapes or fine food and wine—or some delectable combination of all these things—Vancouver, British Columbia, delivers the goods, with laid-back style.

Blame the relaxed air on the city's setting. Located on the west coast of Canada, Vancouver is a city within a rain forest, bounded by majestic mountains to the north and the deep blue Pacific Ocean to the west. Its citizens come from all corners of the world and are, not surprisingly, an outdoor-loving bunch. Vancouverites are known for their laissez-faire attitude and their affection for coffee.

Arrive on a day when the sky sparkles and salty sea air mixes with exotic aromas from ethnic sidewalk cafés, and you'll appreciate two of Vancouver's hallmarks: outdoor recreation and cultural diversity. It is common to hear a variety of foreign accents and languages around town, and the climate of tolerance is pervasive.

Begin your visit in the downtown core, an ocean-encircled peninsula where glistening, glass-covered skyscrapers and condominium towers share the streets with Gothic stone churches and brick-and-beam warehouses that now house chic boutiques and restaurants. Several distinct neighborhoods—Gastown, Yaletown, Chinatown and the West End—and the majority of the city's sights are here. Enjoy stunning harbor-and-mountain views from Canada Place, a convention center and cruise-ship terminal topped with five gargantuan sails, before walking west to the cobblestone streets of Vancouver's oldest district, Gastown. Underneath its historic thoroughfares,



The Boiler House Restaurant in Toronto's renovated Distillery District.

you'll find the city's newest attraction, Storyeum, a 65-minute history tour of British Columbia. Descend in an elevator to a massive theater and walk through nine movie-style sets. Live performers share B.C. history, from its glacial beginnings to its connection to eastern Canada via the transcontinental railway.

Shoppers will want to make the 15-minute walk to Yaletown to high-end stores on Robson Street and hipster boutiques scattered throughout. Fashionistas will devour the designer duds at Atomic Model and Babe Belangere, while dog lovers will covet the skull-and-crossbones canine hoodies at Barking Babies. When it's time for a little human pampering, step into Miraji Hammam. Treatments, based on traditions originating in Saudi Arabia around A.D. 600, begin with an intense steaming then misting in Jerusalem gold marble chambers, followed by a gommage—full-body exfoliation using black Moroccan soap—and a massage.

Access the outdoors downtown at 1,000-acre Stanley Park. Here, you'll find the Vancouver Aquarium—home to beluga whales, exotic fish, otters and other marine animals—and a 5.5-mile seawall perfect for walking, cycling and appreciating the views. The new Lift Bar Grill View restaurant situated outside of the park is another top spot for spying the scenery.

Where there's ocean, there's sandy beach, and Vancouver has some beauties. English Bay Beach is the spot for watching sunsets and—for four nights each summer—fireworks displays set to music during the annual HSBC Celebration of Light (July 26, 29, August 2 and 5). South of downtown is Vanier Park, where The Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival performs in open, circus-style tents against a natural backdrop of sea and sky (June 1 to September 24).

If it is gray or rainy—and, yes, there are more than a few of those days during the year—begin your visit at the Umbrella Shop, and order a custom-made broolly. Vancouverites simply ignore the precipitation, but if you cannot, duck inside the Museum of Anthropology. It is home to one of the world's finest collections of Northwest Coast First Nations art. Massive totem poles and other large carvings dominate the Great Hall, additionally complemented by feast dishes and smaller carvings. Don't miss the works of late Haida artist Bill Reid, including what many consider his masterpiece, a monumental yellow cedar sculpture, *The Raven and the First Men*.

To further immerse yourself in all things Vancouver, hop on one of the mini-ferries that run from downtown to Granville Island and visit the Public Market. Taste salmon jerky, fresh produce and artisan breads, then stroll past artists' studios. Rent a kayak for an on-water experience, or drive 20 minutes north to the Grouse Mountain SkyRide gondola to access the top of this popular ski hill and its awesome city views. Energetic types can skip the gondola and hike up the aptly named Grouse Grind trail. Be sure you're physically prepared to gain 2,800 feet in elevation in 1.8 miles.

When it comes time to eat, sample Vancouver's multicultural makeup and dynasty of homegrown chefs. Seafood lovers can nosh their way around Yaletown, starting at Rodney's for oyster shooters, the Blue Water Café for its dramatic seafood tower (a two- or three-tier sculpture of assorted fish, scallops, prawns, oysters, crab and sushi) or Coast for fresh fish with gourmet appeal (think wild-caught salmon perched on a wild rice barley cake, served with East Coast lobster ragout). Reserve early for the best French cuisine at celebrity chef Rob Feenie's newly renovated Lumière. Chinese food aficionados can choose from a dizzying number of restaurants in Chinatown and nearby Richmond. Sushi lovers should hail a cab for the five-minute ride to pricey-but-worth-it Tojo's, considered the best sushi restaurant in western Canada thanks to Chef Tojo's insistence on the freshest fish, smooth sake and beautiful presentation.

Don't fear all the feasting. You're likely to burn those excess calories while partaking in Vancouver's staggering range of outdoor activities. Choose from windsurfing, rock climbing, whale and seal watching, scuba diving, hiking, kayaking, golf, biking and snowsports, to name a few—all near downtown. Follow the lead of the locals who boast that in spring they can golf in the morning, snowboard in the afternoon and paddle their sea kayak by sunset. —A.C.

TORONTO

To many vacationers, Toronto, Ontario, is the gateway to Canada. In fact, it has long been a reliable destination for Midwesterners seeking a weekend getaway. This year, after an unprecedented building boom in the arts sector, Toronto is in the midst of a cultural renaissance that is reshaping the face of Canada's largest city. Projects are as diverse as the city itself: a new ballet and opera house that promises to be one of the finest venues in North America, a provocative new design for the city's pre-eminent Royal Ontario Museum and the world premiere stage production of *Lord of the Rings*.

To mark the activity, the city has launched its "Live With Culture" campaign. The changes are evident among the arts institutions, but also look for sidewalk musicians, artists and performers as well as opera singers and art installations in subway stations. "It's a yearlong celebration of all that is arts and culture in the city of Toronto," says project manager Gregory Nixon.

At the newly expanded Royal Ontario Museum, a new, controversial design by Daniel Libeskind is creating a better display of the museum's more than 6 million-object collection. Ten new galleries have opened, and work continues on an ultra-modern entrance wing intended to resemble a shattered crystal. Torontonians already are enthusing over the airy, light-filled galleries that house one of the most impressive collections of ancient Chinese art and architecture outside Asia.

Across University Avenue, the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art reopens June 23 with newly expanded galleries and a special exhibit of Jean-Pierre Larocque's sculptures. Locals are salivating in anticipation of the museum's new restaurant, Jamie Kennedy at the Gardiner, where celebrity chef Jamie Kennedy will take his place in the kitchen.

Construction continues at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where an expansion designed by architect Frank Gehry, who grew up in the neighborhood, will increase exhibition space by 47 percent. Although the project won't be completed until spring 2008, the gallery remains open with David Milne's watercolors in the spring, followed by an Andy Warhol exhibit open from July 8 to October 22.

Toronto's biggest buzz is over the world premiere of *Lord of the Rings*, which, at more than \$23 million, is the largest production ever mounted in a theater. That is not the only news on Toronto's stages, however. Finishing touches also are being applied to the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, the new home to both the Canadian Opera Company and the National Ballet of Canada starting this fall. A full production of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* launches the COC's fall season in its new home.

Earlier this year, the city's acclaimed classical theater ensemble, Soulpepper, moved to a new home in a renovated warehouse in the city's east end Distillery District. The new setting allows Soulpepper to offer year-round performances ranging from William Shakespeare to Tom Stoppard.

The Distillery District seems a natural home for such a creative venture. This historic neighborhood constitutes one of the world's largest collections of Victorian industrial buildings, now impeccably restored as a pedestrian-only complex of galleries, boutiques, bistros and performance spaces. It's already the home to the three-day PartyGras, starting July 21, that kicks off the Beaches International Jazz Festival (to July 30). During PartyGras, the District's cobbled laneways are filled with the sounds of samba, Dixieland and blues as music lovers bounce along to the rhythm. Although the beat goes on, the venue switches July 27 to the east end neighborhood known as the Beach.

Over Memorial Day weekend, explore Toronto's architectural heritage at the annual Doors Open event, touring 150 buildings, ranging from modern marvels such as the Sharp Centre for Design that stands on stilts to the city's oldest public school, the Enoch Turner Schoolhouse.

While *Lord of the Rings* boasts the world's largest theater budget, some of the smallest are used to great effect at the annual Fringe Festival, held July 5–16, when roughly 130 productions premiere. With tickets cheaper than a movie, the festival draws huge crowds and has debuted some plays that have gone on to be hits on major stages, such as Trey Anthony's *Da Kink in My Hair* at the Princess of Wales Theatre.



Peggy's Cove near Halifax.

Summer in Toronto is about enjoying culture outdoors. Three different theatrical companies offer alfresco performances of Shakespeare's plays. The most acclaimed is the annual *Dream in the Park* professional production among the towering old oaks of High Park. Festivals, too, add to the excitement and are as diverse as the city itself: Caribana, Taste of Little Italy, Bloor West Village Ukrainian Festival, BrazilFest and many more.

One of the most popular is Pride Toronto from June 19 to 25. It hosts one of the biggest parades in North America and draws gay tourists from across North America and Europe, many of whom get married and honeymoon in Toronto during Pride week. "We have a very tolerant city. Relatively speaking, it's a totally safe environment," says "Live With Culture" campaign manager Nixon.

That tolerance extends to the variety of ethnicities that call Toronto home. The city's constantly evolving neighborhoods continue to absorb wave after wave of immigration, each shaping the streets in its own image, making this one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. There are five Chinatowns, two Italian districts, Greek Town, Little India and many more.

The narrow streets of Kensington Market welcomed Eastern European Jews at the turn of the last century, followed by Portuguese, Caribbean and Chinese. Here, the smells of fishmongers, cured olives and imported cheeses mingle on the street. Students from nearby University of Toronto bounce along to a blaring reggae beat in search of cheap eats and great secondhand clothes. Even Canada's government officials have been known to browse the market and surrounding ethnic neighborhoods. Witness the Dumpling House, located on Spadina Avenue, where Canada's previous prime minister stopped in for a plate of Mandarin-style potstickers. Look for the big green ears in three downtown neighborhoods (the Annex, Spadina and Kensington). They are speakers broadcasting recordings of local celebrities sharing stories about the neighborhood.

College Street West (aka Little Italy) blooms with patio umbrellas each summer as local hipsters seek the best sidewalk tables to see and be seen while enjoying a four-cheese pizza. Popular clubs, such as Souz Dal and Wild Indigo, attract a fashionable young set who relish the opportunity to meet and mingle while humbler cafés attract traditionalists arguing over soccer scores.

One of the most changed neighborhoods of recent years has been Queen Street West between Spadina Avenue and Dufferin Street. Two formerly shabby old hotels in this area—The Drake and The Gladstone—have been renovated into chic hangouts for the artsy crowd. Surrounding galleries and boutiques favor distinctive Canadian design, such as Comrags' fashions and Fleurtje handbags. Favorite restaurants include Fressen, which pairs vegan food with fine wine, and the Red Tea Box, a wonderful place to rest and take afternoon tea.

For the fashionably famous and would-be famous, the Bloor-Yorkville neighborhood beckons. This district of high-end shops and eateries often attracts visiting movie stars, whether in town on a shoot or promoting a flick at the Toronto International Film Festival in September. This district also is home to the big names in fashion and jewelry—Tiffany, Hermes and Chanel. Top Canadian names include Birks and Holt Renfrew. May 3–7, many of the shops team up with wineries to present Sante Bloor-Yorkville Wine Festival, an event that pairs wine tasting with shopping.

Bloor Street intersects with Toronto's main artery, Yonge Street, also the longest street in the world. Catch one of the electric trolleys south to the lakefront.

Harbourfront offers 10 acres of galleries, artist studios and shops. Each summer, parks in this waterfront area hold concerts and craft shows amid a pleasant setting. This also is the place to catch the ferry to Centre Island, one of the city's many green spaces. From the island's tranquil, tree-shaded lawns and canals, you can look back across the bustling harbor for the best views of the city's sparkling downtown office towers and the iconic CN Tower. —B.Z.

HALIFAX

A historic seaport, Halifax is home to countless institutions and events that can rightfully claim to be the first in North America. People in this Nova Scotia capital wear that history with pride—but the past doesn't get in the way of the present.

The first stop for many travelers is the waterfront, where cruise companies dock at this busy port of call. The world's second-largest natural harbor bustles with small fishing boats and commercial cruise ships, while in the background, stately 18th- and 19th-century buildings and towers of glass and steel share the downtown skyline. As in the days of yore, when Britain founded the town in 1749, vessels from all over the world continue to make Halifax a stop on their journey.

From 1928 to 1971, more than 1 million immigrants disembarked at Pier 21, now a National Historic Site. While here, take the short, simulated train ride that virtually spans Canada from Halifax to Vancouver. Also, watch the award-winning, 24-minute movie, *Ocean of Hope*. It portrays

the experience immigrants had upon landing at Pier 21.

A comfortable walk a few blocks north leads to Bishop's Landing, a complex of boutiques and fine dining establishments. Head to Rum Runners Rum Cake Factory and learn how rum running was a major industry here during the 1920s and 1930s. But watch out: The heady smells of the Nova Scotia rum and whiskey used to make the cakes are intoxicating.

Nearby is the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, where you can immerse yourself in marine history aboard a 93-year-old steamship, or savor the world's finest collection of wooden artifacts from the *Titanic*. Take in haunting displays from the Halifax Explosion, when a ship loaded with explosives collided with Pier 6 and claimed the lives of 1,900 people, destroyed 1,630 homes and left 6,000 people homeless. On both sides of the harbor, hardly a pane of glass was left intact. The stories recounted at the museum are legendary—and inspiring.

The one-of-a-kind shops at Historic Properties offer a selection as diverse as the boats in the harbor. At one of the wharves, a red clapboard building houses Nova Scotian Crystal, the only mouth-blown and hand-cut crystal made in Canada. Each exquisite piece is crafted on-site. Watch live glass-blowing demonstrations Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

If you are in the city on a Saturday, stroll the Halifax Farmer's Market—North America's oldest market—located in a handsomely restored 19th-century brewery. Proud of their market, Haligonians support the more than 100 vendors and artisans who busily ply their foods and wares. Roving minstrels, Down East fiddlers and other local musicians frequently entertain here as well. While in the vicinity, slip into Alexander Keith's Brewery (dating back to the 1860s) for one of its lively, informative tours during which ale and song flow aplenty.

Throughout Halifax, a number of intriguing, less-publicized shops contribute to the city's Old World vibe. John W. Doull Booksellers at 1684 Barrington Street shelves an inventory of 130,000 new and rare titles. Navigating the musty, maze-like stalls can be a bit of a challenge, but whether you seek a popular paperback or an esoteric text, you'll surely find something here to tickle your fancy. More vintage goods can be found at Citadel Coins farther north on Barrington Street. Coin collectors will delight in the new and rare offerings displayed here. A distributor for the Royal Canadian Mint, the shop also sells stunning souvenir pieces such as the Bluenose hologram coin and first issues of the Sambro Island Lighthouse coin depicting the oldest operating lighthouse in North America.

Music buffs will have fun at the Halifax Folklore Center, a music shop housed in an old Victorian home (1528 Brunswick Street). Vintage guitars and violins share display space with a mélange of new and used musical instruments and a robust selection of Celtic and maritime music books. It's worth dropping in, if only to enjoy the ramblings of the staff.

One of the biggest challenges in the city is deciding where to eat. There's something for every palate and pocketbook, from the zesty fries at the Bud the Spud truck parked on Springarden Road to the highly acclaimed Talay Thai, cited by *Where* magazine as one of the top 10 new restaurants in Canada for 2005. Another hot spot, The Five Fishermen, just celebrated its 30th year anniversary. It has a laudable wine cellar, and the sommelier happily introduces diners to award-winning Nova Scotian wines.

You can't visit Halifax without spending time at the Halifax Citadel. In the city's early days, this massive, star-shaped fortress was the city's crown jewel and the prime reason Halifax never was attacked. This summer marks the 100th anniversary of the British forces leaving Canada. The festivities associated with the Changing of the Guard will be spectacular. It's a spine-tingling sight to watch soldiers in period uniforms smartly whipping about their duty. The tradition of firing noonday guns is alive and well (cover your ears!).

Halifax also is home to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS)—affectionately known as “the little gallery that could.” Internationally known works, such as Rodin's *The Thinker*, *The Kiss* and *The Gates of Hell*, are displayed. AGNS earned some notoriety in the art world when it became the only gallery in Canada to feature Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Wurth Museum Collection, 80 inspired works from the duo who wrap giant buildings, islands, bridges and trees. This summer, an exhibit celebrates the evolution of modernism in Canada, including works from the Group of Seven, May 5–September 4. Also of note are some stunning permanent collections, including the actual home of Nova Scotia's famous folk artist, Maud Lewis.

Stepping off the beaten path, head for Agricola Street, located in the north end of the city. For starters, find Fred, a former bank that today houses a beauty salon, an art gallery and a café that makes the best soy lattes and gourmet cupcakes in town. Fred often hosts intimate, after-hours musical gatherings. Agricola Street also is home to many old businesses, including antiques and restoration, stained glass and repair, imported international food emporiums and a great Lebanese bakery, the Mid-East Food Centre and Café.

At the end of the day, settle into a comfy seat at the Rebecca Cohn auditorium or Neptune Theater for world-class concerts, plays and musicals. Let your hair down on a pub-crawl back on the

waterfront, where you can listen to everything from soulful jazz to high-energy, toe-tapping Down East fiddling. Regardless of your choice, you are bound to sway with the rhythm of the night. Canada's siren song is calling. —S.P.

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Halifax—Best Western, Econo Lodge, Hyatt, Marriott, Rodd Hotels, Sheraton, W, Westin.

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