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Bigger and better in British Columbia



Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia represents nature in the raw – majestic mountains, rugged coastline and amazing wildlife. It also offers the ultimate in big-city living. With a wide range of quality education providers thrown in, it is little wonder that it is proving an increasingly popular international education destination, as JANE VERNON SMITH discovers.

With its incredible landscape, British Columbia (BC) is, arguably, Canada's most scenic province, according to Mara Muller of Vancouver-based language school ILSC. "Bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and the [Rocky Mountains] to the east, BC is a place where you can ski, snowboard, hike, mountain climb, sail, paddle, whale watch and even surf!" she notes. "Its essential character is both laid-back and outdoorsy." In short, says Paul Ellis of ESL Wilderness Ranch in Gold Bridge, it is the "great outdoors" that people everywhere associate with Canada. Another attraction, comments Tasha Welch of StudyGroup's Victoria school, is the strong sense of safety and abundant personal space that help put international students at ease.

Starting with the big city experience, Vancouver today is a major centre for international education, notes Ken Gardner, Vancouver English Centre's President, and it is also a place that has been repeatedly chosen as "one of the most liveable cities in the world", says Muller. And according to Zach Taylor of the Canadian College of English Language in the city, students are very impressed at how friendly and open its people are. A city that is "ever changing", it offers a variety of fun and activities, says Brooke Klassen at Vancouver's King George International College (KGIC).

"When students first arrive in Vancouver, they generally check out the most popular and inexpensive sightseeing locations," she comments, "such as Robson Street, Gastown, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Lookout Tower, Stanley Park [and] English Bay." "Downtown Vancouver has a number of trendy areas that the students gravitate towards," says Gardner.

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"Gastown is a quaint, touristic neighbourhood, with plenty of souvenir shops and restaurants... For nightlife, students often visit pubs and clubs on Granville Street. A few clubs have international nights which the students enjoy."

"Having lived in Vancouver my entire life, what always amazes me is what I can learn about the world right in my own city," observes Katie Laughlin at Tamwood International College & Go International in Vancouver and Whistler. "There [are endless] activities, events, performances, restaurants and festivals representing numerous nationalities... To an international student, it is often a pleasant surprise to witness just how multicultural our city is... Different cultures are openly accepted and celebrated here."

While representing the big city experience par excellence, Vancouver is also a great base for exploring Canada's great outdoors. As Muller points out, the 2010 Winter Olympics helped highlight the city as a winter sports destination, and, with ski centres such as Cypress Mountain, Grouse Mountain or Mount Seymour within easy reach, "snowboarding, skiing or snowshoeing are definitely big highlights", she says.

For a longer excursion, the Rocky Mountains beckon. "Seeing glaciers, snow-capped mountains and experiencing a true ski town is amazing for any student who comes to Vancouver," Taylor highlights.

For those looking for something a little different, stand-up paddle boarding (SUP) is the city's latest craze, notes Muller, offering a relaxing way to explore the coastal waters that surround the city. "Skim-boarding is another fun and inexpensive water sport that is popular with Vancouver students," she adds.

For a more outdoor adventure lifestyle, Whistler provides a good base. Students can hike, mountain bike, ski and snowboard in between classes, as Laughlin observes, adding, "Our school in Whistler is ideally located right at the bottom of the ski and mountain bike hills."

Located around 1.5 hours from Vancouver, Whistler is "North America's number-one ski resort", according to Klassen, and "full of fun-loving people". While winter activities include snowboarding, skiing, ice skating, snow shoeing, dog sledding and snow tubing, summer is "just as fun". Students can hike or enjoy the peak-to-peak gondola – "one of the best gondola rides in Canada" – bungee jump or zip trek during this season, she enthuses.

Those who combine a love of the mountain environment with a passion for horses will find what they are looking for at Gold Bridge. A small community, located in the heart of the snow-covered South Chilcotin Mountains about five hours' drive from Vancouver, this is home to the ESL Wilderness Ranch, a language school attached to a horse ranch with more than 40 Cayuse (or feral) horses.

Students here can ride "Western-style", and, once they become confident Western riders, can be taken to the mountain tops for a 360-degree view of "beautiful British Columbia", says Ellis from the school. There may also be the chance to see a mother grizzly bear playing with her cubs in an alpine valley. At weekends, river rafting on the Fraser River is a popular day trip.

"We are also surrounded by a wealth of culture and history," he says. "We are close to a native Indian village that is famous for its tradition of net dipping for wild salmon and air-curing it, which gives it such a wonderful taste. There is also the opportunity to visit a traditional pit house, used by the native Indians for thousands of years," he adds.

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The area around the school is also known for its gold and jade mining. He points out that there is an active gold mine located near the school, which is open to visitors, while students can visit the local mining museum to learn how gold was mined at the time of the 1858 gold rush.

Equally alluring for many visitors is the famously wild and rugged coastline. For this, perched at the tip of Vancouver Island, the provincial capital of Victoria offers an ideal base.

"Victoria is a safe, beautiful, friendly city," says Megan Domenichelli at the local Embassy English language school. "It is small enough to be comfortable and convenient, and large enough to offer variety in entertainment." The historic downtown is full of beautiful architecture, and, she adds, possesses an energy that comes from tourists and the many street performers. Students, meanwhile, especially enjoy the inner harbour, where many festivals and activities are held year-round.

For Welch of Study Group, Victoria's harbour is "one of the most beautiful in the world", and, she says, the city's best features "are centred around the endless coastline, dotted with hidden beaches and coves [that are] perfect for picnicking, hiking, kayaking, sailing, swimming [and] scuba diving. The coastline," she underlines, "contributes enormously to the overall beauty of the destination."

From a base at either Victoria or Vancouver, excursions to Salt Spring Island and Tofino come highly recommended. Tofino is a surfer's paradise, while the beautiful Salt Spring Island is "a charming and affordable destination off the beaten path that is well known for its community of artists, sculptors and musicians," notes Welch. "It is also famous for its quiet beaches, with crystal clear water, and for its wineries, as well as its artisan produce."

"My personal favourite and a true highlight," she relates, "is orca whale-watching on a zodiac boat, where you experience a total 'rush' getting really up-close to the three resident pods of killer whales, in addition to seeing bald eagles, seals, sea lions and sea otters."

As Domenichelli underlines, you can do this "right in the heart of Victoria". It is, she says, "a unique experience that few cities are able to offer".

Agent viewpoint

"I always tell [students] (and after their stay in Vancouver, they agree with me) that Vancouver is a perfect city: not too big (like São Paulo), but not too small. There is nature, parks, but also buildings and shopping centres... [They find it a] very secure, clean city that welcomes the students in a friendly way, as it is multicultural. [It is also] very organised, [with] good public transportation... The only surprise (which is not really a surprise) is that the beach in Vancouver is not so beautiful as the beaches in Rio de Janeiro. Well, then I tell them that if it were only for the beach, for sure Rio is much more beautiful... but for everything else? Then they agree with me!"

Monica Mandil, N&M Intercâmbios e Cursos no Exterior, Brazil

"Generally, Thai students like British Columbia as a study English destination because of the country's reputation, as it has been always in the list of countries that are the best to live in. BC is preferred to other [provinces] because the weather is not too cold. Also, the cost of study in Canada, when comparing to other English-speaking countries, such as the USA or UK is more worthwhile. [As to Vancouver,] they usually

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like the atmosphere of the city – that it's friendly, lively and green... Overall, I can say that they enjoy their life there.”
Nattanan Chuntrasakawong, EdNet Bright Co., Thailand

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