

VANCOUVER

Vancouver—Study on Culture

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Traveling alone is not something for everyone. Those who are socially phobic or afraid to be alone should not go about traveling this way. Most people would be annoyed at the thought of committing to such an activity for various reasons, including: 1) they are either to afraid to be alone, or 2) are afraid of meeting new people. I, by no means, have a social phobia nor do I have a fear of being by myself, therefore I have the ability to enjoy myself, even when there is no one else around so share the enjoyment. The beauty of this world is far greater than most people will ever experience. Sometimes you just need the silence to take it all in.

Jutting into the reach of crystal water flanked by the First and Second Narrows, the dramatic white sails of Canada Place gleam in the sun, contrasting its powerful backdrop of edifices looming to its aft. At times a cruise ship may dock at the striking creation, a ferry may pass or an ocean liner will leave its wake, but today the waters are still, almost ironically reflecting the tranquility of Canada Place's sails, whose masts will never feel the pressure of wind. Across the crystal waters, the monolithic peaks of the Coast Range reach skyward out of the shore, snowcapped at their mile high crests, almost begging you to conquer their unimaginable heights. In the direction that the sun sleeps lays the bridge, whose name originates from the appearance of lions' ears on the neighboring peaks, spanning the First Narrows in a display of architectural perfection. It too gleaming in the midday sun. Thus lies the setting of my tale.

With the goal of examining Canadian culture, I set out amid the morning mist with nothing but the clothes on my back and a credit card in my pocket. Most visitors stick to the inner city, the throne of tourism, representing the enticing core of modern design. With that been-there-done-that idea floating around in my head I decided to head

for the suburbs. Most people believe that the suburbs are the boring zones of a metropolitan area, rows and rows of homes stretching for endless miles. I have but one question: What is the root of all culture? The answer: the people. The culture of an area can be defined in its suburbs; the places where the culture resides. The urban zones are destroyed and almost stripped of the mother culture by the time the tourism board has attracted millions each year. There's Americanization for you.

Tsawassen, the south-western most Canadian suburb of Vancouver, lies on a peninsula that reaches into the Strait of Georgia turning downward smack into the 49th parallel, where south of a peculiarly insignificant border crossing lies the small town of Point Roberts, consisting of 2 gas stations and a supermarket. It was on the way to this peninsula-town that I decided to start making a list of interesting things that I entitled: Only in Canada.

The highway to the suburb-with-an-Indian-name imposed a speed limit of 80 kilometers per hour. Driving along this two-lane road, I encountered a sign that still amuses me to think about to this day. The sign read: *Speed limit: 80km/h. 50 km/h when children play on the highway.* Only in Canada. What a hoot!

I proceeded northbound on the freeway after leaving the funny little suburb that had somehow obtained more traffic lights, I think, than the city of Aberdeen.

I ventured into the Vancouver city center, only because I needed maps and information. Canada Place was my destination for research. I struck up a conversation with the attendant at the *infocentre*, inquiring of fun places to visit. I explained that I did not want to visit the culturally meshed core of the city, but wanted to experience *true British Columbia*. I inquired as to what British Columbians do for fun.

She was no help.

I set off on my own, leaving with only a map and a funny memory of the look on her face when I told her that I was half Mexican. I like to see peoples' reactions when they see a white boy who is Mexican. Most people don't know that many Mexicans are Caucasian and even though I am not even 1% Hispanic, I feel that it is my duty to educate the world. One province down, three thousand to go!

I had already visited the southwestern and southeastern most suburbs, so why not complete the square. I embarked over the gleaming bridge spanning the First Narrows, with no exact destination in mind. Only the hope of an adventure spread out for me on the horizon.

For those who are not fortunate enough to have already traversed the wild jungle-like peninsula called Stanley Park, there is a very interesting concept one must master prior to attempting this thoroughfare. The winding road through the park is comprised of three lanes separated by dashed yellow lines. Strung above the road are lights above each lane. These lights signify which lane is open. As traffic flows increase during various parts of the day, the lights change from green dots to red crosses. The road continues in this fashion across the Lions Gate Bridge. Can you imagine driving 45 miles per hour as cars zip by you at a combined rate of 90 miles per hour only feet from your side view mirror? Only in Canada. I'm getting chills just thinking about it!

Once in North Vancouver City, I merged onto the Trans Canada, the multi-thousand mile route connecting Nova Scotia with the farthest reaches of Mainland British Columbia at Horseshoe Bay: my destination. This highway, nearing its terminus, curves along the slopes of those pristine mountains viewed from the city center on its way to the

Ferry Landing in the artsy village whose namesake represents the harbor on which it is located. Once I had arrived at the Landing, I gaped in awe at the beauty that lay before me. A bay shaped peculiarly like a horseshoe (hence the name), opened ahead of me and the ferries were coming and going gently pushing frothy white caps at their bows, the departing boats silently escaping the sanctuary, turning to the Starboard until their layered cream façades had slipped fully into the Strait of Georgia en route to Nanaimo and the Gulf Islands. As had the mountains risen out of Burrard inlet at a magnificent incline, the mountains here had an incredible incline, rising out of the calm water of the cove to the extent that the sun shining on the pristine water had created a sparkling illusion on the trees covering the grand mountains.

For some time now I had been listening to the radio and just as I turned to leave the spotless hamlet-by-the-bay, I heard something on the radio that immediately grasped my attention as I scrambled to get a pen to note it on my Only-in-Canada list. I remember vividly Caribbean music playing in the background of an advertisement that followed accordingly: *Ahhhh...Cuba. Experience the warmth of a Lifetime.* Wow, Cuban-Canadian citizens who had entered the country legally, Cuban cigars and non-stop flights to La Havana. It kind-of made me wonder of what we may be missing out, Living in the Greatest Country on Earth. Only in another place can we begin to understand the complexity of the situation in which we live. Only in Canada...

The ad faded into Michelle Branch's *Good Bye to You* as I turned the corner and headed out of the town. *I'll take the scenic route on the way back*, I thought, *I can see freeways in Washington.*

I was incredibly rushed to get to a gas station as quickly as possible, not because I was low on gas, but two factors pressed my mind: 1) the one-liter bottle of Diet Coke was pushing at my bladder and 2) the morning mist had left my windshield almost beyond visibility, especially when I came around corners and into full sunlight. I pulled into a residential area to ask where a gas station was, because there had been no sign of my desired fueling station in the village-at-the-ferry-landing. A middle-aged lady with brown hair was walking her dog down the sidewalk, so I rolled the window down and explained my dilemma. She explained how to get to the gas station. As I chatted with her she kept telling me that she wasn't sure about this or wasn't sure about that. I could tell that she wasn't from around these parts. I think she was trying really hard to be seen as a resident of West Vancouver as I had tried to be seen as half-Mexican in the shadow cast by the great sails.

I followed her directions but there was no gas station to be seen for several (by now excruciating) minutes. I noticed a lady strolling down the roadway enjoying the Monday sunshine. Something compelled me to stop and talk. It could have been her friendly aura, or it could have been because she had a baby on her back and a toddler in a stroller. We chatted about the lovely weather. She was just as friendly as I had expected. I asked again about the gas station. She pointed the way. Then asked if I had enough gas to make it there. I laughed and gave her a gracious shrug before wishing her pleasantries for the day. She was a native.

I filled the tank, washed the windshield and relieved myself and settled once again in the drivers seat and headed off in the direction where the rebirth of the sun occurs every morning. I passed through several suburbs on my way to Deep Cove—my northeastern

destination. I would like to point out that the suburbs were quite different than what I am used to. The new houses all seemed to have been constructed in period-style. The burghs were lacking in clapboard sided houses with symmetrical sides and a chimney rising from one end. Nope. None of that. Peaks, gables, dormers, bricks, columns, baroque ironworks, shutters, tea gardens and fountains all graced these homes. Even the run down parts of town had a certain period-style-flare about them.

Deep Cove was almost as gorgeous as Horseshoe bay. Indian Arm snaked away in a northeasterly direction piercing the heart of the mountains with the force of the Commonwealth Army. I drove to the waterside shopping district, where brick streets passed posh coffeeshops and bistros. *Save Tonight* came on the radio and I almost freaked. It was perfect. The emerald-green mountains and the midnight-blue waters amidst the setting of the village that hugged the hillside all combined with the song as a shiver ran down my spine. I saw a Starbucks. It had purple chairs. It was too perfect. Shiver. I waved at a passerby and turned up the radio.

Did you know that banks are closed Mondays in Canada? Strange, huh?! The Canadian of Chinese Ancestry Barista that helped me at Starbucks explained the rationale that banks were closed on the first day of the week because they are open on Saturday. I paused a second, admiring the view before heading out the door for a jaunt across the local plaza to the ATM at the Royal Bank of Montreal. I promptly returned to Starbucks to change my twenty-dollar bill and ended up talking to another Barista for twenty minutes while we waited for another customer to pay in cash in order for the till to be open.

We talked about Tacoma, Seattle and Vancouver. We talked about the Cliff Divers at Deep Cove and about the Metrotown Centre in Burnaby. Here's question: Was the United States' idea for state quarters an original concept? No! Canada came out with a series of Quarters representing the (then) twelve provinces and territories. These coins are no longer in circulation, but the Barista explained that I could buy them at Eton Centre. I scooted out the door after asking for some Starbucks logo stickers to remember Deep Cove by. My *Pure Canadian Glacier Water* in hand and an abnormally large smile on my face, I jumped in the car and pointed my hood in the direction of Metrotown Centre.

Traffic Stank. It was getting late, so I picked up my coins and rushed out the door, leaving the fancy New-York façade in my wake. With a left turn onto Willingdon I was on my way south.

I have never seen any thing like what I saw that evening on Richmond's North 5th Avenue. I don't believe that you can find as many cultural centers in one place in the world than in that one particular suburb. As you travel northbound on the avenue, you first pass a magnificently constructed plaza designed in traditional European architecture—it loomed above the neighboring buildings with an elegant grandeur that one could only expect in Europe's City of Light. Next I passed the Chinese Cultural Centre, a neoclassical temple constructed in the image of any of the most grandiose temples in China. Rising from the soil of the little suburb of Richmond, this megalithic structure could have been transported from China. I rarely see a sight that makes my jaw drop, this time my mouth hung open until the temple had passed out of the range of my rearview mirror. Following the Chinese edifice came the Indian Cultural Centre of

Canada, whose roof rose up and peaked in a rounded dome shaped like the Taj Mahal. Then within yards stood the Islamic Cultural Centre of Canada, with its unique design, one would think that they were standing among the edifices of Mecca, Riyadh or Tehran. My heart skipped a beat, possibly even several. Only in Canada, I thought, but then decided to omit this one from my list. I could not comprehend the amount of world culture that had been crammed into this one-mile stretch of road. My mind wandered as I merged onto the freeway and it did not stop until I reached the lineup at the border.

It was almost good that there was a line at the border, for I could sit and reflect on what had come to pass in the previous hours. The Peace Arch was my inspiration, the guiding light of my tale as I concluded my thoughts in pure amazement.

What, then, is a Canadian, you may ask. *You spent all day questing for an answer, now GIVE IT!* Then again, I only spent a day in Canada. Who am I to class their culture based on one visit? It took me 18 years to master my own.

As I approached customs, I paused at the border. A pillar, driven into the earth marks the 49th parallel, labeled with the inscription *International Border*. I stopped the car so that my body sat halfway between the two nations. I aimed my focus upwards at the Peace Arch whose soft glow in the fading light illuminated the passages, which I read aloud: *Children of a Common Mother* and *May These Gates Never Close*.

The silence of the evening entertained the fading light of the sky and the sun, who had peeked through the fog so many hours ago and whose rays glinted on the great white sails, sank into the sky, resting peacefully. It will rise again tomorrow, illuminating the city. I will not be there, but I know that the culture I experienced and had failed to perfectly define will go on, in wait for my next visit.

With the fading light of the last orange cloud, I popped a piece of gum into my mouth and zoomed to catch up with the line for customs.