

Perspectives

LETTER FROM CANADA

Restless In Vancouver By Sarah Lang

"YOU'RE FALLING FOR ME, aren't you?" my ski instructor Andrew remarked, smile lines creasing around his eyes. I'd just skidded off the "magic carpet" that propels skiers up the slopes at Canadian ski resort Whistler and landed in a heap beside the easy-on-the-eye Aussie. I had a baffling balance issue: whenever I tried to "snowplough" to a stop I'd skid metres off to my right.

"Bend both legs!" Andrew called. "I aaaammmmm," I wailed.

But Andrew had practice at perpetual patience at one of the world's top winter resorts and by afternoon's end I could ski down a short slope, manage a couple of turns and snowplough to a stop without endangering lives. The hour-and-a-half drive north from Vancouver to the mountain playground had not been in vain.

Whistler village, essentially an overpriced outdoor mall built around a brick-tiled town square, didn't do it for me: the labels "contrived microcosm" and "rich man's playground" kept springing to mind. But the gondola offered a quite different viewpoint, of a European-style hamlet sprinkled with snow and dwarfed by its raisons d'être, Blackcomb and Whistler mountains.

Colourful dots peopling the slopes fell into two factions: rich holidaymakers and ski/boarder fanatics, many from overseas. Indeed, so many under-25 Aussies and Kiwis hove to

here for the winter season — toiling between runs as bouncers, barmaids or instructors — that Whistler's said to house Canada's Downunder embassies.

My thermals were out in layers as we set off snowmobiling in minus-5° temperatures. The craft looked like a cross between quad bike and plough, propelled by rubber tracks at rear and steered by skis up front. Once I realised the trick was to hang your bum off one side of the bike to balance it when you're hugging a sharp corner, this was my kind of adventure sport: the thrill without the skill, while watching snowflakes settle on the shoulders of fir trees amid a Narnia-esque wilderness.

All the while I kept sharp lookout for a bear. I figured Whistler was my best bet to see one — what with its bear-proof rubbish bins and a how-to-deal-with-bears manual tucked in beside the hotel dining guide.

Turns out there are no grizzlies in Whistler and apparently the local black bears aren't too dangerous. But still I repeated the mantra: don't run — look them in the eyes and back away. Slowly.

But alas not a paw in sight. And I didn't fancy there'd be too many on the streets of Vancouver.

IT'S THE CYCLIST, not the driver, who's top dog in Vancouver, with its wide, flat roads, cycle lanes

and designated cycle-friendly zones, and 400-hectare Stanley Park just northwest of downtown thick with cedar, hemlock, fir and raccoons.

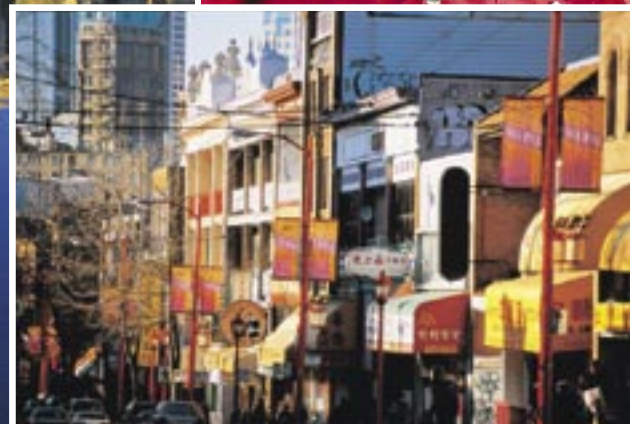
I'd never have guessed 59 per cent of Canadians are overweight and 23 per cent obese. There were plenty of trim bods out running, walking and cycling, so either the bellies were indoors or Vancouver's the exception.

British Columbia is the third-largest of Canada's 10 provinces. People-wise, with 4.1 million residents it's bang on the same size as New Zealand. Half of those dwell in the Greater Vancouver area, 700,000 in the city proper.

Across the cityscape pods of tall glass buildings mirror one another, earning Vancouver its nickname, "The City of Glass". And more are materialising.

Much of the construction bustle is down to the buildup to the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. Outside the art gallery a giant clock counts down the seconds before the games begin — only 100 million, give or take, to go.

All Olympic village roofs will be "green", with a space for gardens atop. Once the athletes clear out the units will become housing for people on low incomes. Green is less a colour than a buzzword in BC: think sustainable-living apartment subdivisions, strict emission rules on new cars, and restaurants (there are too many fabulous ones to mention each by name) that



Wintery Whistler (left), The City of Glass bordered by 400 hectare Stanley Park (centre) and Chinatown (right).

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favour and signpost local, sustainable produce.

It'd be a picky person who didn't fall for a slice of Vancouver. Whether that's the trendy boutiques and bars of renovated warehouse district Yaletown; the chic accessory and chain stores of the bustling central city; or the artists' studios and corner restaurants of South Main.

I could have spent all day among the sprawling food and shoppers' markets on Granville Island (where many stores are solely devoted to one ware) and could have lost a week on East Vancouver's Commercial Drive. Teeming with vintage shops, ethnic eateries and gig venues, it's the hub of the multi-ethnic neighbourhood making up "The Republic of East Vancouver". But I was itching to explore two suburbs that had piqued my interest from the airport taxi: Chinatown and Gastown.

The colourful banners of the Silk Rd pedestrian route lead east from downtown for six blocks to the Millennium Gate, the ornate entrance welcoming visitors to Chinatown (North America's second biggest, after San

Francisco's). A welcome base for the city's 35,000 Chinese Canadians, it feels worlds away from Canada's history of restricting Chinese immigration.

Below a crimson cornucopia of shopfronts, a rogue upmarket fashion shop is squeezed between the Dollar Meat Store and a Chinese lanterns and toy dragons emporium. Food stalls swallow the sidewalk proffering dubious delicacies such as gutted-and-dried lizard on a stick.

Up the road, Dr Sun Yat-Sen's Classical Chinese Garden is tucked away behind protective walls like the Secret Garden of a favourite childhood story. It's the only full-sized classical Chinese garden outside the home country.

NEXT DOOR TO CHINATOWN, Gastown is where Vancouver first emerged. In the 1860s, the logging-and-shipping township had two rules: no booze and no women. The story goes that an old seaman, Gassy Jack (so-nicknamed for his boring tales), opened a pub and brothel just

outside the township. For 50 years Gastown was a prosperous industrial 'burb.

In the 1920s it degenerated into a backwater of dilapidated buildings and demolition was mooted, until 1971 when it was declared a historic area. On cobbled streets, swanky eateries and overpriced design stores now vie for attention with tacky souvenir shops. Down the road, bright murals and graffiti-studded walls bearing slogans such as "Boulevard of Broken Lives" shield hotels looking so derelict it's hard to know if they're even open. Here, too, there's a queue stretching several blocks awaiting Mission Society food-parcel handouts.

Despite Canada's comprehensive social-security system, Vancouver, with the country's most temperate climate, is a beacon for the homeless. Around 3000 live on the streets, provoking outrage among the city's more wealthy inhabitants. But those asking for change are polite and strategic — "25 cents for a slice of cheese, please".

VANCOUVER'S NOT British Columbia's capital. That's Victoria, population 370,000 and half an hour's seaplane ride off Vancouver's coast on Vancouver Island. I imagined a Waiheke-sized isle, but at three-million-plus hectares it's actually the size of Holland.

We skid at an alarming angle on to Victoria's watery runway, one of 50 flights touching down daily. Harbour ferries, cruise ships, whale-watching boats and leisure craft know to stay off the yellow buoy-marked airstrip.

Swanky resorts overwhelm the inner harbour, but thankfully 3000 metres around the water's edge is preserved as a public walkway. On the eastern side of the wharf, watery streets are lined with 100-odd floating homes, painted bright colours and adorned with sailing paraphernalia.

It feels quaint but not fusty as Victoria determinedly tries to shed a fuddy-duddy reputation as a place grandmas take afternoon tea. So informs historian John Adams, who's been running local walking tours for 26 years. Start point is grand colonial hotel the Fairmont Empress, about to turn 100 and the incarnation of why Victoria was once tagged "the newly wed and the nearly dead".

Victoria's also known as the most haunted city in the Pacific Northwest. Adams introduces Francis Rattenbury, an architect who in 1935 was bludgeoned to death by his chauffeur. Now Rattenbury's said to tap his cane loudly on the Empress stairs. And at the chief haunt, the Maritime Museum, the ghost of the "Hanging Judge", who sent many a thief to his death outside in Hangman's Square, is said to lurk rapping his gavel at night in the old courtroom.

Stepping back into the 21st century and on to the main drag, Government St, we pass jugglers, fire-eaters, drummers, a violinist dressed as Darth Vader — and dozens of dogs.

Dogs are everywhere in BC: barking in hotel elevators, toted by tiny Asian girls, blinged up in jewellery and jumpers. And dog love is big business: you don't have to go looking for dog bakeries, daycare facilities, organic biscuits and glam pooch-toting bags. Many hotels offer a doggy blanket, drying towel and carry-bag, and discerning doggy owners can check their pooch into Vancouver's Rex Dog Hotel Spa. The high-end canine hotel sports flat-screen TVs, yoga, massage, a water park and calming Mozart. In fact, Vancouver's ranked Number One in www.DogFriendly.com's ranking of North America's top ten dog-friendly cities.

No surprise, then, to spy a burly bloke swigging a beer on Vancouver mainstreet, a wriggling ball of fur tucked down his hoodie. It's a wee designer specimen in a colourful jumper, the kind you expect Paris Hilton to dress up and take out.

Dogs galore, but I'd given up on the bear. Not until the plane trip home did I discover Whistler offers bear-stalking tours.

Next time. ■

★ Sarah Lang travelled to Canada courtesy of Air New Zealand and Tourism British Columbia.

GREAT OUTDOORS

Up The Nile By Amanda Cropp

I'M HARD PRESSED to explain my fascination with caves, but the family kindly indulged me when I suggested an underground expedition during a West Coast holiday. Key attraction of the Nile River caves in the Paparoa National Park is they have none of the crass commercialism you see in overseas caves spoiled by power cables, board walks, tacky coloured lights and jostling crowds.

Long-time cavers Geoff Schurr and Ray Moroney established Norwest Adventures in 1987 and they deliberately chose not to install a lighting system to preserve the natural atmosphere in the 8km Te Ananui/Metro cave system.

Company HQ is the Charleston Tavern on the coastal road between Punakaiki and Westport and our family of four feel smugly privileged to have English guide Rebecca all to ourselves. (Tour groups are limited to 10.)

After kitting us out with helmets and headlamps Rebecca unfolds a potted history of Charleston during the short drive into the park. The town's current population of 100 is but a fraction of the 8000 living there during the 1860s rush when four million ounces of gold was mined locally.

For our 25-minute journey up the Nile River valley we board "Cecil", a corrugated-iron-clad train powered by a 1960s Morris Minor engine. The passing scenery featured in the BBC documentary series *Walking With Dinosaurs* and I almost expect to see a T. Rex stomping out of the mist around a bulging limestone cliff called the Ship's Bow. Only one rock climber has ever conquered the cliff face and it took him two years to plan the route.

Leaving the train, we cross a swing bridge over the river, stopping to admire a bright-blue mushroom nestled into the base of a tree like an elfin umbrella. At one of the entrances to the cave Rebecca locks the metal gates behind us and lays down the rules: keep within the ropes marking the paths and don't touch the fragile rock formations unless you're about to fall to your death.

Inside it's easy to understand why this fragile environment is so carefully protected. Stalactites formed by the slow drip of lime-laden water take 1000 years to grow just 2.5 centimetres and moments after we set off Rebecca points out a stalactite and a stalagmite. Over the next two hours we see limestone shaped into angel wings, elephant ears, cauliflower cheese and a dinosaur's foot.

We learn caving lingo too. By the light of our headlamps water droplets on the roof turn into glittering "cave diamonds" and the giraffe-skin pattern over a large, flat expanse of rock in one cavern is created by calcium carbonate deposits known as "moon milk".

I feel slightly unnerved when Rebecca tells us the shattered rock ahead was dislodged in an earthquake about 6500 years ago. Underground, an earthquake apparently sounds like an oncoming freight train but it's reassuring to hear the geological make-up of limestone means shockwaves usually pass harmlessly through it.

We finally reach the spectacular 25-metre-high main entrance. Growth of ferns on the walls marks the reach of the sun's rays and after the darkness of the cave the bush outside is blinding emerald green. This is where a farmer and his dog hunting wandering stock discovered the caves in the 1960s and earlier we'd seen the collie's paw prints still perfectly preserved in clay beside the path.

On the journey back to our starting point we extinguish our lights in the glow-worm grotto. Above us, small wriggly creatures hang around on fishing lines emitting light from their bums to attract passing insects to dine on. We know this because that's what we see when Rebecca aims her torch at a glowing dot on a low rock overhang.

As we emerge from the cave entrance our eyes readjust to the light surprisingly quickly, and during our amble back to the train Rebecca persuades us to try the green tip of a supplejack vine, claiming it tastes like freshly podded peas. It's tasty, but the whitebait sandwiches on offer back at the Charleston pub are infinitely better. True West Coast grub to end a truly memorable trip. ■

