

Chapter 15

Orienting Yourself in Victoria

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Victoria, being much more compact than Vancouver (see Part III), is even easier to get around. The airport and ferry terminals are a fair distance outside the city, but clearly marked roads and some public transit make getting into town relatively easy. In this chapter, I tell you how to get there, give you a quick outline of the city's layout, and point you toward the helpful tourist-information folks. Finally, I show you how to best get around Victoria by foot, car, or taxi.

Arriving in Victoria

Upon arrival in Canada, you first must pass through Customs and Immigration. See Chapter 8 for details on what to expect at these checkpoints — and what you need to get through them. Normally, U.S. citizens have little trouble at all, although the crossing is a bit more involved in the wake of September 11, 2001. Residents of countries other than the United States need passports and, sometimes, the appropriate visas.

Getting from Vancouver's airport to your hotel

En route to Victoria, you'll most likely fly into **Vancouver International Airport** (☎ 800-668-3141), abbreviation: YVR. For information on what to expect at the airport and the location of information booths, see Chapter 8. To get to Victoria from this airport, you have several choices.

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By ferry

Many travelers simply rent a car at the airport and drive straight to the Victoria ferry at Tsawwassen (pronounced SAH-WAH-sen, although you sometimes hear TAH-WAH-sen). This way is convenient, but if you go this route, you spend time driving to and from the ferry, waiting for the ferry, riding the ferry, and worrying about traffic and parking in Victoria. Then you need to reverse the process before leaving. Still, if you have to fly into Vancouver International Airport and you have the need for a car, this may be your best option.

Several major rental car companies have representatives at the airport (see the Appendix for their toll-free numbers). After you pick up your car, drive out of the airport, and turn onto Highway 99 South (*away* from Vancouver). Continue approximately 8 miles south to the junction with Highway 17, and then turn south on Highway 17. Then, you roll through suburbs and through miles of peaceful farmland. After about 10 miles, the highway ends at the Tsawwassen dock of **BC Ferries** (☎ 888-223-3779; Internet: www.bcferrries.com). Drive right onto the dock and take a place in the lineup. If you're lucky, you won't face a huge backup; however, you may need to wait a while. The ferry ride across the Strait of Georgia and through several small channels to Swartz Bay takes about 90 minutes. (See Chapter 5 for ticket information for BC Ferries.)

From the Swartz Bay terminal, take Highway 17, the Patricia Bay Highway, directly south into downtown Victoria, where it becomes Blanshard Street. To reach Old Town and the Inner Harbour, turn right at Yates Street. To reach The Fairmont Empress hotel, turn right at Burdett Avenue or Humboldt Street.

By plane or helicopter

Much easier — and cooler — is to fly from Vancouver International Airport straight to downtown Victoria via either a *seaplane* (also called a *floatplane*) or a helicopter. Both land right in Victoria's Inner Harbour, steps from nearly all the major sights. The options include **Harbour Air**, **Helijet**, and **West Coast Air**, and costs range between C\$80 (US\$54) and C\$105 (US\$70) each way. For more details on these services, see Chapter 5.

By bus

You can even get to Victoria from the airport without lifting off *or* driving (yourself, that is). **Pacific Coach Lines** (☎ 800-661-1725 or 604-662-8074; Internet: www.pacificcoach.com), known as PCL, runs three buses each day directly from Vancouver International Airport to downtown Victoria — the bus drives right onto the ferry. Just remember that all departures tend to take place in the middle of the day, which is inconvenient if your flight arrives early or late. The bus ride costs C\$34 (US\$22), one-way, and the trip takes about 3½ hours from

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the airport to Victoria's bus depot. Call or check the Web site for up-to-the-minute reservation, schedule, and fare information.

Getting from Victoria's airport to your hotel

In every situation I can think of, flying into Vancouver's airport is cheaper than flying into Victoria's. Assume, however, that you decide to value convenience over cost and fly into Victoria — either directly (which is actually possible from a handful of cities in the northwestern United States) or on a connecting flight from Vancouver.

Victoria International Airport (abbreviation: CYYJ; ☎ **250-953-7500**; Internet: www.victoriaairport.com) is a small facility located about 15 miles north of the city on Highway 17, up on the Saanich Peninsula. Several short-hop airlines, as well as various special charter flights, land here. The facility is small enough that you won't get lost, and everything is clearly marked and signed. For a list of airlines that fly to this airport, see the Appendix.

Surprisingly, public transit does not connect the airport to Victoria. Therefore the quickest, although certainly not the cheapest, way to travel from the airport into the city is by cab. The 40-minute ride costs roughly C\$38 to C\$41 (US\$26–US\$28); a 15% tip is usually appropriate. The major cab companies include **Blue Bird** (☎ **800-665-7055**), **Empress** (☎ **800-808-6881**), and **Victoria Taxi** (☎ **888-842-7111**). Empress usually has cabs waiting at the airport, but you can pre-arrange for any other cab company to pick you up if you call in advance.

The privately operated shuttle bus known as **Airporter** (☎ **877-386-2525** or 250-386-2525) is also a good choice, because it leaves regularly from the terminal and makes stops at many of the key downtown hotels. You may have to wait a half-hour or more for a departure, however, depending on your timing. The fare is C\$13 (US\$8.70) for adults (C\$11.70 [US\$7.80] for seniors), and the ride takes about an hour.

Although you won't need a car in Victoria, several rental car agencies are at the airport, including **Avis**, **Budget**, **Enterprise**, **Hertz**, and **National** (see the Appendix for their toll-free numbers). For directions from the airport into the city, see the following section.

Driving to Victoria

If you drive into Victoria, you'll either be coming from the Inner Harbour ferry docks, the Swartz Bay terminal north of the city, the airport, or elsewhere on Vancouver Island.

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- ✓ From the Inner Harbour ferry docks, simply drive two short blocks along Belleville Street to Douglas Street, just past the huge Fairmont Empress hotel; here, you turn left to reach the heart of the Old Town or right to reach Beacon Hill Park or the ocean loop through James Bay and Oak Bay.
- ✓ From the Swartz Bay terminal, drive off the ferry and onto Highway 17, the Patricia Bay Highway, which runs directly south into downtown Victoria, where it becomes Blanshard Street. To reach Old Town and the Inner Harbour, turn right at Yates Street. To reach The Fairmont Empress, turn right at Burdett Avenue or Humboldt Street.
- ✓ From the Victoria International Airport, you also drive Highway 17 south for about 15 miles into downtown Victoria, following the same directions as in the preceding paragraph.
- ✓ From elsewhere on Vancouver Island, simply proceed south on Highway 1, which becomes Douglas Street and runs right into the heart of town.

Finding Information After You Arrive

Victoria has one central place for picking up comprehensive tourism information — thank goodness it's well stocked. The **Visitor InfoCentre**, 812 Wharf St. (☎ **250-953-2033**; 800-663-3883 to book accommodations only), located right on the harbor at the corner of Government and Wharf streets, is open daily year-round. The hours are 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. in summer and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the year. (And by the way, it looks sorta like a gas station because it *was* once a gas station. Fill 'er up!)

The friendly staff offers plenty of brochures and other printed material, covering nearly every aspect of Victoria. Beyond this, the office can also find accommodations for you at no extra charge; book tours, boat excursions, and theater tickets; and offer recommendations. Note that the office distributes information for the rest of Vancouver Island, as well.

A smaller, seasonal InfoCentre on the Patricia Bay Highway (Highway 17) is about 16 miles north of town. This is a more convenient first stop if you're coming into town from the north — that is, from the Vancouver-to-Swartz Bay ferry or from the Victoria airport. This office is open from March through the end of November every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Locating ATMs

Victoria's ATMs are concentrated downtown, in bank lobbies, malls such as Bastion Square and Market Square, hotel lobbies, and occasionally

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right on the street. You need to make sure the network logo on the back of your card matches that of the machine; **Cirrus** (☎ 800-424-7787) and **Plus** (☎ 800-843-7587) can both tell you which Victoria ATMs work with cards in their respective systems.

Getting to Know Victoria's Neighborhoods

Compact Victoria is less confusing than spread-out Vancouver. The city's three central neighborhoods are all connected, and as you walk or drive, they tend to blur into one another. Staying in one of these central areas is the best option if you're on a short visit, although you do pay extra. Victoria's suburbs tend to be almost exclusively residential, although one or two of these outlying areas have hotels. Finally, you can find chain motels and hotels on Highway 17 north of Victoria, but consider these only if you're strapped for cash or in a hurry to leave the following morning.

The **Inner Harbour** is the area surrounding the city's small inner harbor, where ferry boats, floatplanes, and whale-watching boats arrive and depart. Accommodations are plentiful and wonderfully situated. The views are splendid, and you're no more than a few minutes' walk to such important sights as The Fairmont Empress hotel, government buildings, and — of course — the waterfront and its ferries. This is, not very surprisingly, the most expensive place in town to bed down for the night.

The central portion of Victoria consists of an area along the waterfront, within five or so city blocks of it in any direction. This is the next-priciest location after the Inner Harbour, and it isn't a quiet place (except when bars shut down), but it does possess good atmosphere. Think of this area as two adjacent parts: **Old Town**, first up walking north from The Fairmont Empress and including Bastion and Market squares, and then **Downtown**, which contains the bulk of the city's commerce — shopping, restaurants and bars, plus hotels.



Downtown and Old Town are so interwoven that, for the purposes of this book, I combine them into a single area called "Downtown/Old Town."

The adjacent neighborhoods are hit-or-miss when it comes to bedtime. The tiny and slightly grubby **Chinatown** (surprisingly, the continent's oldest in spite of its small size) occupies only a few narrow blocks north of Old Town, and I don't recommend any lodgings here. A few blocks northeast lies **Fernwood**, a once down-at-heels but now up-and-coming area, that is swiftly revitalizing itself through the arts, restaurants, and the like; again, however, I don't recommend any accommodations here. Stay tuned.

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Victoria Neighborhoods



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Just west of Old Town, connected by a bridge, lies the neighborhood of **Songhees** (pronounced SONG-eeze) and then the separate municipality called **Esquimalt** (pronounced ess-KWHY-malt). Once an industrial area, this section is hot stuff today — home to North America’s first microbrewery (see Chapter 20), but also several excellent lodgings, all with stupendous water views. Throughout this book, I combine these neighborhoods and refer to them as “Esquimalt/Songhees.”

Finally, a little south and east of the central area, you find a number of residential neighborhoods harboring excellent, and quieter, lodgings. **James Bay**, directly south of downtown (to the right as you leave the ferries) is quietly attractive and offers a handful of distinctive lodgings to go with terrific views over water of islands and mountains. You can also wander nice Beacon Hill Park from your front door. The next neighborhood to the west is **Lower Cook Street Village**, a narrow strip that runs along the eastern side of Beacon Hill Park. **Rockland** and **Fairfield** are situated just north of here, composed of quiet and elegant streets and a handful of nice bed-and-breakfasts.

And **Oak Bay**, farther still to the east, is a friendly and British-feeling neighborhood with excellent beaches, golf courses, and a pleasant mixture of older and newer homes. Surprisingly posh accommodations are here. Think about staying in this neighborhood if you crave a quieter, more local experience. Reach the area by looping east and then north from the Inner Harbour along Dallas Road — a scenic drive.

Getting Around Victoria

You’re most likely to see Victoria by your own power, in a car, by private transportation, or as part of some sort of a tour. However, the city does have a small, public transportation system. In this section, I let you know about each mode of transport.

By foot

You can reach many of the key sights — including all the Inner Harbour, the Old Town, James Bay, and Chinatown — by foot, and, in fact, the vast majority of your fellow visitors will be walking, also.

By bicycle

In a city possessing as many beaches, parks, and gardens as Victoria — without big-city traffic — bicycling turns out to be one of the best ways to see the local charms, if you have the energy. Bike lanes have thoughtfully been provided in key locations, and a day’s rental costs only about C\$20 (US\$14), with an hour’s rental about C\$6 (US\$4).

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Some companies that rent cycles include **Cycle Victoria**, 950 Wharf St. (☎ 800-380-2435 or 250-385-2453); **Harbour Rentals**, 811 Wharf St. (☎ 250-995-1661); and **Sports Rent**, 611 Discovery (☎ 250-385-7368).

A number of bike repair shops are in Victoria, as well, although they're almost all on the outskirts; the most central are probably **James Bay Bicycle Works**, 131 Menzies St. (☎ 250-380-1664), conveniently near the popular ocean loop, and the slightly hard-to-find but helpful **Fairfield Bicycle Shop**, 1275 Oscar St. (☎ 250-381-2453).

By car

Having a car in Victoria is convenient if you plan to get out into the countryside. But if you're concentrating on downtown, I recommend that you leave the wheels at home. If you do drive, you'll find that drivers here are exceptionally polite. You should drive — and act — in the same fashion.

Traffic rules are mostly the same as those of the United States: You drive on the right and stop at red lights. Plus, you can turn right on a red light if no traffic is coming. Blinking green arrows can be confusing — they simply mean “Proceed with caution” not “Go for it! (heh-heh).” Headlights must be on at all times, although on Canadian rental cars this happens automatically, and seat belts are always required. The speed limit within Victoria's limits is generally 50 kilometers per hour (that's about 30 miles per hour), sometimes less.

Traffic backs up downtown at rush hour, which occurs from perhaps 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. as downtown employees make an exodus for the northern, eastern, and western suburbs, and the one-way street system can be confounding. Parking is also often a hassle due to the compactness of the tourist area. On-street meters are expensive and nearly impossible to find during the high summer season — if you do manage to snag one, have plenty of change at the ready (a Canadian dollar gets you only a half-hour). Parking in a garage or lot is a better option than a meter. Several facilities are along Blanshard and View streets, for example. For the locations of downtown parking lots, see the Cheat Sheet at the front of this book.



You should always find out whether your restaurant, hotel, or merchant can validate your parking slip.



Watch for parking spots that disappear at rush hour, when parking spaces become driving lanes; you'll be towed if you stay too long in these. Parking fines in Victoria run about C\$20 (US\$13) — you can pay online if you're nabbed.

By public transportation

BC Transit's Victoria arm, known as the **Victoria Regional Transit System** (☎ 250-385-2551; Internet: www.bctransit.com), consists almost solely of a bus network you may never use, but the agency still does a good job of collecting local maps and transportation information together in one package. You can pick up booklets such as *Victoria Rider's Guide* or *Explore Victoria by Bus* at the waterfront tourist information center. If you've already been to Vancouver, that city's transit guide also includes a section covering Victoria.

City buses do go to some tourist destinations, such as the ferry docks and Butchart Gardens. Buses are clean, but they're slow and make lots of stops.

Multiple fare zones determine prices: A ride costs either C\$1.75 or C\$2.50 (US\$1.20 or US\$1.70) per adult, depending on how far you go, less for seniors and children. Drivers don't carry change, so you need exact fare — a possible headache if you've just arrived. Day passes, available at both the tourist information center and certain stores, cost C\$5.50 (US\$3.70) for adults (C\$4.00 [US\$2.70] for children and seniors) and allow you to avoid the exact-change dance but otherwise aren't a good deal because you're unlikely to use the bus system enough to justify buying one.



You can get transfers for one-time use if you're continuing in the same direction on a different bus. If you venture out of zone one, which is downtown Victoria, you have between 30 to 45 minutes before a transfer becomes invalid. If you get off the bus and don't take the very next bus running the same direction, however, you have to purchase a new ticket. For a one-zone ticket, you have between 15 to 20 minutes to use the transfer, and the same rules apply. For more information on the zones, log on to www.bctransit.com.

By taxi

You probably won't need a cab in Victoria, but if you do here's the skinny. Taxis cost C\$2.40 (US\$1.60) to start the meter and C\$1.40 (US\$.97) for each additional kilometer (which is a little more than half a mile). Downtown trips generally cost about C\$5 to C\$6 (US\$3.33–US\$4); from the airport, fares vary from C\$38 to C\$41 (US\$26–US\$28). A 15% tip is appropriate. The major cab companies include **Blue Bird** (☎ 800-665-7055), **Empress** (☎ 800-808-6881), and **Victoria Taxi** (☎ 888-842-7111). Call ahead if at all possible, rather than simply trying to hail a cab in the street; they may not stop.

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