



The Tsuchodi region in the foothills of the northern Rocky Mountains (main picture)

British Columbia's magic

With just three cities but a vast expanse of countryside that takes in glacier lakes, mountains, beaches, the ocean and Gold Rush country, British Columbia is a pretty thrilling province to study in. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Although one of Canada's best known provinces, British Columbia (BC) holds many surprises for international visitors. Its wide range of scenery, cities, towns and English language learning centres means it can satisfy all tastes, as Mark Herringer at Malaspina University College & International High School in Nanaimo explains. "The awesome natural and cultural environments of British Columbia are unparalleled!" he says. "From cosmopolitan urban areas close to some of the greatest recreational opportunities anywhere, to friendly smaller towns and cities offering each student a unique learning environment with great community support, BC has it all."

According to schools in the province, British Columbia appeals to all nationality groups but often for a range of reasons. Monika Benker, Manager of Four Corners Language Institute in Victoria, says, "European students come because of the expectation of the Wild West nature and outdoor activities, [and] students from South America come because of the moderate climate of BC and especially Vancouver Island." Barbara Yearwood, Admissions

Officer at Columbia College in Vancouver, adds, "Being on the Pacific Rim, Vancouver is attractive to Asian students because of its proximity to Asian countries."

For all students, regardless of where they come from, the friendliness of the people is another major draw of BC, coupled with the current price advantage of the country. "For East Asians and Western Europeans the Canadian dollar offers a good rate of exchange, and the cost of living here is generally quite a bit lower," says Cassandra Dycke at Comox Valley International College (CVIC).

While the whole of British Columbia certainly appeals to all, Vancouver is often called the "city with something for everyone",

"My fastest learner was a student from Bolivia. Pablo had quite the penchant for the young ladies in town, and it was awfully hard to impress them without any English. Pablo studied harder than any student I have ever had, met lots of ladies, and within six months his English was high enough to earn him a 570 Toefl and gain entrance to an Engineering programme at a technical school in Calgary. I've never seen anything like it!"

Kassandra Dycke, Comox Valley International College, Courtenay

Victoria

In 1849, the Imperial Government of the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island was established and Fort Victoria was the capital. Evidence of the city's British origins is apparent in street names



according to Janice Kent, Marketing Coordinator at the Canadian Business English Institute (CBEI) in Vancouver. Yearwood says the city's location on the Pacific Ocean, surrounded by the Coastal Mountain Range, makes it an ideal base for undertaking all sorts of outdoor activities "within minutes" of the city.

Kent also highlights some of the advantages of studying in Vancouver itself. "The Museum of Anthropology, Aquarium, Art

Agent viewpoint

Gallery and many theatres and sports arenas offer opportunities for entertainment and to experience Canadian culture," she says. "The Vancouver Public Library is an architectural favourite, and students often like shopping on Robson Street."

For a different take on British Columbia, there are numerous different options including the attractive town of Kelowna, which is an important fruit-growing centre; Kamloops, an ideal base for exploring the Revelstoke, Yoho, Glacier and Kootenay National Parks; and Barkerville, the gold-rush boom town that actually accelerated the settlement of British Columbia in 1862. Just off the coast of Vancouver is Vancouver Island, which is proud to offer a wide range of experiences, as Dycke of local school, CVIC, explains. "Vancouver Island [has] a few large, modern cities filled with tourist attractions and nightlife, but just minutes away from these urban centres, visitors can find vast untouched wilderness and charming coastal villages."

Vancouver Island itself is about the size of Taiwan, but it has a population of only 350,000 people. It is home to British Columbia's capital, Victoria, which Matthew Chisholm, Programme Coordinator at Geos

Language Academy in the city, describes as "small, friendly, safe and beautiful".

Benker elaborates, "The mild climate, the whale watching, the world famous Butchart Gardens, the Empress Hotel and afternoon tea, the mountains and ocean are a big draw for many visitors. Victoria has been nicknamed the Garden City, because in February, when most of the other parts of Canada are still digging out of snow, we are counting our spring flowers!"

Further north from Victoria is Nanaimo, ideally placed for exploring the island. Taking us on a virtual tour of the area, Herringer says, "From Nanaimo, students can visit the rugged Pacific Rim National Park in hours, and on the way, they can pass by Cathedral Grove, which is home to some of the largest oldest trees in North America. Just two hours away is the town of Campbell River, which has world-class salmon fishing. Mount Washington is a top ski resort just an hour away and will be one of the training centres for the 2010 Winter Olympics."

Given the abundance of natural attractions in Canada, it is no wonder that Canadians make the most of the outdoors. Chisholm exclaims, "We love to exercise!" and this desire for activity appears to be contagious, with students at schools throughout British Columbia taking up exciting and unusual outdoor pursuits. Herringer says, "Our recreation department has surfing tours to the west coast; students



"Chinese students see many advantages of studying in British Columbia. The geographical proximity [to their home country], strong Asian influence, mild climate and natural beauty of BC make them feel much less of a cultural shock than any other destination in North America. Should the students be interested in going to BC, we often recommend them to commence their studies in a relatively small town or city such as Nanaimo or Victoria. Despite all the great things about Vancouver, in the experience of our past students, the smaller cities



ing the new students a quiet, undisturbed and more accommodating studying environment."

Jianming Ma, China Scholarship Council, China



"British Columbia is dominated by mountains in the interior with some mountains toward the northern part of Vancouver Island. These serve as gateways to popular winter sports like skiing (both alpine and cross-country) and snow boarding. They also lend themselves to summer sports like hiking, kayaking/canoeing and mountain biking. With a long

coastline and many gulf islands between the mainland and Vancouver Island, marine activities such as sailing, ocean kayaking, fishing and swimming are also popular."

Jeff Cairns, Collage, Inc., Japan



"The myth here is that Canada is supposed to be very distant, Western and cold, with a culture that is sort of scary. Some even say you have to be able to speak French in Canada. But to students' surprise, BC is not so different to their hometowns. They

can meet lots of Asian friends, eat Asian food at various ethnic restaurants scattered around the area, and hang out doing the same activities just like back home."

Ivan Liusaputra, Vista Ed. Services, Indonesia



"British Columbia, especially Vancouver, is a preferred destination among the Swiss. They love the combination of mountains and ocean so close to each other and they adore the relaxed lifestyle."

Mary McKay Vilén, Canada Live, Switzerland



Gold Rush Trail

It is possible to take a tour along part or all of the original Gold Rush Trail, which is littered with remnants from a bygone era along the way and features rugged landscapes, rapid rivers and mountain passes

can also paddle an outrigger canoe just like they do in Hawaii.

For those students who have never seen snow before, we recommend that they take a guided snowshoeing tour which is magical among the tall trees with piles of snow on them - they can even go winter camping with an experienced guide!"

Favourite free-time activities at CVIC include "kayaking out in Comox Bay to our little deserted islands and watching the seals as they pop up beside our boats; caving at Horne Lake, descending deep into a crevasse and viewing spectacular crystal formations; and fossil hunting here in the first stop on Canada's Great Fossil Trail", according to Dycke.

Experiencing British Columbia's great outdoors is a fundamental part of a language travel trip to the province; getting to know its people is another, and students who live with host families have a head start in this respect. "Host families are so active with their guests and initiate many opportunities for them to get to know people around town," says Dycke.

Schools in Vancouver also work hard to, as Kent puts it, "weave the city" into their programmes. As well as organising

work experience or volunteer positions, many schools include community-based research in their language courses. "There are projects for which students research neighbourhood demographics, and prepare marketing presentations for Vancouver businesses," says Kent. "In some cases, students go on field trips where they experience first-hand the business-related topics and cross-cultural differences that they are learning about in the classroom."

British Columbia offers students a language learning experience embellished by exciting activities, beautiful scenery, energising cosmopolitan cities and welcoming people. It is not surprising then that, as Dycke says, "Language students feel so at home that most find it quite difficult to leave."