

Our Canada 2025

by
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*West to East
by
Plane, Train and Automobile*



16 May 2025, "Hidden Gem," Airbnb, Vancouver

Arrived from Tokyo just before lunchtime today with JAL. We have flown a few times with JAL recently, rather than Qantas. JAL is part of the same airline alliance, One World, so we get points and all the benefits of our status level with Qantas. What we don't get is Qantas' outrageous prices! Our flight was not direct, in fact it could be considered a milk run, but at half the price of the more direct Qantas flight, it was well worth the extra time taken on the Brisbane to Hong Kong to Tokyo to Vancouver route.

This is our third trip to Canada, but our first time in Vancouver. The city has great reviews and friends who have been here rave about it, but not so much the weather, so our glum welcome was not unexpected.

The forecast for the next few days is a little better, so our expectations are high.



17 May, Vancouver

Our day didn't start well. Yesterday, we did all the right things to avoid jetlag. We ate at our normal time, stayed awake until our normal time but, after a restless early night, we both drifted off, only to awake at 10:30am! A record sleep-in.

Eventually out the door by 11.30am, we decided to go out to the Capilano Suspension Bridge Park, a subway trip and bus ride away. Simple? Not so. Seems we had to change buses along the way, a fact that escaped us in our state of over-sleep. After a number of calm and reasoned discussions and a long walk in the wrong direction to catch yet another bus, we gave up and headed back downtown.

We had noticed the Vancouver Art Gallery close to the subway station that would take us home so, to retrieve some value out of the day, we coughed up the CAD35 entry fee in expectation of some good quality art. What we had missed, in





our haste, was that this was a “contemporary” gallery. Now that is fine. Not big fans, but we have enjoyed some of the more famous galleries of the genre, like the Pompidou Centre in Paris. The VAG was not quite in the same class. Put as charitably as possible, pocket your CAD35 (plus tax) and go to the casino. It will take you far longer to burn through your money and you will have at least a small amount of enjoyment on the way.

18 May, Vancouver

We were away at a much more respectable time today for another attempt at the Capilano Suspension Bridge Park. Based on our fairly disastrous attempt yesterday, we decided to do some more research. Believe it or not, we had taken the most convoluted and expensive option. Seems there is a free shuttle out to the park from just near the terminal station on our local subway line.

Armed with this new information, we easily made it to this fantastic attraction. The sun was out and the temperature was comfortable enough to shed sweatshirts.

Set in a dense forest area just on the edge of the city, today the park drew fairly large, but manageable, crowds. The bridge itself is the third built over the Capilano river since the mid-19th century. From the photographs on display, there is very little chance that we would have crossed it in its earlier forms.

The park was well laid out and, despite the high price tag, (CAD70 pp) it was good value on what turned out to be a spectacular day, weather wise.

On our return trip on the free shuttle bus, we scored the most entertaining bus driver we have ever had. In his Chinese-accented English, he kept passengers amused with jokes and trivia all the way back to town. His tip jar was full by the time

we got off the bus.

Given our disappointment with the art gallery yesterday, we were a bit dubious about the Museum of Vancouver where we headed for the afternoon. Getting used to the bus system, today we had no trouble finding our way to the museum. What a surprise. To start with, today, Sunday, was “name your own entry price day”. A bit tricky for us travellers, not wishing to look tight, we opted for paying CAD10 each rather than CAD12. As it turned out, again, great value! It was one of those museums that displayed periods of history through displays of everyday items from each period. We love these, because we can always find things that were part of our lives, or even things that we still have at home. We even got to drop a quarter into a real vintage juke box and play an EP from the 50s.

Canadians have a reputation for being “nice” people. We have to say, while stereotypes should be frowned on, our observations on this and other trips have enforced this view. Uniformly, we are offered seats on buses and subways, a benefit of age which we mostly decline. People thank bus drivers, just like at home, locals interact with each other in positive, friendly ways. The only downside is the tendency of drivers to use their horns much more than we are used to.

19 May, Vancouver

Gave ourselves an easy day today for our last day in Vancouver. Started out with a stroll around the Granville Island Markets, which were a little low key today, Victoria Day, a public holiday and a little overcast and cold. The produce markets are only a small part of the Granville Island complex. Restaurants, mainly seafood, souvenir shops and some rather flash pottery and art outlets lined the narrow streets. We love to wander through a good city market and, while this





one wasn't huge, there was a great range of deli, seafood, meat and veges, all of good quality. But the prices! The fish was remarkably cheap by current Australian standards and the vegetables were on par. But the meat and deli prices were eye-popping. Sausages were CAD25 to CAD30 a kilo, porterhouse steak at around CAD75/kg.

Next stop, Gas Town. Promoted as the old heart of the city, the area had some 19th century buildings, a few remaining cobblestone lanes and of course, the major attraction, the steam-driven clock. A bit like "Old Yellow," the clock worked up a head of steam every 15 minutes and let blast with a steam-driven chime.

Getting about the city has been reasonably easy on a combination of buses and the subway. Google Maps works extremely well, but care needs to be taken to check for bus changes. This is what got us badly lost on our first day.

Vancouver has a stored-value transit card, called Compass. We looked into it, but for our short visit, it didn't seem good value. Instead, we used our credit cards to "tap on and off," though tapping off is not required for buses, as they are flat rate across the city. The subways, on the other hand, are zonal. You can also do a free transfer within 90 minutes, even when using a credit card. We have usually driven in North America and we will again later on this trip, but driving and parking in big cities is becoming more difficult. Traffic around central Vancouver seemed hectic during our stay and while there was ample street parking near our Airbnb, the rental car would have just sat there for all the time we were in Vancouver. Our transit fares averaged around CAD12 each a day. Having a rental sitting on the street at CAD100+ a day would have made no sense.







25 May, VIA Canada “The Canadian” to Toronto

The past few days have been spent with Janita’s cousin, Tim and his wife, Judy, in Regina, the provincial capital of Saskatchewan. Naturally we visited the very grand Provincial Legislature building, constructed in 1909. It was great to have local guides to take us around the city, including a visit to the home of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the "Mounties." About an hour west of Regina, the small town of Moose Jaw entertained us for a day. During prohibition in the USA, the city was one of the centres for the “bootleg” liquor trade. The notorious gangster, Al Capone, (Old Scar Face) operated through a complex of tunnels that led from a number of buildings in the centre of the city to the railway station. Disguised as normal freight like maple syrup, the bootleg liquor made its way south and on to Chicago.

The plains of central Canada are not as flat as we had imagined, with frequent small valleys breaking up the scenery. Just outside Saskatoon, the land levelled out significantly, exposing a feature known locally as “The Pimple.” The Pimple is in fact a man-made hill, created to facilitate skiing during the Canada Games in Regina.

Tim and Judy were kind enough to drive us up to Saskatoon, where they once again acted as our well-informed local guides. The highlight for us was the Western Development Centre, an excellent museum featuring a wide range of displays, including a reconstructed early 20th century main street, displays of farm machinery and vintage cars and a detailed model railway display. A visit to a berry farm for lunch topped off a great visit.

This morning we were up about 4am to catch our train for Toronto which was on time for its 6:57am departure.

26 May, “The Canadian,” somewhere in Ontario

After such a long day yesterday, we had little trouble sleeping. The rocking of the train was a great help.

We have a two-person cabin which is more than a little “cozy”. The bunk beds are very comfy and just as wide as a normal single bed. There is a toilet in a fairly large cabinet. The toilet is the same style as on airlines. What is difficult is managing enough space to allow for luggage storage and still have enough floor space for two people to dress and move about. Fairly extensive public areas and glass-roofed observation carriages provide seating and socialising options away from the cabins. Other areas of the train have airline-like economy seating, economy semi-private sleepers and, at the top of the scale, Prestige Cabins. These have double beds and fully-equipped bathrooms. Good quality meals are provided and Prestige Cabin passengers get a free alcoholic drink with meals.

27 May, Toronto

We feel that, aside from watching the fantastic scenery of Canada pass by our window, all we have done is eat! Three two or three course meals a day! Great food, but way more than we’re used to. However, we did manage to struggle through it all.

The majority of the people on our part of the train were on a railway tour. Yet again, our long -term aversion to tours was confirmed by being confined with a lot of Brits and Americans, plus a few Australians. While almost all our dining partners were nice, often well-travelled people, the routine of the whole trip was a little confining for us. Perhaps we are being more than a little picky? At least when people start to grate, we can go back to our cabin.

Would we do the VIA Canadian trip again. No. It is a bit like







the Trans-Siberian - a one-off experience. Would we recommend it? Definitely. Adding on the section we missed from Vancouver through the Rockies would make the experience even more memorable. We skipped this section as we had driven it some years back.

Our arrival at Toronto's Union Station was about an hour earlier than scheduled. We were off and on the subway to the 'burbs in just a few minutes, but then faced an unscheduled delay on the subway. On boarding, we were confronted by what was obviously human excrement on the floor of the car. With other passengers, we huddled together away from the offending and smelly deposit. Very soon, an announcement came through, telling us to leave the train, which was being taken out of service due to a "health risk" issue.

Tonight, we are back in control of our own little world in an inner suburb of Toronto. It is another basement apartment with all the mod cons. Provisioned up from the local supermarket and liquor store, we are planning a quick visit to the city before heading off to Montreal by train in a couple of days.

Some Canadian provinces seem to have made some changes to legislation to allow retailers to include all the various taxes that are applied to goods in the shelf price. Those who have travelled in the USA or Canada would have experienced the frustration of getting to a checkout to get a 10% or more price "surprise", because the tax hasn't been included in the shelf price. Today were overjoyed to note that the shelf price was what we paid. Well done, Canada! Can the USA learn anything from this? Probably not!

31 May, Montreal

Our last night in Montreal after a very busy couple of days. The train trip here from Toronto was fairly uneventful. Five and



a half hours comfortable travel was through mostly farmland, which surprised us a bit, as we envisaged that this part of the east of Canada would be quite densely populated.

Our Airbnb is a fair way out of the city, but well connected by bus and Metro.

Before running through the events of the past couple of days it would probably be worthwhile examining of the travel tricks we have learned here.

Montreal is a large city with an extensive bus network and a reasonable Metro system. As with most large modern cities, Montreal has a range of transit fares that can save short-term visitors significant money. We don't intend to explain the whole range of fare options, but if visitors are flying into Montreal and getting about without a car, we believe the best option is the 3 day Zone A, Unrestricted, "Occasional Card." Montreal's transit system is zoned, with higher fares in the outer zones. However, virtually all the attractions that a visitor might wish to see are within Zone A. At time of writing, this card cost CAD21.50. The great benefit of this card is that it covers the fare on the Airport 747 bus, which itself costs CAD11. Fares in Zone A are a flat CAD3.75 and include a free transfer within 2 hours. In just 2 days, we estimate that we racked up around CAD18. Add in the CAD11 that we will spend on our airport transfer tomorrow and we will be well ahead.

For the last two days, we have immersed ourselves in the art and cultural aspects of this great city. Fantastic museums, art galleries and the vibrant street life, combined with good weather that bought the locals out in force on the streets of the old city that runs for blocks along the St Laurence River, created a memorable experience for us.

Our most lasting impression of Montreal will be that les bons citoyens de Montréal clearly believe that they live in



metropolitan France. The signs are everywhere. Or not. Outside Quebec, as mandated by legislation, all signs, official documents and public announcements, such as those made on buses, subways and in stations should be in both English and French. Not in Montreal. French is king. There is more English signage in Tokyo, Hong Kong or Saigon than there is in Montreal. Metro entrances are Parisienne style, the subway trains have rubber wheels, just as on the Paris Metro and many of the station names are the same. To top it off, the busking saxophone player at our station this afternoon was playing Gershwin's "An American in Paris". Having said all this, almost everybody speaks English, probably as an equal first language, although in older folk, this can be with a strong French accent. We find it easier to understand spoken Canadian French, though we still struggle. A nice Algerian guy we met on the Metro gave us a new slant on why. He believes that Canadians speak French with an English accent. As an aside, this gent chatted about his visits to Australia, including living for a short time in Brisbane and working in "Bundy!" What a small world it is. Little encounters like this enhance the travel experience. Off tomorrow with Air Canada to Halifax.

2 June, Halifax

Montreal's Pierre Trudeau Airport is not well served by public transport. There is a Metro station a couple of kilometres away, at Douval, but for some reason it is only connected to the Airport by local bus or taxi. Our journey was rather complex but an absolute bargain for us because the 3-day pass described above covered the CAD11 bus fare and all the connections we had to make, which were bus-Metro-Metro-bus-Airport.

In Halifax we collected a nice Ford Escape SUV which will



take us around the Atlantic provinces over the next two weeks.

Settled into our small suburban basement apartment in the 'burbs we have a full load of washing going and, after some negotiation with the apartment's owner, we are better set up to cook dinner than we were last night. To our surprise, a large empty space was all that was left of the oven and cooktop we were depending on. Flexible as we are, we decided to park the problem until the next day and manage with the microwave and toaster oven that presumably was to replace the oven. We bought some veges and a frozen chicken pie. Only problem was, when we read the package back at home, the pie wasn't microwaveable, it required 1 hour 40 minutes in an... OVEN! Skipping the details, we finally sat down to plates of chicken pie filling, topped with pastry browned in the toaster oven, served with soggy, microwaved carrots, zucchini and broccoli. Not as bad as it sounds. Tonight, we also have a two-burner, electric hotplate. The first day in a left-hand drive vehicle is always a little stressful. Today wasn't too bad. Halifax is only a small city of about 500,000 souls. The port area, where most of the attractions are, is away from the main traffic areas of the CBD, traffic is light and parking is plentiful.

The waterfront of Halifax, and the steep rise behind it, known today as the Citadel, hold an important place in Canadian history. As a major strategic port at the mouth of the St Lawrence River, the British fortified the city through the American Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and the war of 1812.

Halifax was, and to some extent, still is, a major entry point for immigrants arriving in Canada from all over the world. The Immigration Museum is situated in the old immigration complex that operated until the mid 1970s. It does a great job



in presenting the history of a long and sometimes chequered story of Canada's role in some of the major immigration movements of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The city's Maritime Museum houses a great collection of small boats and spectacular, large-scale models of ocean liners. Among other displays was a presentation of relics, photographs and descriptions of one of the greatest disasters in Canada's history. In December 1917, a ship loaded with ammunition and explosives headed for France collided with another ship in the port. The explosion was said to be the largest man-made explosion in human history, prior to the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. Seventeen hundred people were killed, thousands more wounded and many thousands more made homeless.

3 June, Halifax

Beautiful sunny day today for our trip to the popular, small, scenic, lobster fishing port of Peggy's Cove and further along the coast, to the UNESCO listed town of Lunenburg. Every corner drew "Wows" from us as we pulled into village after village. Peggy's Cove was not open for business this morning, except for a single restaurant but we walked around the village, with its stacked lobster pots and colourful Hamptons chairs to the viewing platform for the best photos of the lighthouse, before moving on. Lunenburg had several blocks of 18th and 19th century buildings and a waterfront where a couple of large fully rigged, "Tall Ships" waited for the flood of tourists that will descend on Nova Scotia when the summer holidays get into full swing in the next couple of weeks. Today, we had no problem with parking and had most of the area fairly much to ourselves.





6 June, Bathurst

Crossed the spectacular Confederation Bridge this morning from Prince Edward Island back to the mainland after a couple of relaxing days on what passes for a holiday beach island in Canada's Maritime provinces. We were extremely lucky during our stay to experience some truly spectacular weather. We spent most of our time cruising from small town to small town, wandering around, just enjoying the warm sunshine. The only planned excursions were a visit to the town of Cavendish and to visit the Green Gables Heritage Site. The site includes a museum of sorts with quotes and diary notes, as well as family photos of Lucy Maud Montgomery, the author of *Anne of Green Gables* and several follow-on books. The Green Gables house is the original farmhouse of cousins of Lucy Maud. The inside is decorated to match Lucy Maud's descriptions of the house in which the fictional Anne grew up. We also found Lucy Maud's grave.

The pace of life on PEI, the most common name used by the locals, is slow and laid back. Even pausing near a pedestrian crossing will bring traffic in both directions to an immediate halt. Elderly people often just stroll out onto the road and again, the traffic just stops. Nobody hits the horn or makes rude signs, everything just works in a communal, co-operative way.

Canadians have a reputation for politeness and courtesy. It is well earned. There is a real, honest, genuine culture of kindness in stark contrast to some of their neighbours to the south. As an example, moving into our motel this afternoon, the access door to our second-floor room wouldn't open. Immediately a couple who were moving into their ground floor room, waved us through their room to give us access to the second floor. Australians could take some lessons.

Canadian motorways and primary highways are extremely











well maintained. Sadly, the same can't be said of the minor roads. Most local roads are shockers! Potholes, rough edges and ruts make driving less than enjoyable.

9 June, Levis, Quebec City

Wandering aimlessly through New Brunswick and Quebec provinces over the past couple of days has produced some unexpected gems. Following the coastline, we had hoped to find some nice access points, but we were constantly disappointed as most spots we chose led to dead ends with little to see of the mighty St Lawrence River. Our persistence eventually paid off when we came upon the little town of Shediac, a town with a surviving "heart." Most places that showed as substantial settlements on the map turned out to be clusters of houses, many quite attractive houses it must be said, and the odd super mall. Shediac had a small main street, with some older historic buildings scattered among newer structures, some of which also had retained the old facades. The greatest drawcard, however, was the Big Lobster on the town's outskirts.

Yesterday, we again decided to just cruise around on our last leg to Quebec. Blessed with a near perfect day, we followed the waterfront, taking every likely-looking road that was close to the water. We were rewarded with kilometre after kilometre of spectacular homes, most with large, newly-mown lawns and well laid-out spring flower gardens.

Our random ramblings also led us to the small town of Kamouraska where we visited a local history museum located in an old convent. Several well-described floors of exhibits took us through some of the impacts on local communities of the battles between the British and the French colonists.

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be explored. One of these was a navy catamaran built in the 1960s as a prototype sub-hunter. At the time it was the fastest naval vessel in the world. Sadly, the Canadian Navy decided not to go forward with further production.

10 June, Levis

Settled in our great Airbnb in Levis, just across the river from Quebec Old City, we are recovering from a busy day in and around the old city centre.

Our Airbnb hosts have provided us with free ferry passes for the short and regular ferry service directly to the centre of the Old City. From the river, the iconic Frontenac Chateau dominated the skyline. The chateau quickly became the most photographed location of this trip as both of us took multiple shots as the angle of our view changed on our approach to the city.

The Old City is quite small and sadly, a little over “touristy.” The cobbled streets are far from original, but they do add to the atmosphere. It is a steep climb to the famous Plains of Abraham, where the epic battle that ended French control of eastern Canada was fought. The British may have won control, but they never conquered the spirit of the French, a spirit that predominates through all eastern Canada even today. Major cities like Montreal and Quebec may as well be situated in metropolitan France. French is the dominant language, so much so that we have come across people whose English is very much a secondary language and, in some cases, a few older people we encountered struggled to engage in English conversation.

The strategic location of Quebec at a narrow passage on the St Laurence River led the British to build a substantial defensive citadel which still stands. Today the citadel is an operational Canadian Army base, but it can be visited on





guided tours.

We had been told that Quebec was the place to experience the famous Canadian “delicacy” of poutine. We found ourselves a nice little café that offered an array of poutine dishes with all sorts of toppings. We elected to go with the “classic” poutine which is simply French fries, cheese curd and gravy. Not to put too fine a point on it, it was disgusting! Both of us compared the dish to a favourite of students in our university days. Chips with gravy. The chips with gravy won hands down.

12 June, Montreal

Miserable morning yesterday, so we decided to do a couple of indoor activities. The history of Quebec reaches back over 400 years. The first settlement was established in 1608. Over the centuries, multiple forts and castles were built on the site. Beneath the current boardwalk in front of Frontenac Chateau, we took an interesting tour of the ruins of the castle as it was in the mid 19th century. More than a million artefacts were discovered during the archaeological excavations, mainly in the latrines, which were also used as rubbish dumps.

As the rain picked up, we headed off to the Musee de Beaux Arts de Quebec. It was a long, wet walk and sadly, not worth the effort.

The long walk back to the centre of the old city took us to the Museum de la Civilisation, a much more rewarding experience.

Today, our last full day on the road, we once again followed local roads through small communities with historical links to the St Laurence River.

We return the car tomorrow and fly out from Montreal airport, so we had booked a hotel close to the airport. The traffic getting into Montreal was simply horrible and so was our hotel



which was not at all reflective of the excellent accommodation we experienced throughout our trip.

9 July Home – Canada Review

It is now some weeks since our return from Canada. The gap in this blog is due to a trip to Japan for 10 days with our grandson, Henry and a beach holiday at Pottsville with the grandkids.

This was our third trip to Canada, not our longest, but probably our most extensive. We achieved an ambition to cross Canada from west to east and to do the extended Via Rail trip from Saskatoon to Montreal. Combined with previous trips, we can now claim an overland crossing of the second largest country in the world.

To state the obvious, Canada is massive, but most of the population lives within a hundred kilometres of the US border. On an earlier trip we drove from Alaska south to the US border and experienced some of what we might call the Canadian “outback,” but there is still a lot of Canada out there left to explore.

Travelling in Canada is fairly stress free. Main highways are well maintained and driving is easy. Some secondary roads however are extremely poorly maintained, narrow and potholed, which is a shame, because it is on these minor roads where some truly beautiful little communities can be discovered.

We found prices much on a par with Australia, though some of the entry fees to museums and other attractions were exorbitant. People were universally welcoming and friendly and the underlying culture is similar to what we experience at home.



