

Holiday Shopping Vancouver Style

By C. Nicki Krom



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On a recent chilly Friday night, I braved the Peace Arch border crossing for a weekend of marathon holiday shopping.

Luckily, the customs gods were watching over me: The border was quiet at 7:30 p.m., and I crossed without a wait.

Though some may call it frivolous, I look forward to shopping trips in Vancouver, B.C.. With fewer malls and more street-level boutiques, this sophisticated city offers more in the way of distinctive gifts than many metropolitan areas. Plus, though not what it used to be, the exchange rate works to benefit stateside shoppers.

As I adjusted from miles to kilometers, I created a mental shopping strategy. From small-town boutiques to high-end urban shopping, I wasn't going to miss a thing.

Pulling into Accent Inn's Vancouver Airport hotel at 8:30 p.m., I had the weekend planned.

I chose Accent Inns for one simple reason: the shopaholics package. For \$75 (Canadian), shopping enthusiasts receive a one-night stay and discount coupons for area businesses.

Though few of the coupons caught my interest, a discount at IKEA made the package worth the price, saving me the equivalent of half the cost of my room.

SEASIDE SHOPPING

After a good night's sleep, I strapped on my walking shoes.

Deciding to start small, I drove 10 minutes to Richmond B.C.'s Steveston Village. A seaside town filled with salt-water winds and quaint boutiques, sleepy Steveston eased me into a long day of shopping.

Fueled with caffeine from breakfast at Steveston Coffee Company, I hit the streets.

My first stop, Pieces, specialized in gifts and décor. With Parisian-inspired décor, handcrafted jewelry and the work of Canadian artisans, Pieces was a productive start to a day of shopping.

Next door is Nikaido Gifts. Specializing in Japanese products and teas, the small shop beckons patrons with crisp smells and bright colors. A variety of teas and a kaleidoscope of tea pots cover two walls of the store. Check out the handmade Japanese paper goods.

My last stop in Steveston was Funktion Junktion, "defining the line between funk and junk." The antique-store-cum-coffee-stand carried everything from old buoys and vinyl records to original works by Canadian artists.

Warmed up, I was ready for the mass-produced mayhem of IKEA. Luckily, a new, larger IKEA has opened in nearby Coquitlam, B.C., making Richmond's branch more manageable than in past visits.

If you're in search of inexpensive home items, IKEA is your place, great for basic pieces and for outfitting a first apartment.

WISTFUL WINDOW SHOPPING

Driving downtown, I was grateful for two things: well-lit road signs and grid streets.

Vancouver is not only easy to navigate but it also feels more intimate than its size.

Narrow streets and varied storefronts give shoppers the feeling of a European metropolis. Lost within minutes, I hardly had time to discreetly check a map before a gentleman stopped to ask if I needed directions. Helpful with directions and likely to smile at passers-by, Vancouverites know how to make visitors feel welcome.

Before hitting Robson Street for a bit of wishful window shopping, I stopped at The Gourmet Warehouse on Pandora Street.

For those with a culinary itch, Gourmet Warehouse is a must stop. Specializing in gourmet food and housewares, it offers cooking oils, seasonings, sauces, noodles, chocolates and cooking tools imported from throughout the world.

Driving downtown, I found a parking garage and bundled up for the evening. Vancouver's weather being much like our own, wet and cold, I pulled on a wool coat and grabbed an umbrella.

The walk to Robson Street was slowed by indulging in my retail vices: home furnishings, books and food.

I ducked into Urban Barn, a Vancouver-based home store that reminded me of Anthropologie. Carrying décor motifs covering Parisian to early American diner, Urban Barn was worth a detour.

Chapters, a huge bookstore, broke my stride next. Never managing to escape a bookstore without bags, I added to the day's purchases, treating myself to a new thesaurus and a "Food Lover's Companion."

Feeling the fatigue of a half-day's shopping, I took refuge in The Lennox Pub, conveniently located on the corner of Granville and Robson streets, the starting point for Robson shopping.

After an above-average pub lunch of blackened steak and Caesar salad, my strength was restored. I was off to ogle designer handbags worth the price of my car and jeans priced at more than a month's rent.

Robson Street, nicknamed "The Rodeo Drive of the West" by Vancouverites, is a shopper's paradise.

One of my favorite stops, Lush, is an elaborate bath shop with handcrafted soaps in sinful scents. Five-pound bars of soap in an array of colors are stacked along the walls, while lotions, perfumes and gourmet bath goods fill tables in between.

Another gem for cosmetics lovers is the MAC store. Anyone who's developed a MAC

addiction from Nordstrom counters will be stunned by the selection of makeup and accessories.

For those with less feminine interests, take a break in La Casa Del Habano. With the look and feel of an exclusive men's club, La Casa Del Habano specializes in top-of-the-line cigars. Cigar purchasers are invited to sit and smoke in the VIP lounge. A fresh-brewed cappuccino, hand-rolled cigar and a chess opponent later, you'll feel like you've landed in a Humphrey Bogart film.

Beat after 10 hours of shopping and my first hand-rolled cigar, I was ready to retreat.

My final stop was Saje, a Canada-based company specializing in aromatherapy, to buy an energizing blend of bergamot and grapefruit oils.

With a day's successful shopping and a few people checked off my Christmas list, I drove back to the hotel then crossed the border on Sunday with a smile on my face.

C. Nicki Krom is a freelance writer who will attend graduate school at Western Washington University in 2004.

Shopping districts

Here is a guide to a few of the major shopping areas in Vancouver, B.C.

Pacific Centre, Georgia and Howe streets. With more than 140 shops, this downtown mall offers familiar chains and a number of European- and Canadian-based clothiers. For one-stop shopping, this is a great place to start.

Commercial Drive, from Hastings Street to Broadway. The antithesis of a mall, Commercial Drive offers funky, ethnic boutiques too cluttered for manicured-mall standards. Boasting alternative home-design shops, a bevy of ethnic restaurants and vintage clothiers, Commercial Drive captures the imagination and effortlessly pries open the wallet.

Robson Street west of Granville Street. For a bit of wishful window shopping, tour the three blocks between Hornby and Bute streets on Robson. Nicknamed the "Rodeo Drive of the West" by Vancouverites, Robson Street offers Armani Exchange and Ferragamo on the same street as Levi's and the Gap.

Yaletown, mostly on Mainland and Hamilton streets. The up-and-coming shopping hotspot, Yaletown is quickly gaining a reputation for variety. With high-end boutiques, specialty bookstores, restaurants and furniture shops, Yaletown is arguably the trendiest place in town. Though the prices are a bit steeper in this neighborhood, the shopping experience is varied and pleasant.

Chinatown, east and west of Main Street on Keefer and Pender streets. The sweet smells of ginger and incense fill city streets lined with Chinese herbalists, authentic restaurants and décor imports. The second largest market of its kind in North America, Vancouver's Chinatown is an interesting place to lose a couple of hours.

Granville Island, take the Granville Street bridge. Easiest access off Burrard Street on Second Ave. The best in lazy-day shopping, Granville Island offers consumers interesting fare with a side of people-watching and live music. The former industrial district of Vancouver, Granville Island is an impressive mix of factory facades and delicate artisan shops. With a large farmers and flower market, Granville Island is frequented by locals as well as tourists.

Dollars and cents

All British Columbia purchases include an additional Goods and Services Tax. Depending on the size of the purchase, the tax can be refundable (excluding meals and gas) for visiting shoppers. The refund can be collected at the border or mailed in from home. Keep your receipts. For additional information on GST refunds, visit: www.ccra-adrc.gc.ca/visitors/. For up-to-date information on exchange rates, check with local banks or go to www.x-rates.com/calculator.html.

HERALD FILE PHOTO

Vancouver, B.C., skyline.

MICKY JONES PHOTO

Vancouver's Chinatown

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