

Victorian secret

British Columbia's capital rolls out a red carpet for the holidays

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Victoria's Parliament Buildings glow with holiday spirit.

([Coastal Living](#)) -- Beautiful and welcoming, Victoria, British Columbia, sparkles with Christmas color and spirit. The capital city's Parliament Buildings, outlined all year in sedate white lights, glow with well-placed green and red bulbs this season. Wreaths adorn Tally Ho's horse-drawn carriages, and Santa hats keep drivers warm. In the mood for giving, Harbour Ferry skippers donate their weekend fares to charity.

With summer and fall crowds gone, winter becomes more of a residents' season and the weather -- never very cold -- encourages getting out and about. To join in, you can immerse yourself in the venerable Fairmont Empress Hotel and its traditions. There, you half expect the Sugarplum Fairy to come leaping down the hallway past dozens of 15-foot-tall, uniquely decorated trees.

Whether or not you stay at the Empress, don't miss the hotel's afternoon tea. "It's not Christmas for my family till we've had tea at the Empress," says Vancouver native Amber Fiddler.

According to legend, England's Duchess of Bedford invented the idea of afternoon tea to get through the day's "peckish period." It's enjoyed today by multigenerational local families, clusters of little girls in their Sunday best, couples snuggling by the fireplace and tourists (usually woefully underdressed) chattering away the afternoon.

If the Empress exudes old-world charm, the Delta Victoria Ocean Pointe Resort and Spa across the city's Inner Harbour personifies contemporary warmth. The stylish hotel has been ranked as one of the best places to stay in the world, but that heady compliment doesn't keep it from welcoming families -- and their dogs. Kids and canines receive a complimentary gift basket at check-in, and there's evening story time for children and pets in front of the lobby fireplace, complete with milk and freshly baked cookies delivered by the hotel chef.

Adults are hardly neglected at the Delta. The Spa will pamper you into oblivion: Try a seaweed body wrap, or get your toes painted in a decidedly Canadian color, perhaps "You Ottawear Purple." And in a harbor-view room, you can fall asleep with the curtains open to frame Parliament's glittery nighttime scene.

From any downtown Victoria hotel, walk to scads of shops and restaurants. On Government Street, shopping central, The Spirit of Christmas shows off two stories of ornaments and decorations year-round. You'll find sure-to-please sweets at Rogers' Chocolate Shop. Your sense of smell will direct you to LUSH Cosmetics, an irreverent soap, lotion, and potion boutique that has eggnog lip balm, bath balls, and other festive gifts.

A short walk away lies Johnson Street, with locally popular shops such as Narnia Farms for natural home and bath products and toiletries, and Urban Accents for gorgeous sari-fabric curtains and pillows.

Though not a large city (population barely more than 74,000), Victoria has North America's second-highest number of restaurants per capita. Nearly limitless dining choices include English and Irish pubs, Chinese dim sum parlors, seafood cafes, cozy bistros and fine nouvelle-cuisine dining rooms.

Il Terrazzo Ristorante has been voted Victoria's best Italian restaurant for many years. The Elephant and Castle serves a hearty shepherd's pie and more types of beer than you could hope to sample. At Nautical Nellies, you can dine on local seafood. The restaurant's waterfront vista makes Nellies a nostalgic place to end your holiday visit: Look out to Victoria Harbour, ablaze with light, and listen for the clop-clop, jingle-jingle of a Tally Ho horse-drawn carriage rounding the corner.