



Beautiful Beacon Hill Park in Victoria covers 200 acres. The crowning jewel in Victoria's park system offers natural areas, walking paths, sports facilities and even a petting zoo.

ARRIVALS

VICTORIA IS CANADA'S URBAN PLAYGROUND FOR FAMILIES

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

While inspecting the eerily lifelike sea lions beached on the craggy rocks of the Royal B.C. Museum's seashore display, I hear my daughter's voice boom, "Mama, can I help clean the skeletons?"

She's quivering with excitement, and the father-daughter taxidermist team manning the station are thrilled with her enthusiasm. We spend an hour here, scraping dust off tiny squirrel bones with a toothbrush, asking myriad questions about taxidermy and learning how the museum uses live beetles to remove residual flesh from its bird and mammal skeleton collection. Travelling with kids is never boring, and if you pick the right destination, it's an absolute joy. Victoria, on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, is a cultural wonderland bursting with cool historical and eco-focused activities for kids.

The bonus? A temperate coastal climate that allows for year-round outdoor fun. After four days exploring museums, galleries and perfectly manicured parks, the City of Gardens has earned our family's vote for top urban playground in Canada. From bugs, bicycles and baby goats to royal teas and taxidermy, Victoria's adventures are infinite.

B.C. ROYAL MUSEUM

Although the taxidermist station isn't a permanent feature, the Royal B.C. Museum still maintains its status as one of Victoria's most iconic attractions.

After two hours touring the wildlife and ecosystems in the natural history gallery, we stepped back in time to learn about B.C.'s First Nations. The totem poles, carvings, beadwork, masks, blankets and artifacts displayed here are awe-inspiring. My daughter was mesmerized by the intricate artwork and towering poles in Totem Hall, and she loved learning about how the ancient coastal communities lived. We then moved on to the modern history gallery to explore the cobblestone streets of turn-of-the-century Victoria and captain the full-scale replica of the HMS Discovery. Sadly, we missed out on the museum's newest exhibition: Egypt, Time of the Pharaohs, which is now open and welcoming visitors through the end of 2018.

FAMILY BICYCLE TOUR

Although Victoria is super pedestrian friendly, a guided bike tour is a unique way to uncover some of the city's more eclectic neighbourhoods.

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IF YOU GO

Late spring and early fall are my favourite times of year to visit Victoria. Crowds are much smaller, and the weather is usually a comfortable temperature. The Fairmont Empress, in the inner harbour, is ideal for families wanting to explore the city on foot. Last year the property underwent an extensive renovation, which included the lobby, restaurants, guest rooms and spa. The new pool area, where we spent most evenings after supper, is absolutely stunning. You'll also find two rental car companies directly behind the hotel, for day trips to explore farther afield. Check Fairmont.com for special room savings, including CAA rates of up to 25 per cent off. For more destination information visit www.arrivalstravel.com

Pedaler Cycling Tours, in the inner harbour, offers private sightseeing excursions for families. The two-hour route is tailored to the abilities and needs of your children, and as our kiddo isn't a confident rider, we pulled her in a trailer. Highlights included visiting the charming shops and restaurants at Fisherman's Wharf, feeding the baby goats at Beacon Hill Park, and watching the kite flyers at Clover Point Park. Afterwards, we wandered over to Nourish Kitchen for a wholesome lunch in a beautiful James Bay heritage house. Insider tip: order the Sleeping Beauty whole oat pancakes, served with fruit compote, organic whipped cream and bee pollen sprinkles. You're welcome.

VICTORIA BUG ZOO

In an attempt to quash my fears, I tiptoed to the Victoria Bug Zoo's first exhibit, of elegant stick insects camouflaged by foliage. Unfortunately, the colossal,



The writer's six-year-old daughter snaps photos of the Parliament Buildings.

hairy tarantula in the neighbouring tank caught my eye and it was simply too much for my acute arachnophobia to handle. So, I sat at the entrance while my husband and daughter gawked over the creepy crawly residents.

It's no surprise that kids absolutely love this place. The staff are highly knowledgeable and passionate about the zoo's 40-plus species of insects, which include everything from tropical bugs and praying mantises to glow-in-the-dark scorpions. Adventurous visitors can even hold some of the friendlier creatures. To temper my post-zoo nerves, we walked to 10 Acres Bistro for Happy Hour. It's amazing how calming a craft cocktail and charcuterie board can be.

PRINCESS TEA

We celebrated our daughter's sixth birthday with a Princess Tea party in the elegant Lobby Lounge of the Fairmont Empress. The glamorous experience includes a tiara (or prince's crown for boys), a pot of fruit-infused herbal tea and a tiered tray filled with goodies.

While my husband and I enjoyed the traditional Tea at the Empress, our birthday girl nibbled on a pint-sized menu of honey ham and cheese and organic peanut butter and jelly finger sandwiches, a mini raisin scone with clotted cream, and a decadent selection of mini

ity goggles for the immersive 360-degree video showcasing the connection between art and nature. The centre's birdsong gallery, which features audio clips of bird calls for each painting's primary subject, is also a hit with little ones.

After touring the galleries, we joined one of the centre's Nature Sketch Club artists for a drawing session in Beacon Hill Park.

ISLAND ROAD TRIP

If you have the time, book a car and take a road trip to Butchart Gardens to tour the magical 55-acre spectacle.

We gave our daughter an old point-and-shoot digital camera for her birthday and she spent an hour taking macro shots of flowers in the lush, fragrant sunken garden. We finally lured her away with the promise of riding the Rose Carousel.

From Butchart, we drove further north to the Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea in Sidney to discover the mysterious underwater world of the Pacific Ocean. Cool features include the floor-to-ceiling aquarium tanks, killer whale skeleton and hands-on tide pools. We lucked out with timing and were able to watch the giant Pacific octopus receive its weekly feeding.

Before returning to Victoria, take the kids across the street to Mineral World & The Scratch Pad to search for gemstones. The cost to fill a small bag is just \$6.

sweet treats. As she adored every aspect, we've promised to make it an annual birthday tradition — although maybe at a Fairmont property closer to home.

THE ROBERT BATEMAN CENTRE

The collection of one of Canada's most treasured artists is beautifully displayed at The Robert Bateman Centre. It's exceedingly family-friendly and, upon entry, children are given a scavenger hunt to facilitate exploring Bateman's work.

We especially enjoyed donning the centre's virtual real-

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