

# Creature Comforts

Amazing animals and luxury accommodation come together in a weekend excursion to Vancouver. BY ROBERT MOYES

**DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER IS WELL-KNOWN FOR SATISFYING** the appetites of hungry diners, energetic shoppers and exacting hotel guests. And most visitors know that animal lovers can also explore their interests by taking a quick stroll to the Vancouver Aquarium in Stanley Park.

But people who just can't get enough of animal encounters — and especially those who sometimes find themselves at marinas, gawking at the seals that hang around in hopes of a handout — might be surprised and delighted to know that a hands-on nature experience awaits, within mere blocks of the city's upscale stores and boutique hotels.

The Vancouver Aquarium has a special program that allows for up-close encounters with large marine mammals including sea lions, turtles, sea otters, dolphins and beluga whales (the beluga encounters are on hold until the fall due to the recent birth of a baby beluga). These "face-to-fin" meetings are preceded by an extensive behind-the-scenes session with Aquarium trainers, an educational component that deepens the thrill of interacting with these magnificent wild creatures.

"These are once-in-a-lifetime experiences," says Kent Hurl, public relations coordinator for the Aquarium. "Some locals will buy it as a birthday gift. And there are many out-of-towners who come because their home town doesn't offer this kind of opportunity." The turtle, sea otter and sea lion encounters cost \$25 to \$35, take 45 minutes, and are close-up but not always hands-on. The deluxe



encounter, which takes place poolside with the quartet of Pacific white-sided dolphins, is a splashy, interactive affair where you hand out dolphin snacks and get up close and personal enough with these charismatic acrobats that you can tickle their chins and smell their mackerel breath. A dolphin drop-in isn't cheap at \$195, but the session lasts 90 minutes and includes a take-home CD of digital photos that you will really treasure. (The beluga encounter, similarly intimate, costs \$150.)

After your encounter, there is a lot left to see and do at the Aquarium. Everybody wants to visit the new baby beluga, which at press time still hadn't been named. In order to facilitate mother-daughter bonding, Qila and her baby have been left in the main pool while the other belugas have been temporarily relocated to other tanks. Even as early as mid-morning there's a big crowd watching as this mother-daughter team glides through the water. It's fascinating to watch how the baby

*Above: The Vancouver Aquarium's "Trainer Tours" allow visitors to get face-to-fin with a variety of sea mammals.*

PHOTO BY JOHN HEALEY



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closely mimics her mother's aquatics. With their white colour and bulging foreheads — referred to as "the melon" — these Arctic whales have a serene charisma, a quality that is even more apparent in the underwater viewing area, which is dimly lit and respectfully quiet.

Downstairs don't miss the Frogs Forever? exhibit, which highlights the peril currently facing these funky amphibians. Nearby, a massive tank filled with everything from sturgeon to starfish reflects what a scuba diver encounters in Howe Sound. And just past the jewelled fish darting about in The Tropic Zone is the immersive world of The Amazon Rainforest, a relatively recent addition. It's easy to see why this aquarium attracts a million visitors annually.

"These animals are ambassadors for their counterparts in the wild," says Hurl. "Our hope is that visitors — and especially children — will feel a connection with the natural world and become life-long animal lovers," he adds. "Fostering a commitment to conservation is one of our major goals at the Aquarium."

After a hard day of tossing herring snacks to the dolphins, it's time to meander back to cosmopolitan downtown Vancouver where you can pamper your own sweet self. When you've had your fill of shopping, people-watching and latte-sipping along Robson Street, Vancouver's newest boutique

hotel, L'Hermitage, offers some great R&R. With just 60 elegant suites, L'Hermitage has no trouble at all being elite and discreet. Located at the corner of Richards and Robson, L'Hermitage has gracious staff with a mandate to pamper the guests.

Silent elevators whisk you upstairs to spacious rooms finished in a restful palette of taupe and wheat. Relax by reading a book borrowed from the library or flip on the HD-TV with its full range of digital satellite program options. The elegant bathroom is a hedonistic retreat, outfitted with a marble floor, a tub deep enough to luxuriate in, and a glass-walled shower. And the king-size bed, dressed with sensuous bed linens and fluffy pillows, offers the prospect of a perfect night's rest.

Down the hall on the fifth floor is a large communal balcony overlooking the Garden Patio with its green-tiled lap pool. Surrounded by downtown skyscrapers, this sunny oasis with its wooden benches and potted flowers is made even more restful by the serene water sounds emanating from the pool. Other amenities include the state-of-the-art fitness centre complete with steam room and Jacuzzi.

Of particular interest is the executive concierge room, L'Orangerie, an atrium lounge where you can enjoy both a



complimentary European-style continental breakfast as well as hors d'oeuvres later in the afternoon. These delectable foods — including rosemary-scented ham, savoury tarts, artisan breads and seasonal fruits — are locally sourced. A food and beverage menu is also available here from 2 PM until 9 PM, with this spacious, relaxing room favouring a soundtrack of non-commercial jazz from the personal collection of the concierge. Visitors agree that L'Hermitage, with its knack for offering classic comfort with a modern twist, represents an unforgettable getaway. So if you come to Vancouver for an adventure with animals, don't forget about the creature comforts that await you at the city's newest adventure in luxury.



Opposite: Participants in the Beluga Encounter programs get some "face time" with these amazing creatures at the Vancouver Aquarium. PHOTO BY NOEL HENDRICKSON  
Above: After a day filled with marine mammal adventures, consider switching gears with a stylish urban experience at L'Hermitage, Vancouver's newest boutique hotel. Enjoy hors d'oeuvres in the atrium lounge, and then tuck yourself into a plush king-sized bed in one of the hotel's 60 luxurious rooms.

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