

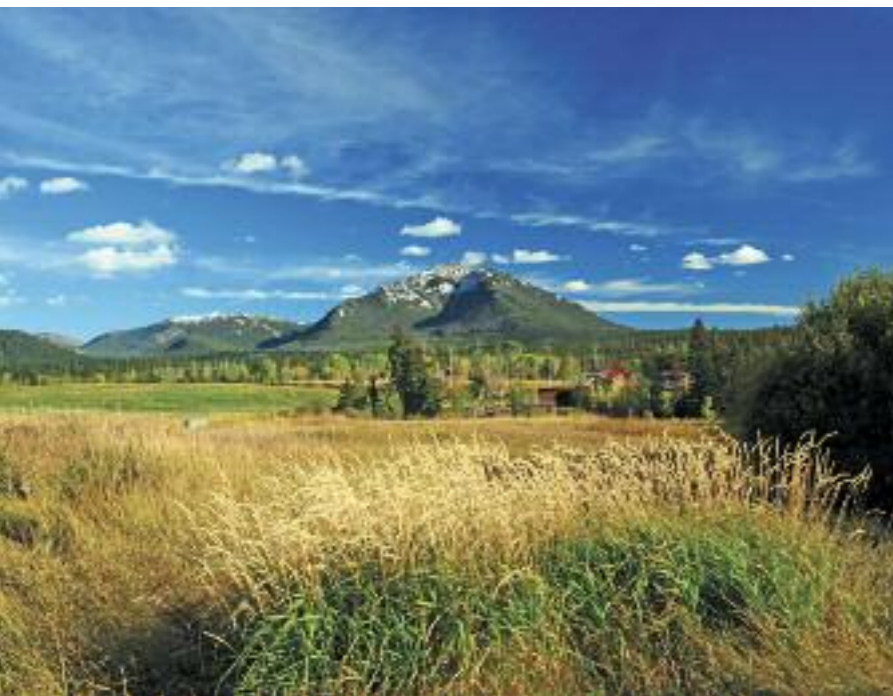
Canadian contrasts

On Canada's west coast, British Columbia combines city chic and untamed landscapes. In the first instalment of a two-part feature, **Norman Wright** enjoys its diverse delights

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

Zooming around Howe Sound with
Sewell's Marina Sea Safari ▶





Typical British Columbia scenery - simply stunning

Top left: Just a dusting of snow on the mountain tops at Echo Valley ranch; what a fabulous place to relax and enjoy the mountain air

Bottom left: Lunch at Echo Valley Ranch looked better than the chuck wagon from all those western movies

IT COULD have been a scene from a Hemingway short story as a small group of riders picked their way carefully past the ranch buildings on to the trail down towards the Fraser River.

The mountains in the middle distance were dusted with the first snows of autumn and their peaks were reflected in the mirror water of the ponds where two anglers were trying to tempt the rainbow trout.

Taking in the clear, pure air of this remote valley in British Columbia – one-time hideout of fugitives pursued by the Mounties – was the latest of the very

diverse aspects of the Canadian province we were able to discover all within a couple of days' drive.

We went from the urban landscape of Vancouver to zooming around Howe Sound in an RBI boat to wonder at the sheer magnificence of the coast and islands just out of sight of the city skyline. Then, leaving the city tower blocks behind, we found nature's skyscrapers as we walked among the treetops of mighty forests of larch and Douglas firs.

Back to sophistication, we lunched with both spectacular food and views, overlooking a wide valley of vineyards, before just missing a

marauding bear who had been sampling the soon to be harvested grapes.

Finally, it was a winding climb and a drive above the snowline on a high pass through the mountains as autumn gave warning of the coming winter.

Civilised, friendly and chic, yet savage and wild, too – that's British Columbia. One day you can eat fabulous nouvelle cuisine, the next gaze around at snowy peaks from the foot of a waterfall cascading hundreds of feet.

After tasting some seriously fine BC wine, a few hours later you might catch a glimpse of a lynx in the

craggy forested domain of the bear and the mountain lion. And that wasn't the half of it.

Although the portents of winter were there in crisper mornings and the first tinges of colour as leaves started to turn, the end of September proved to be an excellent time to visit with plenty of sun and a flurry or two of snow if you ventured high enough.

As our aircraft manoeuvred for landing, Vancouver was bathed in light, and all around it was a stunning seascape with a backdrop of mountains stretching away as far as you could see even from that height.

The city, with a population of two million, is



Coming out of Horseshoe Bay and into Howe Sound. A stunning coastline is studded with homes with million dollar views

Right: Enjoying a coffee break at Granville Island's indoor market

Below: Some of the fabulous produce at Granville Island markets



perched between sea and mountains on Canada's west coast. Across the sound is Vancouver Island and the provincial capital of Victoria. A few miles to the south is the USA border, the forests of Washington State and the city of Seattle. Hawaii, a six-hour flight heading south-west over the Pacific Ocean, is as close as Canada's eastern shores.

Our introduction to the outdoors spirit of British Columbia started right away as we were plucked from the luxury of the Fairmont Hotel in downtown Vancouver and driven through the beautiful Stanley Park and across the landmark Lion's Gate Bridge to

West Vancouver and the harbour at Horseshoe Bay, which fishing boats and car ferries to the islands share with recreational craft.

Londoner Dan Sewell came to Horseshoe Bay in 1931 attracted by the fishing. He built boats, hired them out created a marina and generally put the little community on the map. Bing Crosby and Roy Rogers were among the many Hollywood stars who came to enjoy fishing around the islands of Howe Sound.

Now, with the fourth generation of Sewells running the marina, you can hire speedboats, take

fishing expeditions or climb aboard the inflatable, hold on tight and enjoy a two-hour sea safari.

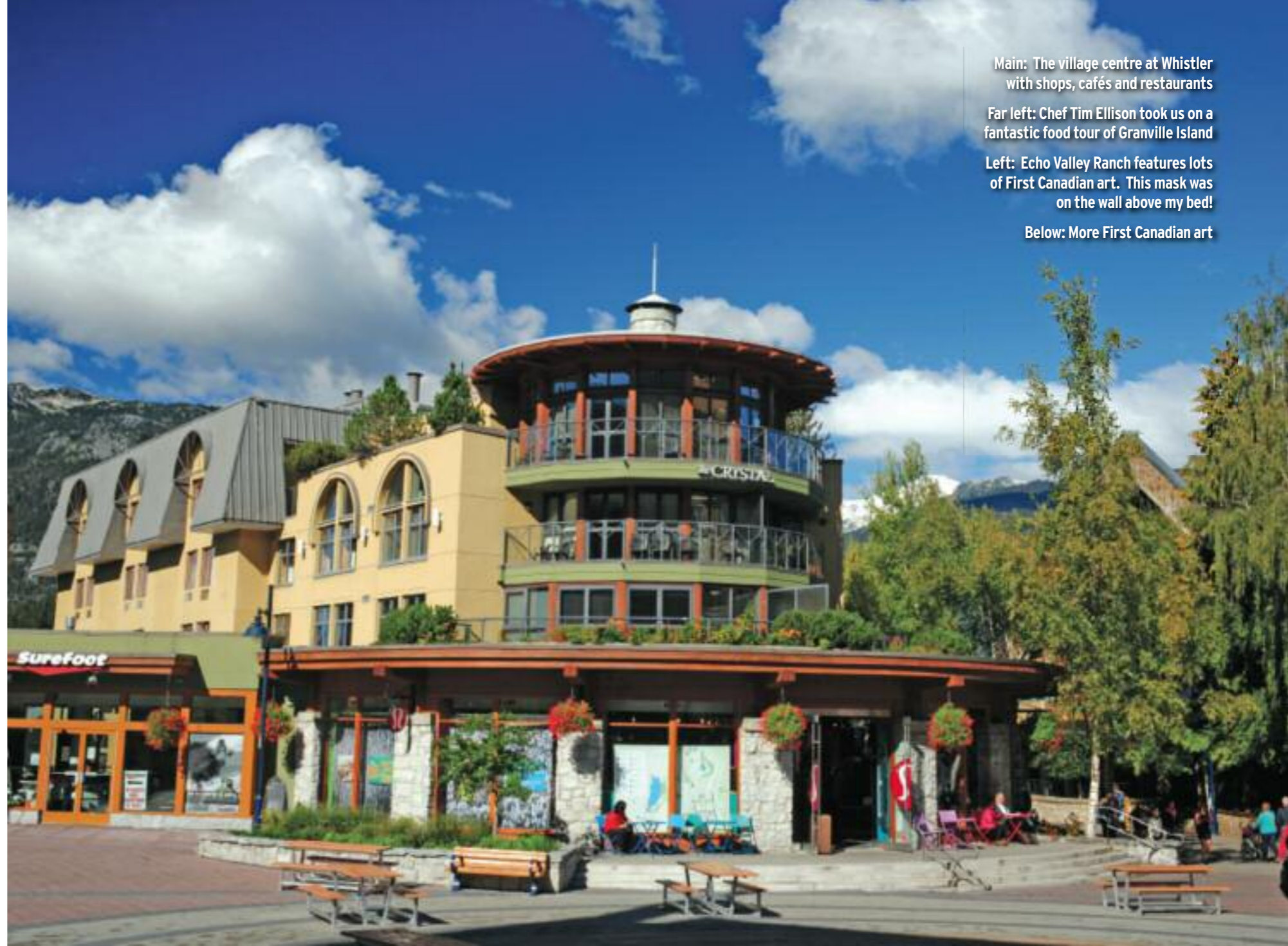
Your trip starts gently as the craft noses, albeit briskly, around the headlands and past some of the fabulous millionaire homes perched above.

Then the twin outboards roar and the boat simply takes off on a wash of white, churning water. We head around Bowens Island, the biggest of several we will visit. The pilot swoops us past some amazing scenery, then slows so we can admire the wider vistas across the water. He ramps up the thrills by performing high-speed 'doughnuts' in ever-decreasing circles so

the boat is riding on its own wake. Then we idle past seal colonies, basking on tiny rock islands. Close in to the mainland we find the waters of a small creek tumbling down the rocks into the sea. Salmon circle the pool at the foot of the narrow creek trying to find a way up into the freshwater stream to breed. It looked an impossible task.

The city, only a few minutes away, couldn't be more different. It is clean, young and busy, so you can enjoy its shops and modern restaurants but also find some traditional corners that remind you of its past.

Granville Island is one of these places that



Main: The village centre at Whistler with shops, cafés and restaurants
 Far left: Chef Tim Ellison took us on a fantastic food tour of Granville Island
 Left: Echo Valley Ranch features lots of First Canadian art. This mask was on the wall above my bed!
 Below: More First Canadian art

shouldn't be missed. In fact, Granville was the little mill town that was renamed Vancouver in 1886 when the Canadian Pacific Railway arrived. The island was created from two sandbanks by adding spoil from dredging False Creek to allow larger vessels into the heart of the growing city. A bridge crosses the narrow channel to the city.

At first, it was industrial; now only a concrete production unit remains. The rest is a celebration of food, drink and the arts. The fishing fleet lands its catch here so there are smoke houses, tanks of lobsters, oysters, octopus and prawns. The industrial

sheds, which once house sawmills and factories making barrels, chains, ropes, nails and paint, have been converted to an incredible indoor market featuring a display of fruit, vegetables, meat, cheese, fish, bakery, species, herbs – an exotic array of top-class food.

In and around the quayside are art galleries, craft shops and stalls, cafés and restaurants.

If you love food, this is the place to come. Tim Ellison certainly loves food and wine. He was born and brought up in the area and after a career as a chef, caterer and sommelier is now a director of the

Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts which is based at the entrance to the island.

Tim is one of the chefs who take parties on a walking tour of the island. He tells you the history of the place as well as introducing you to the delights of the market, with tips on preparing and using the ingredients that cascade from the market tables.

At the end of the 90-minute tour, Tim commandeers a table at a café, whips a crisp white cloth from a bag he has been carrying and creates a snack on china plates from items bought in the market. We sampled some superb smoked salmon

and goat's cheese and caramelised onion wrapped in a roll of prosciutto ham.

Better was to follow when we lunched at the institute's restaurant, Bistro 101. The organisation is a professional cooking and baking school and the Bistro and the coffee shop, Bakery 101, are staffed by students, whom you can see cooking through picture windows.

This is the place to lunch: we enjoyed dishes like green tea poached octopus, Pacific salmon with grilled vegetable chutney and poached pears with blackberry strudel. A three-course gourmet meal

A Vancouver Aquabus arrives to ferry us around town

Right: White water on a mountain river as we drive on from Whistler towards Clinton and the remote Echo Valley Ranch and Spa

Bottom right: Bakery students at the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts in Vancouver show they could give Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood a run for their money



◀ served by very attentive students doing their front-of-house training cost the equivalent of just £11.

We took a leisurely trip back along False Creek on a Rainbow Aquabus back to downtown.

There's no doubt you could spend a whole holiday in and around Vancouver itself but we wanted to look further inland so we drove back almost to Horseshoe Bay and picked up the intriguingly named Sea to Sky Highway and, climbing higher and higher into the Coastal Mountains, headed for the Winter Olympic village of Whistler.

It's a beautiful and easy drive of less than two hours.

“Leaving the city tower blocks behind, we found nature’s skyscrapers as we walked among the treetops of mighty forests of larch and Douglas firs”

Winter sports are the principal attractions in season but the resort, with hotels, lodges, shops and restaurants, has lots to offer in the summer.

There are hundreds of walking routes and organised treks as well as plenty for the thrill-seeker. Several companies offer zip line adventures where you plunge, attached to a harness, down a steel cable

through the trees. We took the gentler option of a Tree Trek, a wonderful 90-minute tour along wooden walkways suspended among the tops of giant pines. The minibus took us up to the start-point alongside the Olympic bobsleigh run and the route was mainly downwards. There are a few steps up and down but it was pretty easy going. Our guide explained what we were seeing in just the right amount of detail.

The Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre at Whistler demonstrates the art, culture and history of these two First Canadian Nations. We explored here in the clear mountain air and then strolled around the

village and had a coffee in the Olympic Plaza where the opening and closing ceremonies were held.

After a night in Whistler we set off further into the mountains heading for Echo Valley Ranch and Spa.

We didn't realise just how remote this valley was. The last 20 miles or so are along a gravel road through forest and some grassy valleys where the cattle graze freely. We caught a rare glimpse of a lynx on this drive. At first we thought it was a small deer but the distinctive light colouring and long back legs confirmed it was one of these wild cats.

The nearest town is Clinton, once a hideout for

Magnificent peak of the Coastal Mountains on the way up the Sea to Sky Highway to Whistler

Right: Treetop trek at Whistler. The walkways around the tops of Douglas firs and larch are easy walking and there are zip line runs if you are adventurous



“Taking in the clear, pure air of this remote valley – one-time hideout of fugitives pursued by the Mounties – was the latest of the very diverse aspects of the Canadian province we were able to discover”

outlaws on the run from the Mounties. Rumour is there are still some bad 'uns in the forest cabins and remote valleys.

The Echo Valley Ranch is an amalgam of west, east and... Essex. The first voice we heard was Sharon, the receptionist from Southend, and the next person was her husband, who is the wrangler at the ranch, looking after the horses and taking customers out on treks.

The eastern influence is from co-owner Nan, who is Thai and founded the resort with her husband Norm. Thais staff the spa and cook a

Thai feast every week. The resort can sleep up to 40 people but usually around 24 are in residence. The food is produced by a professional chef and is eaten around a large table.

Guests can ride, fish (we were the two anglers mentioned earlier – the trout weren't biting), walk, pan for gold and relax with a range of beauty and spa treatments.

It's a peaceful place to chill out and take a walk accompanied by the ranch's collection of free-ranging sheep dogs.

A couple of days there and you could easily

imagine yourself as a backwoodsman. Great food and wine, a comfortable lodge bed and the spa pool rather put an end to that daydream.

After the ranch we headed through a desert to sample great wine, just missed meeting a bear in a vineyard, and enjoyed food supplied by an Indian family from Southampton and an Italian coffee expert from Essex.

All will be revealed in part two of this feature next month, as well as more stunning British Columbia scenery.



Passport to British Columbia

Getting there

■ Air Transat run services from Gatwick, Manchester or Glasgow to Vancouver, flight time around ten hours from Gatwick. It is a low cost airline but the service levels are excellent. Reservations, tel: 020 7616 9187, website: (www.airtransat.co.uk).

Where to stay

■ In Vancouver we stayed at the Fairmont Hotel. Tel: 001 604 684 3131, website: (www.fairmont.com/hotelvancouver)
 ■ In Whistler we were at the village centre Hilton Resort and Spa. Tel: 001 604 932 1982, website: (www.hiltonwhistler.com)
 ■ Echo Valley Ranch and Spa is in cowboy country above the Fraser River in the Cariboo Region, tel: 001 250 459 2386,

website: (www.evranch.com).

Where to eat

■ Bistro 101 at the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts is a must - a three course gourmet lunch for just £11. The institute also runs tours of Granville Island. Tel: 001 604 734 0101, website: (www.bistro101.com).

Find out more

■ Sewell's Marina Sea Safari tours, tel: 001 604 921 3474, website: (www.sewellsmarina.com)
 ■ Tree Trek Eco Tour at Whistler, tel: 001 604 935 0001, website: (www.ziptrek.com)
 ■ Destination British Columbia: (www.BritishColumbia.travel)
 ■ Tourism Vancouver: (www.tourismvancouver.com)
 ■ Tourism Whistler: (www.tourismwhistler.com).