

THE SOARING OF THE IMAGINATION:

Day Trips to Remember

By Belinda Bruce

"I fly because it releases my mind from the tyranny of petty things"

—Antoine de Saint Exupéry

I'LL NEVER FORGET my first flight on a seaplane. It was a balmy July day in 1993 and I was visiting British Columbia for the first time. On the morning I left Toronto was already on its way to a sweltering day, the sticky heat assaulting every crevice and pore. I looked forward to the legendary coastal breezes and walking around without my shirt glued to my back.

I was headed to Pender Island to meet my friend, Heidi, who had taken a summer job at Bedwell Harbour Resort. A native of Salt Spring Island, Heidi knew her way around the coast and had promised to be my personal tour guide.

From Vancouver International Airport, I took a shuttle bus directly to the terminal at Coal Harbour. The waterfront docks rippled with West Coast charm, from the criss-crossing boardwalks and rustic fishing boats to the white seaplanes coasting in and out like a fleet of swans. I followed the pilot to a Harbour Air Single Otter aircraft and climbed inside, excited by my choice to travel by seaplane rather than ferry.

There were only three passengers for the trip; to my astonishment, the other two were iconic Haida artist Bill Reid and his daughter. As we pulled away from the dock, they exchanged friendly banter with the pilot and I sensed that they had made this journey many times before. The thrill of the take-off alone made the trip worthwhile: effortless speed, sprays of water whooshing beside the plane, and then the dramatic lift into the air.

The picture-postcard scenery was exactly as I had imagined: stunning vistas of indigo mountains, endless deciduous trees, biblical blue skies and the white triangles of sailboats gliding over the sun-dappled ocean. As we coasted into Bedwell Harbour, dusk cast blue shadows over the docks and resort buildings, and a seal



(Sarah Needley)

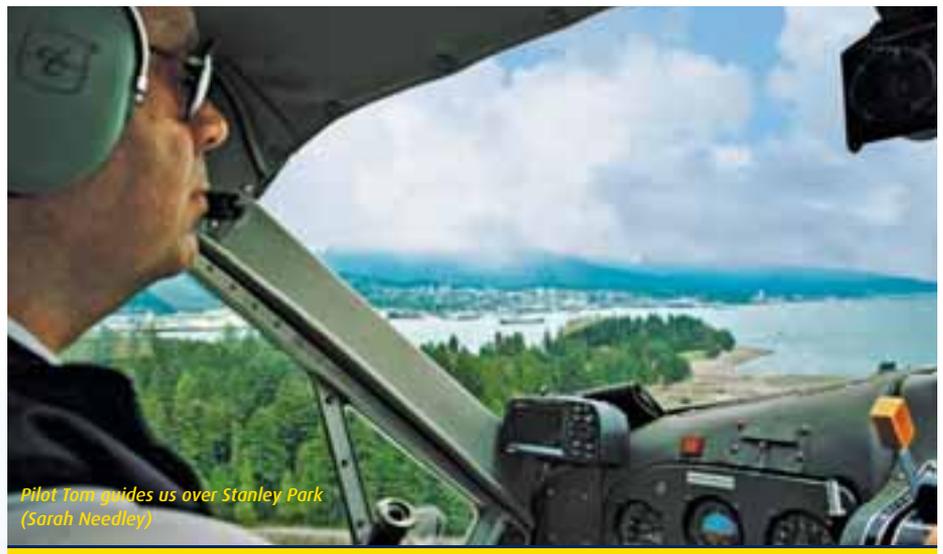
poked its head out of the water—the perfect punctuation mark on a remarkable day. And it had taken less than a half hour! Even Heidi was impressed by my swift and stylish arrival; she may have been an island girl, but she had never flown on a seaplane.

My first experience of the coast couldn't have been more spectacular.

VANCOUVER HAS BEEN MY HOME for seven years now, and yet, I feel as if I have barely explored its contours. Being from the flat landscape of southwestern Ontario, I am still dazzled by the sight of the North Shore mountains at my doorstep, but lack a true sense of the coastal geography and heritage. When a friend from Montreal called to say he would be visiting Vancouver with only one day for sightseeing, a snapshot of my dramatic introduction to the province floated up in my mind. I thought, what could be a more quintessentially West Coast experience for him, and a perfect way for me to fill in the gaps in my knowledge, than a 'flightseeing' tour?

Jean-Pierre eagerly agreed. We booked Harbour Air's Vancouver Panoramic tour, with our own added twist. This breathtaking, 20-minute flight circles the city and surrounding mountains, providing irrefutable proof of Vancouver's ranking, for the fourth year in a row, as the world's most desirable place to live. Jean-Pierre and I decided to charter the plane for extra time so that we could have lunch on Bowen Island.

The morning of our journey is a bit overcast. "Magnifique," says Jean-Pierre, not bothered in the least. We begin the day with the foamy perfection of cappuccinos from Caffé Artigiano, available inside the terminal at Coal Harbour. We



Pilot Tom guides us over Stanley Park (Sarah Needley)

are travelling by Beaver aircraft, a comfortable ride for five to six passengers. Many people are not aware that the co-pilot seat is often up for grabs; you just have to ask. Jean-Pierre is thrilled to slap on the headphones and listen to the flight chatter as we soak up the sights.

The thrill of the take-off alone made the trip worthwhile

The North Shore mountains—Cypress, Seymour and Grouse—dominate the city landscape. On a clear day you can see as far as Washington's snow-capped Mount Baker to the southeast, and across the Strait of Georgia and the Sunshine Coast to the northwest.

From 1600 feet up, it's plain to see why Vancouver is a world-class port. A quick glance down reveals evidence of its shipbuilding legacy, the booming marine trade and the unique

commuter lifestyle enjoyed by so many West Coast folk. There are freighters at anchor, SeaBuses travelling between Vancouver's Waterfront Station and the North Shore, and the luxury cruise ships parked beside the great white tent-peaks of Canada Place. Jean-Pierre and I marvel at the cadmium-yellow hills of sulphur at Pacific Coast Terminal and the sense of being on top of the world.

Our friendly pilot Tom tells us about Harbour Air's pioneering role in British Columbia's heritage. With only two seaplanes back when the company started in 1981, the three founding bush pilots created the airline to service the local forestry industry. As they expanded to include sightseeing tours and multiple bases around the coast, Harbour Air grew to become the largest all-seaplane airline in the world. "There are remote places," says Tom, "that are still only accessible by seaplane."

As we pass over the green expanse of Stanley Park, the words of American aviator Amelia Earhart ring true: "You haven't seen a tree until you've seen its shadow from the sky." The trees of the temperate rainforest cast some pretty significant shadows. We glide high above sailboats and yachts cutting through the water, and the West Vancouver hills studded with million-dollar homes, then arc toward Horseshoe Bay, where docked ferries await their next passage. Jean-Pierre turns to me and says simply, "Wow."

Passing over small islets of white rock, we soon catch sight of the sweet spot: Bowen Island. As if to signal our arrival, the clouds break and we glide into the cozy harbour in a wash of sunshine. Below are a group of kayakers, paddling in unison in bright blue, orange and white boats; and to our left, a rocky beach with a gaggle of Canada geese. Once we're docked, we



Coasting over Point Atkinson Lighthouse south of Horseshoe Bay (Sarah Needley)



Toasting to a great day on Bowen Island (Sarah Needley)

walk toward the quaint old Union Steamship Company buildings that house gift shops and Doc Morgan's Restaurant, where we will be eating.

The manager greets us and shows us to a table on the deck on the lower level overlooking the harbour. Doc Morgan's has a special menu for Fly 'n Dine tours that includes a splendid mix of seafood, steak and sandwiches. Jean-Pierre opts for the Seared Salmon, while I go for the traditional Doc's Famous Halibut & Chips. If we were staying the whole afternoon, we could walk along the nearby nature trails and hike to the local bluffs. We are content to absorb the fresh air, dig into our excellent meals and reminisce about old times.

There is nothing like giving that sense of magic and wonder to someone else

When we're finished, Tom guides us back into the air. Clear skies afford views of the ocean's tidal pools and kelp beds. The tour takes us over windsurfers in English Bay, the swimming pools and beachfronts of Jericho Beach and Spanish Banks, and past the outcropping that is the endowment lands and the University of British Columbia. Next, we traverse the established communities of Point Grey and Kerrisdale, and circle as far east as Burnaby. From here, I get a real sense of the breadth and beauty of the Lower Mainland. We then wing back over the Second Narrows Bridge, the Burrard Inlet and the glorious arms of Lion's Gate Bridge, which, at the time of its construction in 1939, was the longest suspension bridge in the British Empire.

The magnificence of the coastal landscape is as powerful for me today as it was on my first journey. There is nothing like giving that sense of magic and wonder to someone else. With the sun turning everything golden, the glass high-rises glinting like fiery mirrors and the curving coastline giving way to open ocean, it's like being at the edge of the earth. "What an incredible place," Jean-Pierre says. "I am seriously considering moving here." ☘



Our personal view of paradise (Sarah Needley)

Book a Tour

Harbour Air's regular Fly 'n Dine Snug Cove tour takes you skyward at 7:00 p.m. and includes a three-course dinner at Doc Morgan's on Bowen Island, a ferry ride back to Horseshoe Bay at 10:05 p.m. and the "city lights" drive back to downtown Vancouver by limousine.

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