

Victoria's Chinatown

Victoria has a vibrant area known as Chinatown. Much smaller in geographic area than at the height of its size, the primary street through Chinatown now is Fisgard Street.

The beginnings of Chinatown date back to the era of the gold rush of 1858. Victoria's has the distinction of being the oldest Chinese community in Canada and the second oldest in North America, just behind San Francisco's Chinatown.

The lure of potentially easy and vast riches from the Fraser River, in 1858, caused a sudden surge in immigration to the Colony of British Columbia. The initial "onslaught" was from California as its latest gold rush was oversubscribed, as all rushes tend to be. Many of the California gold rush immigrants were from China with several hundred arriving there in 1849 and 1850. In 1852 more than 20,000 landed in San Francisco. Once opportunity knocked "up north" the rush was on. Of the number of initial "rush" immigrants from California, about one third were Chinese.

Within a year, immigration to the colony directly from China began as news spread of the gold find, but the gold rush was only one reason many Chinese citizens immigrated. Trouble in their homeland (famine, drought, war) also encouraged venturing across the Pacific to hopefully better circumstances in the British Crown colonies known as Vancouver Island and British Columbia. Subsequently these two separate Colonies were amalgamated to what is now the province of British Columbia. It was mostly men who immigrated, but if they could make enough money, they would send for their family. The majority of those who came were from the province of Guangdong in South China.

Additional Chinese immigration was at the behest of the Canadian Pacific Railway as they were constructing the railway to connect BC, a condition of the agreement for BC to join Confederation, with eastern Canada. The Chinese used for railway construction were given less pay for more dangerous work than their non Asian co-workers. With the completion of the railway, many Chinese gravitated to Victoria where they found a more familiar lifestyle amongst fellow countrymen in Chinatown.

Although Victoria's Chinatown was initially a collection of crude wooden huts, it rapidly evolved into a dense neighbourhood of businesses, theatres, schools, churches, temples and a hospital. It did gain a dark, seedy reputation however, because of opium factories, gambling dens and brothels. Chinatown grew steadily over the years until its peak in 1911, at which time it occupied an area of about six city blocks and housed over 3,100 people.

Between the 1920's and 1970's Chinatown suffered a period of dramatic decline both in size and in population. Many inhabitants were leaving the area for the suburbs for both residential and business purposes. Significant revitalization efforts were undertaken in the 1980's. The most notable change was the construction of the Gate of Harmonious Interest on Fisgard Street at Government Street which provides a "formal" entrance to the Chinatown of today. This gate was built in Suzhou, China which is one of Victoria's sister cities.



Victoria's revitalized Chinatown is a very popular area for residents and tourists alike. The artistic community has embraced this area as well. The focus is the 500-600 block of Fisgard Street, including famously narrow Fan Tan Alley, the old Chinese School and a small selection of historic buildings and Chinese businesses. Many historic buildings have been well preserved in Chinatown and also in the larger area it once occupied along Government Street, Herald Street, Store Street, and Pandora Avenue.

The modern Chinatown continues to be a key component of Downtown Victoria with many tourist attractions, hotels, bars, restaurants, theatres, services, and shopping areas nearby. The district was designated a National Historic Site of Canada in 1995.

A visit to Victoria's Chinatown is a must for visitors to the city. A combination of history, adventure, shopping, art galleries, dining and just plain fun are all available in this compact neighbourhood.

While Harry Potter has Diagon Alley, Victoria's Chinatown has Dragon Alley. The shops in this alley are awaiting your exploration. You probably won't find a Wizard's Wand Shoppe here though!



The more famous Chinatown alley is Fan Tan Alley.



This was formerly a private walk way servicing gambling and opium dens, and is a Victoria must see!. The game of Fan Tan, after which the alley is named, is a gambling game that reached the height of its popularity in this location in the early 1940s. It is named after its component parts: “Fan” being to turn over, and “Tan” meaning to spread out. The dealer takes a handful of buttons or beads and covers them with a brass cup. The players bet on how many buttons will be left after the dealer has removed all multiples of four. Once the bets are made, the dealer turns over the cup and spreads out the buttons to count them.

The alley is considered Canada's narrowest street measuring a mere 3 feet wide at the narrowest point. A very popular place for photographs, don't forget to take your camera along when you visit.



Don't miss the opportunity to experience a little bit of Asia and gather more memories of the 2015 Conference in Victoria's Chinatown.

Visit the Victoria Branch website to keep up-to-date on the planning for 2015.

<http://www.uelac.org/uelvictoria/Uelac-Conference-2015-Victoria-BC.htm>

Conference 2015 Planning Committee