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Sea-to-Sky Road Tripping In Style

2019 BMW X7 xDrive50i

STORY | STEVEN BOCHENEK





The following highlights several days and nights in and around Vancouver and Whistler's preeminent Fairmont Hotels. The conveyance between them is the BMW X7, itself a rolling spa.

FRIDAY 6:00pm. Dinner at Di Beppe. This chaotic, charming bistro appreciates the perfect simplicity of real, freshly plucked tomatoes, creating a sauce that blends riotously with the pizza's anchovies. The negroni, the first of many this extended weekend, doesn't stint on the gin.

SATURDAY 8:30am. Ever wonder why people from British

Columbia are so notoriously laid back? They live three hours in the past. Newly visiting Torontonians can "sleep in" but still be outdoors and breakfasted before Vancouverites wake up.

Free shuttles leave Canada Place every 15 minutes for Capilano Suspension Bridge Park. Its treetop hébertism course and glass-floored cliff walk complete the feelings of daring-do you get from shaking other terrified tourists on its 140-meter bouncy bridge, jangling 70 meters over a rocky gorge. Definitely arrive early. An hour after opening, the bridge is crammed but my return bus is empty.





11:30am. One word for weary business travellers: foot massage! Danielle, expert masseuse at Fairmont's Willow Stream Spa, magically de-stresses nerves there beneath "a triple layer wrap, designed to hydrate, soothe and remineralize." Speaking of mineralization ...

1:00pm. Calling the Omakase Long Board at The Fairmont Pacific Rim's RawBar an array of sushi is like calling Vancouver's Coast Mountain chain a series of potentially nice walks. Complement nigiri with negroni ... but be extra careful denuding the king prawns of their razor-edged exoskeleton. #ouch

2:30pm. It's hot and humid. Punctuate your postprandial bike ride along Stanley Park's seawall with detours through splash-pad fountains and a seat on the beach.

Afterwards, see Gastown's edgier edges display haunting street-art. Commenting on the politics of race and addiction, these boldly coloured murals make effective social media clickbait. (Maybe just ride here during the day though.)

5:00pm. The sky is clear. 200 meters from Fairmont Pacific Rim's entrance, you can board a Harbour Air seaplane ride from Coal Harbour and the Burrard Inlet, up past North and West Vans, then over the channel beside the Sea to Sky Highway, before returning past Stanley Park and circling the centre of town.

6:30pm. Ask any Hufflepuff alumnus: botany rocks! Cocktails and dinner at the hotel's Botanist Lounge draw cleverly on local flora, as the name suggests, and heavier on the adjectives peppering your servers' extended explanations. The cocktail, wine and food pairings and creations all reflect a thoroughly left-coast ethic. Example? A freelance forager regularly delivers handpicked mushrooms to the kitchen and bar. Really.



SUNDAY 10:30am. The drive up the Sea-to-Sky Highway in a freshly hatched BMW X7 is lovely outside and in. However, we're late extricating ourselves from the Pacific Rim's luxuries, so planned stops are truncated.

1:30pm. Lunch on the Fairmont Chateau Whistler's patio is almost as distracting as the jaw-dropping view. Pub fare with flair. Today's Banh Mi burger's a tantalizing mess of savoury, sweet, bread and meat. The patio belongs to the huge Mallard Lounge, whose functions evolve throughout each day like a town square. You'll be back here tomorrow for a flight of negronis and live music.

3:30pm. Walk off that soporific caloric depth charge during the weekly farmer's market stretching throughout the main pedestrian boulevard of the upper village. I buy a lovely hand-milled charcuterie board from Justin Trudeau's doppelganger whose surname, counterintuitively, is Bush.

6:30pm. Another of the Fairmont's multipurpose fueling stations, the Portobello is a hip smokehouse in the evening and cafeteria/deli by day. Tonight's dinner? Picture pretty much everyone you sang about on Old MacDonald's farm, slow-smoked into a carnivore's bucket list.

9:00am. Part holiday camp, this massive hotel offers an array of daily activities (many, complementary) that shrink it to a small town. Our one-hour guided hike past the accurately named Whistler Train Wreck is just 10 minutes' drive away. The reward-for-work ratio that any savvy hiker gauges is at least 10 to 1—and I'm a tough marker. Glacier-fed rapids, unearthly rock formations, another bouncy suspension bridge and, of course,

the twisted remains of a colossal train wreck are within easy steps of each other.

12:00 noon. With so much Okanagan cava flowing, lunch at Oso, a Spanish inspired tapas room in the main village, is too short. Bless those short ribs but we're on a schedule, and there's a mountain to slide down. Our host hustles me out.

1:30pm. Superfly Ziplines include two of Canada's "longest ziplines at over a kilometre long, 600 feet high and reaching speeds of 100km/h." You're so tightly clipped in—you can flail, swing, kick and wobble on the fly—it feels safe as a PNE/Playland ride. Nonetheless, I'm glad nobody in our group of nine is here to face their fear of heights or flying.

4:00pm. Luckily, there's time to ascend Whistler mountain for a view that beggars description, even though I've seen and written about it before. Plan time to take the Peak-to-Peak Gondola. Then tell me what it was like because I didn't plan enough time.

6:00pm. When good negroni lovers die, they go to the Mallard Lounge where, this evening, the menu boasts four unique twists on this classic cocktail. Leave the car keys in your room. Maybe your camera-phone too. Just not your room key. 'Nuff said.

7:00pm. With its dark paneling, distant ceiling, and muted soundtrack, The Wildflower is a sumptuous display of classic hotel decorating. Dinner is sumptuous too. My sirloin is just the bluest side of rare—practically lowing, bless it—and goes down well with the accompanying Okanagan cab-sauvignon. (See above re car keys.)



Tuesday 8:00am. If you still haven't completely adjusted to the three-hour time shift, arise with the dawn for a vigorous solo mountain hike. Why not just go the gym? Only the truly hardcore cycle these trails before the gondola opens. And when the weather's agreeable, the views become more rewarding with each upward step. Today, the weather's agreeable.

10:30am. Time to drive to Vancouver's airport. Enjoyed from the perspective you missed on the way up, the same views on Highway 99 are impressively new. Keep your eyes on the road. Somehow, it's even curvier, when you're leaving relaxed.

VANCOUVER'S GROWN UP

To say this town's gone corporate isn't accurate. Sure, you can no longer use "Sorry I'm late; my coven's Wreck Beach séances always drain my creative energy" as an excuse. And Bryan Adams does still blare disproportionately across local patios a la droning Drake in Toronto. But major international commerce happens here now. Vancouver's business class confidently

flaunts its cravings for the good things. Small wonder there are four Fairmont Hotels here. Downtown on Coal Harbour, we're guests at the Fairmont Pacific Rim. All grownup, Vancouver now comfortably juggles multiple reputations. 'Lotus Land' also means the scores of deafening supercars impatiently inching through a downtown designed for cyclists and walkers. Meanwhile, below the sparkling glass towers, quotidian life hasn't forgotten its activist routes, still leading the country with progressive cultural happenings.

Example? Just next door to our hotel, in tents designed like longhouses, we notice events for Women Deliver. This convention features over 6,000 world leaders, from parliamentarians to journalists, discussing "gender equality and the health, rights and wellbeing of women and girls" explains local artist/educator Sally Buck. During her presentation, tourist seaplanes noisily take off and land not 400 meters away, regularly prompting Buck and other Women in the Way (their event's title) to, rather appropriately, raise their voices.









WHISTLER'S ON FIRE

To say this town's gone corporate also isn't accurate; it always was. Functionally invented to attract the Olympics and legally established as a resort municipality in 1975, Whistler's a tourism juggernaut. The general look is some prefab business-friendly fantasy of 19th century Tyrol.

But any soullessness in the consistently functional design is easily forgiven. Everyone is spellbound by Whistler's towering mountains, and breathing deep of the sweet, fresh air—both visitors and "locals". Yes. Huge numbers of Whistler's working population are transient Kiwis, Brits, and you can't throw a boomerang without hitting Australians. In fact, the town's nicknamed Whistralia. Canadians loom but management wisely parades the colourful accents out front, good for repeat business.

Not unrelated to the rampant tourism, Whistler's construction and "medical" marijuana industries are smoking hot too.

BMW X7 xDrive50i:

Imagine a luxury tank ... or a fortified rolling spa.

Lower your window now and again when igniting the X7 xDrive50i. With soundproofing and acoustics worthy of Berlin's Konzerthaus, you'll miss the satisfying 21-cannon salute from a 4.4-liter V8 that achieves 456 horsepower.

And there's plenty of time to enjoy splendours like its custom fragrances, full body massage from the coddling leather seats, and the ample skies viewed through the ubiquitous sunroof.

Besides, you don't want to test that engine, capable of 0 to 100km/h in 5.4 seconds, on the well policed Sea-to-Sky highway. Just relax and enjoy this mobile spa.



