

SPECIAL EDITION ON VANCOUVER 2017 GRAND REUNION

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE 25TH USTMAAA GRAND REUNION 2017

June 29, Thursday	Fly to Victoria, British Columbia, CN Empress Hotel for two nights
June 30, Friday	Tour of Victoria in the morning Butchart Gardens including 'Afternoon Tea' in the afternoon and evening
July 1, Saturday	150 th Canada Day Bus ride including Ferry to Vancouver City Tour of Vancouver Check in at Sheraton Wall Centre Board Reception and 'Fireworks'
July 2, Sunday	Board meetings, Thanksgiving Mass Opening Ceremonies, Individual Class Reunions
July 3, Monday	CME, Talent Night
July 4, Tuesday	CME, Gala Dinner
July 5, Wednesday	Free Day in Vancouver
July 6-9 Thursday-Sunday	Train /bus to the Canadian Rockies and visit Banff, Lake Louise, Jasper National Park
July 9, Sunday	Flight out of Calgary to home

If you are interested in making this trip please check on the following:

- ☐ Victoria and Butchart Gardens
- ☐ Vancouver City Tour
- ☐ Canadian Rocky Mountain Experience
- ☐ Alaskan Cruise (this is not a part of our offering but we would like to know if there is enough interest that this can be included in our planning. It can be done before or following the above activities.

For this to work, we have to commit early to reserve spots in hotels and tour buses/train/ship. Email me a response if you are interested: primo.andres@USTMAAAmerica.com

Scouting Vancouver

With barely one year to prepare for the 25th running of the USTMAAA Grand Reunion and Medical Convention, it was deemed very important for us to take a look at the facilities of the convention venue, the Sheraton Wall Centre Hotel in



The City of Vancouver pretty much surrounded by water

downtown Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The Grand Reunion is scheduled for July 1-5, 2017 which happens to coincide with a very important event in Canada, the 150th Anniversary of the foundation of the country, dubbed Canada Day, that is celebrated on the 1st of July.

And so it was that Sylvia and I flew from Indianapolis to San Francisco then to Vancouver on May 19 and came back through Chicago O'Hare on May 22, 2016 on United Airlines using Expedia to book at a very reasonable fare of just about \$400 each, no more than what it would have cost us to fly to California. This dispelled the notion that it was a lot more expensive to fly to Vancouver. The trick was early booking for better choices, although I booked the flight rather late, less than 3 months before our trip. And considering that the rate of exchange is **1 US\$ = 1.2 + Can\$** with no reason to believe it would change any time soon, it is indeed a relatively cheap way of spending a vacation.

We were surprised to find out that there were no freeways going inside Vancouver, and for very good reasons. They did not want to ruin the beautiful scenery and create unusable spaces under the freeways in an already compact and relatively small land area, a lesson learned from Seattle whose downtown area is bisected by crisscrossing freeways. It was a pleasant taxi drive through the broad main streets entering the city that was lined by residential and commercial buildings with beautiful gardens and landscaping that were very easy on the eyes. The traffic flow even on a weekday was smooth with no unusual delays perhaps because of fewer vehicles compared to similar size cities in the United States. The city of Vancouver is centered around a small 'island', the downtown area, with a population of around 2.5 million. Sixty percent of the buildings downtown are residential buildings and most of the residents prefer to walk to work and 10 % ride a bicycle despite the hilly terrain using dedicated lanes.

Sheraton Wall Centre is located in the middle of downtown on top of a hill overlooking the entire city. It has two towers with



Two towers of Sheraton Wall Centre with the North Tower dominating the city

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the North Tower being the newer and more imposing and taller building and with the meeting and event facilities at its base. We were given a corner room on the 25th floor with a spectacular view of the city overlooking the City Center and the Court and



Meeting with Land Sea Tours and Cruise Connections operators

Law Offices building that was designed to look like a skyscraper that is laying on its side. Everything seemed a short 10-15 minute walk from the hotel.

We did not waste time setting up meetings with various groups. We first met with representatives of Land Sea Tours discussing with them our interest in visiting Victoria and the Butchart Gardens. They also provide private tours of the city and nearby tourist attractions including the Whistler Winter Olympic Park. We also met with Cruise Connections, a local company that arranges cruises to Alaska with CME meetings and land tours of the Canadian Rockies and even trips to Victoria and Butchart Gardens, the complete package if there is one.

Later that afternoon we met with the Sheraton Sales and Convention people who showed us the meeting rooms and facilities which are really very adequate for our needs. We had requested some adjustments from the original contract in order to optimize our experience. For example, we want our guests to be booked in the North Tower where the convention facilities are instead of the older South Tower which is across a courtyard and maybe an effort for some of our less mobile attendees to walk from. They assured us that all effort will be made to accommodate this request, as long as we register our rooms





Our visit to Vancouver was arranged by Ms. Kellie Sabas of Helms Briscoe who has been helping us negotiate hotel rates during our conventions, at no additional cost to us I might add. She was able to arrange our visit through the Vancouver Tourism Office whose manager, Ms. Carrie Leung, was good enough to provide complimentary tickets for a day trip to Victoria and the Butchart Gardens and an "Experience Pass" that allowed us to enter the major tourist attractions at no charge.

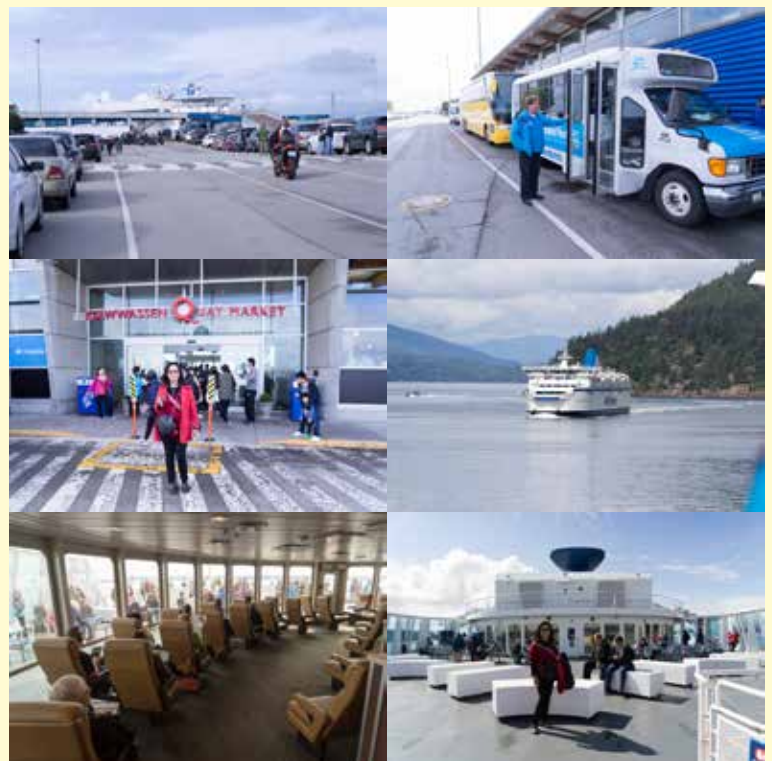
Day Trip to Victoria and the Butchart Gardens

Sylvia and I got up early Friday morning for the Land Sea Tour to Victoria and the Butchart Gardens. There was no time to sit down for breakfast, hurriedly ordering coffee and some cookies at the Starbucks kiosk in the hotel before the bus named "Sheila" driven by a very interesting and entertaining guy named "Manny" arrived. With special dedicated lanes for buses in the freeway, it was only a 30 minute ride to the town of Tsawwassen, a territory of the First Nation (as the local Indians are referred to) where we took the ferry that brought us to Victoria, the Capital City of British Columbia, in the Island of Vancouver. The Spirit of Victoria, a unit of the BC Ferries fleet that services the multiple inhabited islands of the Province (would you believe that they have over 4,000 islands) took one and one half hours to cross the English Bay and the multiple channels in between the islands. It was like a cruise ship that could accommodate over 2,000 passengers and over 400 vehicles. We elected to stay in the "Crowne Lounge" for just Can\$12, where it was quieter and with coffee and drinks and snacks already included, rather than stay in the more public sitting and viewing areas that were a lot more crowded and less comfortable. It was worth all the penny. Although we were told we might see some wildlife including



Double and King bedrooms with spectacular views of the city all around

early. There you go again, early planning and commitment is very necessary.



killer whale - Orcas, dolphins and maybe even bears, we never saw any. But the houses on the islands were picturesque and there was enough to see to enjoy the boat ride.

It was a short drive to Victoria from the ferry landing and we were driven around by Manny to see the major sites of the city stopping by 'Mile 0' where begins the Trans Canada highway system by the banks of the Pacific. We were dropped off in the center of the city by the inner bay in front of the Empress Hotel that was just finishing renovations. It was tempting to go for the "afternoon tea" but that would have taken most of the 3 hour free time that we were given. Sylvia and I decided instead to explore the Capitol and took a tour of the legislature enjoying the short skit that was played by an actress depicting Mary Ellen Smith, the female activist who fought for women's right to vote and eventually ending up as the first woman member of the Parliament of British Columbia.

There was a lot to see in our short walk through Government Avenue which was lined by restaurants, boutique shops and the usual other 'tourist traps' as we approached China Town on the far end. Doubling back, we settled on 'Irish Times Pub' to have our lunch while enjoying watching people on the main tourist street. We stopped by an ice cream parlor manned by beautiful Japanese

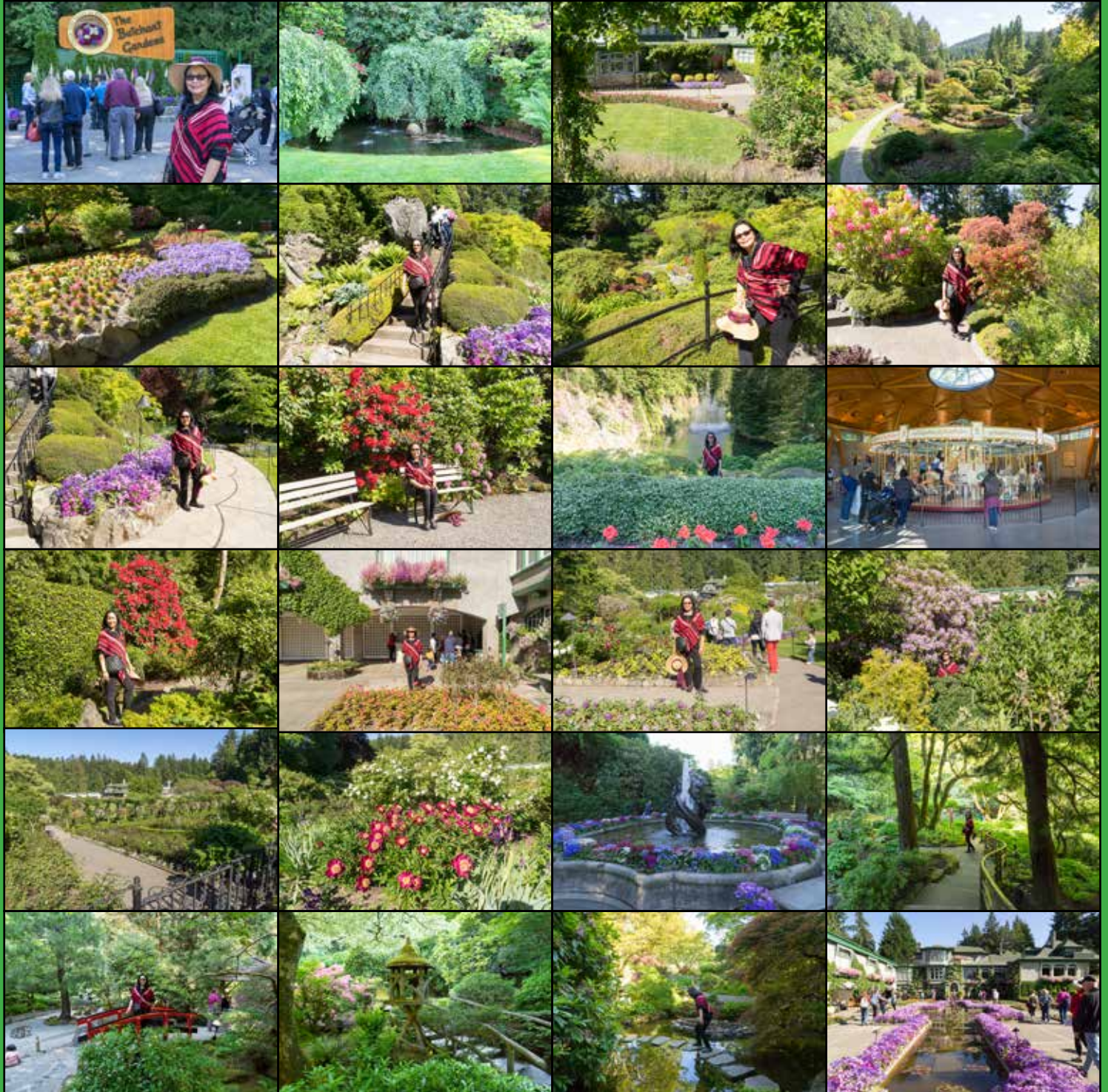
IMAGES OF VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA



ladies. Then it was time to go to the harbor and take in the scenic and expansive view in front of the Empress Hotel and the Parliament as seaplanes took off and landed like taxis ferrying passengers from and to Vancouver.

And just before our appointed time, Manny on Sheila came to pick us up by the statue of Captain Cook to bring us to the highlight of our day trip. The Butchart Gardens was about a 30 minute drive north of Victoria and more than halfway back

IMAGES OF BUTCHART GARDENS IN VICTORIA



It was too late for us to make our dinner reservation at “Il Crocodile” by the time we arrived in Vancouver. We rescheduled it for the following evening. We had to settle for Tim Horton’s

Cafe close to the hotel that was pretty much the only fast food that was open that time of the night. They actually had delicious wraps that we ended up enjoying in our room with a beautiful ambiance overlooking the city lights. Needless to say, we slept good that night after a very hectic but enjoyable full day.

Exploring Vancouver

Armed with the “Experience Pass” provided by Carrie Leung of the Tourism Vancouver Bureau, we set out to see as much of the city as we could. First target was the world famous Stanley Park that was named after the same person that the National Hockey League trophy, the Stanley Cup, was named after. He must have been quite a guy because the park is a whole island that is larger than the Central Park of New York. We decided to try the “Hop On. Hop off” buses operated by the Trolley Company. While it was distinctive, it was relatively slow and there was more waiting involved. We ‘jumped ship’ onto the more traditional open tourist buses operated by the West Coast bus company that was more efficient. First stop was the Rose Garden that was even better than the one we saw at Butchart Gardens. It is a good thing we now use digital cameras with almost unlimited capacity to take multiple pictures. Otherwise I would have needed a separate back pack just to carry loads of extra films. A short walk on a path led us to the Vancouver Aquarium that was busy with revelers from all walks of life, mostly multi-ethnic children. There were several sections with exhibits from different oceans of the world and even live shows like the Dolphin show but the one that probably topped them all was the Beluga whale show that featured two amazing white whales that danced to the command of their trainers. Burgers and fish and chips for lunch could not have tasted any better in that environment.

We were running out of time so we decided to hit only the major spots. Prospect Point on the far end of Stanley Park offered an excellent view of the English Bay Strait that led to the Vancouver harbor with the Lion Gate Bridge spanning the strait acting like a gate. The restaurant overlooking the bridge was too inviting to pass up and so we had our second lunch. Then followed the long winding ride through downtown as we proceeded to China Town, one of the oldest in North America, passing up on Granville Island in the interest of time, which we were told was a mistake. Well, there will be another chance next year for sure. We visited the Dr. Sun Yat Sen Park which was not as well kept, and China Town itself was not as vibrant as we expected it to be. Gastown was different just a few blocks away where people were hopping. There was perhaps the only one remaining steam powered giant clock in the world at one of the street corners that sounded off once every 15 minutes guarded by a ‘street person’ who would tell all the onlookers “that’s all folks” after a couple of gaspy breaths from the vintage timepiece.

A few blocks up the street was ‘Vancouver Lookout’ with a circular restaurant and viewing area that overlooked the entire city. I do not know that my pictures would do justice to the

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panorama that the tower provided the visitors.

Then finally we were in Canada Place, the hub of Vancouver activity, the site of the Convention Center along side which are the piers where cruise ships dock and the harbor where seaplanes take off and land. This is the place where all the tourist buses converge to pick up and drop off their passengers. This is also the place where we watched the IMAX movie called "Fly Over" that made us experience an exhilarating flight from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coasts of Canada over the thunderous Niagara Falls and the vast cattle ranches and cornfields of the prairies then the wind-sucking thrills of the Rocky Mountain ranges before finally hovering over the skyscrapers of Vancouver, all in twelve minutes, complete with mist as we went through clouds and over waterfalls and snow drifts.

What a ride indeed and what a Northwestern Canadian experience that is for sure hard to match. So do not forget to mark your calendars and come ride with us next year on July 1-5, 2017 and perhaps even beyond.

Dining in Vancouver

Being a city of immigrants in a country of immigrants makes Vancouver truly an International community will almost all countries represented. This becomes even more obvious when you go through the list of restaurants with a good array of International cuisine. Realizing this, Sylvia and I did our homework and consulted Trip Advisor and other resources to find out which ones might be the top rated culinary establishments.

We first tried 'Blue Waters' on our first night. After traveling all day and having those long meetings with tour companies in the afternoon, we wanted to make our reservation earlier than the original 9:30 PM (12:30 AM Indiana time) that was given to us. The only space available was by the Sushi Bar at 7:30 PM. As it turned out, it probably was the best place because it was very entertaining to watch the real Japanese guys preparing all kinds of sushi and sashimi dishes even as we were enjoying our seafood platter. We indulged ourselves with a few of the appetizing sushi dishes as they looked too good to forgo.

We had a reservation at the 'Absinthe Bistro' the following day, a small establishment just outside the "main island" with





barely ten tables and with fix menus with only three selections to choose from in each course that changes daily. It is owned and operated by a husband and wife team and their family and with very positive reviews from their customers and were ranked second in the Trip Advisor, next to 'Blue Waters'. Unfortunately we were too late arriving from our Victoria excursion to take advantage of this highly anticipated experience. Maybe next year. We had to settle for 'Tim Horton's Cafe' just outside the hotel for a take out dinner of pretty delicious wraps that we ended up consuming in our room that had a wonderful view of the city lights at close to midnight.

Sylvia and I made sure that we did not miss our next reservation the next day, our last night. The 'Il Crocodile' was a popular French restaurant just a few blocks from the Sheraton Wall Centre and so we had some time to shower and dress up after a long day of touring the city before walking downhill to the make our 9:30 PM appointment. The owner was the cook and he obviously took pride in his lovely creations. I took advantage of the 'tasting menu' with paired wines while Sylvia ordered other seafood dishes, and we shared everything cleaning up all the plates and even scraping the last drops of the delectable sauces with freshly baked French bread to the delight of our Chinese-Cuban waitress. We could barely walk back up the hill, very stuffed and somewhat tipsy from all the French wine that we drunk.

To my surprise, Sylvia had all our luggages packed when I woke up early the following morning. What an efficient traveler! And so it was that we regretted flying out that Sunday morning but only mortified by the fact that we will get to do it all over again, and maybe more, when we come back in July 2017 during the 25th USTMAAA Grand Reunion.

