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Making the Vancouver circuit
A 14-day tour by rail, road and ferry offers gorgeous glimpse of western Canada

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By Les Picker, Special to The Baltimore Sun
June 2, 2011

Ah, the quintessential time-honored family road trip. Maui's Road to Hana? Sure, a nice family drive. The breathtaking Mount Blanc circuit of France, Italy and Switzerland? Without doubt, a family bucket list candidate.

But for my tastes nothing can hold a candle to the diamond ring of family circuit routes. Leaving from Vancouver, British Columbia, this fantabulous trip northeast to the Canadian Rockies, then west to the Pacific Ocean and then by ferry back to Vancouver will squeeze reluctant oohs and aaahs from the moodiest, most text-addicted teen.



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I put together the plan after a reader challenged me to create from scratch a never-reported-before road vacation that was limited to 14 days — while Europeans consider anything less than five work-free weeks positively scandalous, we Americans consider two consecutive weeks away from work a luxury — was reasonably priced and would elicit raves from even the most jaded family travelers. No better way to test that than to bring along my wife and our teenage granddaughter.

And so, we took Air Canada from Baltimore-Washington Thurgood Marshall Airport to Vancouver, starting our adventure by enjoying great service, a personal screen, an electrical outlet and USB hub at every economy seat. Score an immediate plus for my granddaughter.

Viva Vancouver!

Vancouver is the Canadian gateway to the Pacific, a vibrant metropolis that we all remember from the 2010 Winter Olympics. Far more than a ski destination, Vancouver boasts world-class museums, expansive parks and music venues. Situated between snow-capped mountains and the Pacific Ocean, the city enjoys a mild climate year-round.

We only had a day to enjoy Vancouver's delights, and in this cosmopolitan city nothing is more delightful than its restaurants. Throughout downtown are a host of top-notch eateries, but Asian is the way to go. After ambling through the bounding architecture of the city, we decided to try Azia, a new fusion restaurant that prides itself on its friendly and accommodating wait staff.

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After two pots of green tea steeped with fresh leaves, we shared an appetizer of heavenly dim sum dipped in spicy sauce. My General Tsao's shrimp was served hot and crispy, over a bed of thin, crispy noodles, topped with a spicy hot sauce that brought ovations from my taste buds. Accompanying it was a side of coconut rice wrapped in a banana leaf.

My wife and granddaughter shared a Seafood Curry Hot Pot loaded with shrimp, scallops, green beans and eggplant, served in a spicy curry sauce, an all-in-one meal with a palate full of flavors. The portions were plentiful without being overbearing. We left knowing we'll be back.

The Rocky Mountaineer

The next morning we showed up early at the Rocky Mountaineer's downtown train station. Being a once-in-a-lifetime trip, we wisely decided to splurge and go with the luxurious Gold Leaf service.

Meals on the double-decker Gold Leaf cars were served on fine white tablecloths and china. Each car has its own galley and every dish we tasted from our chef, Christos Caldeos, was extraordinary, from breakfast selections like poached egg over smoked meat on a fluffy crumpet, topped with piping hot Hollandaise sauce to dinner entrees of fresh salmon or bison steaks served to order and with a full range of trimmings.

Soon after leaving downtown Vancouver the vistas widen to farming country, lakes and estuaries. Throughout, the attendants narrate historic places of interest as well as the natural and cultural history of the areas we passed. The cars on the Gold Leaf service are roomier than in Red Leaf service and include wrap-around windows that felt like the outdoors was right in our laps. Eagles and ospreys flew over and around us all day.

By 6:15 that first evening we arrived in Kamloops, having spent a very pleasant day onboard. Rocky Mountaineer tickets include overnight accommodations at a comfortable hotel.

We awoke the next day to bright and sunny skies, ready for our climb to Jasper's 4,000 feet. The mountains loomed larger every mile and we witnessed deer drinking from slate-green streams cascading with glacial runoff. As we passed the iconic Pyramid Falls the train slowed so that passengers could ooh and aah and snap photos. By 6 p.m. on the second day the Mountaineer rolled into Jasper, Alberta, our destination.

Spectacular Jasper and Banff

After a night in one of Jasper's modest hotels, we started with breakfast at Bear's Paw Bakery, where the menu includes scrumptious breakfast sandwiches, to-die-for pastries and fresh breads, all baked on site.

With gear packed into our rental car, we headed down the famed Icefields Parkway toward Banff, frequently nominated as one of the most scenic drives on Earth. Despite the overcast day, whenever there was a break in the clouds the massive Canadian Rockies suddenly loomed above us, their magnificent snowy peaks reflected in the many lakes along the route. As first-time visitors, my wife and granddaughter were enthralled.

Our destination was Moraine Lake, even more awesome to my eye than its more renowned cousin, Lake Louise, a few miles away. The drive to Moraine Lake is over a narrow, winding mountain road, making one's first glimpse of the lake simply breathtaking. The deep teal-blue water seems unreal at first, like someone Photoshopped it to balance the glorious 10 peaks that form an arc around the lake.

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