



Vancouver

by Tina Gianoulis

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Cosmopolitan Vancouver, nestled on Canada's west coast in a picturesque triangle between English Bay, Burrard Inlet, and the Fraser River, has developed in less than 200 years from a frontier outpost in an untamed land to one of the fastest-growing cities in North America.

With a constant influx of immigrants and a vigorous and adaptable economy, Vancouver is a progressive city with a large and active queer community. That community began organizing in the 1960s, with the founding of Canada's first homophile organization, and has continued into the 2000s, as activists work to protect queer rights and develop queer culture.

With its sheltered location, fertile farmland, and rich inland waterways, the southwestern corner of British Columbia's mainland attracted settlers from a variety of native cultures for over three thousand years. More than twenty tribes, including the Tsawwassen and Musqueam, comprised the Stó:lo Nation, the "People of the Water," who farmed and fished the Fraser River Valley before the arrival of European explorers in the late eighteenth century.

From the first European trading post, established by the Hudson Bay Company in 1827, the small community soon grew into a boomtown with a thriving economy based on its lumber and mining industries, fisheries, and agriculture. By the late 1800s, the settlement had become a hub for a newly developing railroad network, and in 1886, the City of Vancouver was incorporated. The city grew rapidly, tripling its population within a few decades and spawning a construction boom in the early 1900s.

A century later, Vancouver remains a world-class port city, whose lumber mills, mines, and fisheries are now supplemented by modern industries such as biotechnology, alternative energy, and media production. The city has become the third largest film production center in North America, earning the nickname "Hollywood North."

Vancouver is also a gay-friendly city, with the largest queer community of any city in western Canada. Many gay Vancouverites live in the so-called "gay village" in the city's densely populated West End. In the East End, Commercial Drive, known locally as "The Drive," is a popular neighborhood for Vancouver's lesbian community.

Gay-centered events are scheduled throughout the year, including a week-long pride festival and dyke march at the beginning of August and a "Queerwood" film festival called Out on Screen that is Canada's largest gay arts event.

Influenced by its progressive largest city, the province of British Columbia has protected glbtq people from discrimination for years. A Court of Appeals ruling legalized same-sex marriage in British Columbia on July 8, 2003.

Gay Organizing in Vancouver

Gay organizing was in its infancy worldwide when the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK) formed in Vancouver in 1964. The homophile organization published a monthly newsletter from 1964 until 1968 and opened the first gay community center in Canada in 1966.

In the summer of 1969, as the New York Stonewall Rebellion signalled a growing militance among gay men and lesbians in the United States, Canada's Parliament--at the behest of charismatic Attorney General Pierre Trudeau--followed Great Britain's example and approved legislation decriminalizing homosexuality.

Vancouver gay men and lesbians soon formed a number of political organizations, such as the Vancouver Gay Liberation Front in 1970 and the Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE) in 1971. GATE began strategizing to gain civil rights for gay men and lesbians, organizing the first gay march in Vancouver in solidarity with a demonstration in Ottawa.

In 1973 GATE began publishing a magazine called *Gay Tide*. In 1974, when the *Vancouver Sun* refused to print an advertisement for *Gay Tide*, GATE filed suit against the paper, initiating the first gay rights case ever taken before the Supreme Court of Canada.

GATE won a British Columbia Human Rights Commission complaint on the matter and a subsequent challenge by the *Sun* in the British Columbia Supreme Court, but the decision was reversed in the federal Court of Appeals. Finally, in 1979, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in the *Sun's* favor. However, times had changed and the *Sun* voluntarily altered its homophobic policy and agreed to print *Gay Tide's* ad. GATE disbanded in 1980.

Pride Celebrations

In 1980, many gay men and lesbians worked to elect Vancouver's first queer-friendly mayor, Michael Harcourt, and in 1981 Harcourt officially launched Gay Unity Week. Though there had been demonstrations and marches in support of gay pride since 1973, the 1981 celebration featured the city's first pride parade. (Harcourt would later become Premier of British Columbia.)

The Vancouver Pride Parade and Pride Week Festival has since grown into an extensive community celebration, which, by the early 2000s, includes political, art, film, and music events. Queer visitors from all over the world visit the city in August to celebrate all aspects of gay culture.

In 1981, Vancouver lesbians hosted the Fifth Bi-national [i.e., Canada and Quebec] Lesbian Conference, where women from across Canada gathered for discussion, solidarity, and the first lesbian pride march in the city. Over the next decade a number of lesbian organizations were founded, including the Vancouver Lesbian Connection, which opened the only lesbian center in the nation, and the Gazebo Connection, which remains active in 2006 and claims the title of oldest lesbian organization on the west coast.

In 1988, Member of Parliament Svend Robinson, who had first been elected to represent Vancouver and Burnaby as a New Democrat in 1979, came out. The first openly gay MP in Canada, he served until 2004.

Censorship Battle

Another landmark legal battle for gay rights began in Vancouver in 1986, this time on behalf of Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium, a gay and lesbian bookstore founded in 1983. With the support of other gay groups, Little Sister's brought a discrimination suit against Canadian Customs, citing the fact that customs officials improperly used obscenity laws as an excuse to search and seize book shipments crossing the border on their way to Little Sister's. Publications as diverse as *Black Looks: Race And Representation* by

feminist academic bell hooks and the U.S. gay newsmagazine *The Advocate* were regularly confiscated.

After some fifteen years of litigation, the case was finally ruled on by the Canadian Supreme Court. In 2000, it ruled that Customs officials did indeed act in a discriminatory manner, but refused to declare the legislation authorizing customs officials to seize "obscene" materials unconstitutional. It did hold that the onus is on the government to prove that imported materials are obscene and prohibited Customs from confiscating material arbitrarily.

Little Sister's legal struggle against censorship continues. It has been the subject of two books, *Restricted Entry: Censorship on Trial* by Janine Fuller and Stuart Blackley (1996) and *Forbidden Passages: Writings Banned in Canada* (1995), edited by Pat Califia, and a feature-length documentary film, *Little Sister's VS Big Brother* (2002), directed by Aerlyn Weissman.

Gay Games III and Conferences of Older Lesbians

In August 1990, Vancouver took its place as an international glbtq center when the city hosted Gay Games III. Thousands of athletes and performers from around the world gathered at B.C. Place Stadium to compete in the first Gay Games held outside the U.S.

The Games festivities included a Vancouver Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, which soon became an important annual tradition, changing its name to the Vancouver Queer Film and Video Festival in 1996.

In September 2005, another international tradition began for Canadian lesbians when Vancouver activist Pat Hogan and the women of Sounds and Furies Productions organized the first West Coast Gathering and Conference of Lesbians 50 Years and Older. More than 160 women from western Canada and the U.S. met in Vancouver to network around issues important to older lesbians. The event was successful once again in 2006, and conference planners anticipate an even bigger third annual gathering in September 2007.

Immigration Rights

Immigration rights is an important issue among gay men and lesbians, especially in a country such as Canada where immigration is a significant means of growth. Vancouver has been in the forefront of the fight for equality in immigration policy. In 1978, Canadian gay rights received a boost when Parliament passed the Canadian Immigration Act, which removed a ban on homosexual immigrants.

In 1991, Vancouver activists formed the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Task Force (LEGIT) to work for immigration rights for the partners of Canadian queers. LEGIT and its Francophone ally, *Immigration pour conjoint(e) des gais et lesbiennes (ICGL)*, soon spread across Canada.

By 1993, many gay and lesbian partners of Canadian citizens were allowed to immigrate, citing "humanitarian and compassionate grounds." In 2002 the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act was passed, making Canada one of the few countries that allowed gay men and lesbians to sponsor their partners. Now that same-sex marriage is legal across Canada, same-sex spouses enjoy the same rights in immigration as opposite-sex spouses.

Hate Crimes and Internal Fights

Although Vancouver is generally regarded as one of the most tolerant cities in the world, it has nevertheless been the scene of some unfortunate incidents. One of the most horrendous hate crimes in Canadian history occurred in Vancouver in November 2001, when a gay man was beaten to death in Stanley Park.

Sadly, some of Vancouver's most publicized queer rights legal battles have pitched members of the glbtq community against each other. In 1999, a transgendered woman named Susan Mamela filed a discrimination

complaint with the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal against the Vancouver Lesbian Connection. Mamela had been banned from VLC's drop-in center and not allowed to work there as a volunteer because the organizers of the center did not consider her to be a lesbian. She won her case, the center was fined \$3,000, and, soon after, the VLC closed its doors.

In a similar case, heard by the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal in 2000-2001, a male-to-female transsexual named Kimberly Nixon filed a discrimination suit against Vancouver Rape Relief for denying her request to become a volunteer peer counselor. Though a 2002 decision awarded Nixon \$7,500 for "hurt feelings," the tribunal reversed its decision on appeal and in 2005 ruled that Vancouver Rape Relief could reasonably claim that its counselors needed to have the experience of growing up female.

Despite the squabbles that have pitted different constituents of its glbtq community against each other, Vancouver remains a notably gay-friendly city. It is home to a vibrant and active glbtq community and an important glbtq tourist destination. The city's breathtaking natural beauty, sandy beaches, and natural rainforest, as well as its trendy restaurants, fashionable stores, and lively nightclubs, attract glbtq visitors from around the world.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.