

Visiting Vancouver

If you're visiting Vancouver to attend a trade show - or the 2010 Olympics - pick up some tips from this insider's guide to the city's popular attractions

BY JOHN LEE

IT'S MID-AFTERNOON ON THE PARASOL-studded patio of the Vancouver Art Gallery's mezzanine-level café. Animated locals are sipping lattes and blinking in the sunlight, while one or two are chatting about the impending 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games as they peer over nearby Robson Square. Fitted with a new canopy, it's set to be the main gathering place for partying sports fans during next year's big event. But Vancouver doesn't need the Olympics to make it an ideal visitor destination - there's plenty to do here before the five rings roll into town.

The waterfront promenade of Canada Place - that sail-roofed convention centre landmark that seems to be on every postcard - is the place to start. Ambling to its pier-like northern tip, the snow-capped North Shore mountains loom ahead, separated from downtown by Burrard Inlet, home to droning seaplanes, athletic kayakers and the occasional bobbing head of a harbour seal. To the left is the new convention centre expansion and then Stanley Park, exemplifying a city that's found the right balance between urban sophistication and natural charm.

Many visitors make straight for the crowded sidewalks of Robson Street, the city's main shopping stroll. Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory is a recommended pit stop to pick up some edible souvenirs, or you can just watch through the window as they mix up the latest batch of gloopy fudge in their giant copper cauldron. Those who want to convert to the slim-line West Coast look should probably avoid the fudge and walk across the street to Lululemon Athletica where locals have made the stretchy yoga gear sold here into a full-time fashion.

If you want to give your credit cards a rest, leave Robson Street and

