

MOVING TO OAK BAY

by Emmanouela S.

I moved to Oak Bay in July 2016 and it was love at first sight. I first came in by the scenic route on Beach Drive. The golf course set the tone, winding me down with its peaceful green undulating and open space right next to the ocean. Then came the beautiful homes along the way and the impressive Oak Bay Beach Hotel which welcomes newcomers driving into the community. In a strange way it felt somehow familiar, the beautiful tree covered road reminded me of parts of my home town. Then the road opened up at the Oak Bay Marina with gorgeous views of the ocean after which I finally arrived at Willows Beach which would become my neighborhood.



Willows Beach

I couldn't believe I had found a place just a block away from the beach! Oak Bay combined the best of what I loved about my home town together with all of my

favorite places in Europe to perfection. Amazed I just stood there, looking all around me, taking in all the beauty that was so generously offered to my senses. The lush greenery, the gorgeous houses, the beautiful and abundant flowers, plus the ocean to boot! Having spent most of my life in Southern Europe, Belgium and England, my first experience of Canada in Northern Alberta had been a rather unpleasant culture and climatic shock. What I was experiencing with all my senses now in Oak Bay was beyond comforting!

I thought to myself this was a dream come true. My body felt a delicious pleasure under the warmth of that beautiful sunny summer day and my heart was filled with a sense of bliss. My mind was eager to explore this new found paradise. I started from the Village on Oak Bay Avenue, the 'High Street' of Oak Bay if you like, which is a wonderful assortment of charming small shops and businesses. It has everything you may need, from bakeries to cafes, pubs and restaurants, to boutiques, bookshop, pharmacy, banks and grocery stores, you name it, everything is there. For a European it feels so comforting and familiar, it brings a smile to my face.

My husband and I love to start our day either at Ottavio's Italian Bakery, coming up from Beach drive into Oak Bay Village or further up on the right at Discovery Coffee. The first one has a wonderful collection of cheese, cookies and sweets along with Italian groceries and breads and the second has great music and coffee not to mention chocolate croissants with generous amounts of chocolate!

My favorite restaurant by far is Vis-à-Vis next to the Penny Farthing Pub in the center of Oak Bay Village. I just love the steak with the parmesan frites there! More than that, what I love about the place is the warm and attractive interior design as well as the wonderful service. Clients are made to feel welcome, valued

and respected and unless you go at rush hour the place is generally peaceful and quiet. Not to mention in the summer or even in winter when the weather is nice, you can sit outside facing the street surrounded by greenery enjoying a most delicious meal or glass of wine while observing the Oak Bay Village life.

My husband's favorite place is the Penny Farthing Pub right next to Vis-à-Vis. I must admit I love the interior décor of the Pub very much - it reminds me of my student years in Guildford - yet because it is usually always quite busy, I find it too loud for my taste. The food however is exceptional, the service great and the collection of beers amazing. You can even get a taste of six different beers in mini beer glasses to acquaint yourself to local varieties, some of which are superb!

Almost right across is my favorite boutique 'Maresa' where I have found some of my most beloved pieces of clothing. The owner is very helpful and refreshingly direct in advising you what suits you best. In other words you can rest assured you will come out of there with something that will make you look good, with which you will be happy and collect compliments.

Another favorite place lays hidden on a little side street on Wilmot Place, just across from Fairways - the little super market - and it is a tiny gourmet grocery store called Ambrosia Fine Foods & Deli. That is where I find all the things that I usually cannot find anywhere else. From Italian pasta to Greek cheese, to Halva, Italian coffee, Greek olive oil, my favorite brand of Portuguese sardines, and the list does not end there. The owners are absolutely fantastic! Friendly, helpful, devoted to their business and their clients, they ensure you leave their shop happy, satisfied and always with a treat.

Further up on Oak Bay Avenue is the Village Butcher with a wonderful collection of sausages of different kinds and prime quality meats. Once again, like most shops

in Oak Bay the interior atmosphere of the place together with the exceptional service of the staff, makes shopping there a pleasure that can make your day.

A place I discovered recently which is right on the outskirts of Oak Bay on Foul Bay Road, is Charelli's Cheese Shop, Deli & Catering. I avoid going there too often because I never manage to get out of the place less than a couple hundred dollars lighter. If you are a cheese lover this is the place to go. Furthermore, they have the Original Cote d'Or dark chocolate bars! Need I say more?

Where do I find the best Filet Mignon? At Slater's on Cadboro Bay Road. Not only that, but they have a wonderful Organic Irish Cheddar there that is irresistible. This place seems rather innocuous at first, but they get you somewhere on the way out with a great collection of sauces and condiments and different sorts of chocolates on the counter depending on the season.

There is no 'innocent' shop in Oak Bay, one way or the other each and every one of them will manage to lure you into buying something, maybe not one day but certainly the next. One such shop is Wilson W&J on Newport Avenue. There is one in down town Victoria, but this one is by far my favorite for two reasons; it is nice and quiet and the sales person is a very warm and friendly lady from Belgium with whom I have a chat in French or Flemish. That is where I find my favorite European brands of jeans and high quality clothing. I have also found some beautiful sweaters for my husband there as well as pretty good deals on the Sales racks in the back. Worth checking out.

I almost forgot my most favorite place of all, a little secret relaxing heaven which is Jane's Hair salon. It is right on the corner of Oak Bay Avenue and Monterey Street, down in the lower level next to the pet groomer. Yes, I suppose if you have a dog you can both book your hair appointments together on the same day and

time! Jane has a great eye to envision what kind of cut will suit you best and the salon itself even though tiny is the coziest and most beautiful I have ever been to. There is always great soft music playing in the background and last but not least there is Mr. Rex! A high spirited, cute little miniature Pincher who loves women but hates men. Gentlemen, you have been warned!

Oak Bay is not just the Village and the shops of course and there is so much to explore. My husband and I love going to the Marina and visit 'the girls'. The girls being a group of 8-9 female seals who seem to be regulars. Right next door is the Marina Dockside Eatery, where we enjoy a most tasty ham and cheese sandwich along with a cold glass of beer. It is quite busy there but if you get one of the tables by the window, you will soon forget the people around you and get absorbed by the peaceful sight of the boats, the ocean and far away shores.



One of my summer favorite walk destinations is the Uplands Park and Cattle Point, further up on Beach drive going from Willows Beach towards Cadboro Bay. You

can also drive there and you will find abundant parking space. The view of the ocean is amazing, and can range from peaceful and relaxing to awesome and invigorating when the weather is wild in the winter. I prefer it in the summer though for one main reason, the piano! Yes, there is a piano there in the summer, as well as on Willows beach, but the one on Cattle Point is a whole different experience.

First time I saw it I couldn't believe my eyes! A piano in an open space like that at the disposal of the public? Furthermore I never expected that the piano would sound so loud and clear next to the ocean. The feeling of playing the piano there facing the ocean is so freeing and exhilarating, relaxing and pleasurable that I would invite you to try it even if you don't know how to play the piano.



Cattle Point

The ode to Oak Bay wouldn't be complete without a walk on Willows beach, which I have admired at every time of the day and night. My most favorite moment though is early morning at sunrise.



Willows Beach at sunrise

The sensation when you set foot on the sand as the first rays of the sun come out, surrounded by the bird population feeding in frenzy, the raccoon families fishing and the seals swimming in the water, is out of this world! I had never seen so much wildlife

before so close to inhabited areas, as that is one thing you don't see much anymore in Europe. Such a blessing, so much beauty, it makes you feel so grateful for the beauty of life.

Speaking of which, I cannot describe how it felt to see a family of deer walking into our garden one day, only to discover that Oak Bay is full of them! Having seen

a live deer only once in my life before and that on the mountains in Germany, watching them go in and out of the gardens and crossing the street on street crossings felt beyond unreal. Most locals are not too thrilled as they love eating flowers, tender bushes and not only, yet I am too new to the place and still too fascinated by their sight to complain.

There is a lot more to discover in Oak Bay, from small parks, to view points, to beaches and hidden oases like the Gonzales Hill regional Park on Denison Road, the Bowker Creek Walkway or the Trafalgar Park on King George Terrace. One could swear that fairies exist in Oak Bay and if you don't 'see' them in a garden you are bound to catch a glimpse of them somewhere along the beautiful winding paths and among the abundant variety of flowers and orgy of colors of the natural landscape.

To me this is what Oak Bay is all about: Magic! The beautiful heritage architecture, the mesmerizing Garry oaks, the quiet peaceful roads, the cute and vibrant little Village. The friendly people, the long sandy beaches, the ocean, the wildlife, the gorgeous colorful gardens. It has so much to offer in so many different ways to both residents and visitors. It offers one so much satisfaction at every level, it fills your heart, senses and soul that it is very hard not to fall in love with it!



Photos by author