

Gastown, the oldest neighbourhood of Vancouver, is somehow also the youngest, and the merriest way to experience its schizophrenic charm is by exploring its numerous watering holes.

Text Vipasha Aloukik Pai

Sometimes all you need is some whiskey.

The year is 1867. The Fraser Canyon Gold Rush has let you down and your saloon business has gone bankrupt. You are down to your last couple of dollars and very few possessions, including—and this is very important—a single barrel of whiskey. What do you do?

If you're John 'Gassy Jack' Deighton – adventurer, entrepreneur and inexhaustible storyteller, you take off into a wilderness that is industrial but dangerously unpopulated. You convince some local mill workers to help you build a saloon of sorts, enticing them with generous swigs of your whiskey and within 24 hours, get right to work! Slowly but surely, a settlement forms around your saloon, turns into a township, and in the process, you become the founding father of Gastown, in the very heart of Vancouver.

I knew this story even before I stepped in to Gastown. And yet, I was surprised by how much I loved the neighbourhood. Like a beloved character from a favourite movie, Gastown—with its trendy cafes, funky pubs and spirited bars—throbbed with old-world charm and heaps of moxie. And I thought, what better way to explore the 'hood than to tip my hat to Gassy Jack and tinkle my way through Gastown?

▲ The Gastown steam clock in Downtown Vancouver is an integral part of the city's heritage. The clock looks like an antique but was designed and engineered in 1977 by noted horologist Raymond Saunders. Over the years, the clock's quarter-hour chimes (to Westminster Quarters) and the simultaneous whips of steam it lets out have got deeply ingrained into the aural and atmospheric fabric of Gastown, lending it its old-worldly charm and quaintness.

Gastown guzzler



Image courtesy: Heather Hospitality Group



Pourhouse images courtesy: Christopher Pratt

First, the good eats

As pre-inebriation wisdom would have you believe, it is always a good idea to eat before you drink. For me, Blood Alley was a good place to start. Many believe it is one of Vancouver's eerier haunts because of the profusion of blood spilled here (historically, of course), but my guide for the evening assured me that the name has less to do with crime and more to do with the business of local butchers. Revitalised, today Blood Alley thrives, indeed in Spartan brown-bricked chutzpah, housing one of Gastown's classier joints—Salt Tasting Room.

Perfect for cheese-and-wine buffs, it also offers an excellent selection of charcuterie. The premise here is simple—pick any three items from their meat and cheese selection and any three condiments to go with them. You can also choose to have the Butcher Plate or if you're a lover of cheese like me, then go for the Cheese Monger Plate. Mine came loaded with three selections—

the nutty Lincolnshire Poacher, Brie Le Châtelain and my favourite, Point Reyes which was paired perfectly with Similkameen Honeycomb. You can also pair your tasting plate with three wines, but unless you're a certified oenophile, my advice would be to let the good folks at Salt Tasting Room pick your wines for you.

If you're in Gastown, it would be all kinds of wrong to miss grabbing a Scotch Egg at Pourhouse on Water Street. Located near the famous Gastown steam clock, housed in a 100-year-old structure and designed with impeccable Jazz Age-inspired motifs, Pourhouse exemplifies classic flapper-era elegance to the hilt. If the music and the ambience don't impress you, the 38-foot bar, crafted from 120-year-old Douglas Fir planks, is sure to get your vote. When I finally visited Pourhouse, I instinctively ordered the Scotch Egg—a hard-boiled egg wrapped in deep-fried sausage accompanied with some terrific aioli—

which, in retrospect, was easily the best thing I'd had in Vancouver. A bar snack, the Scotch Egg must be accompanied with some good old-fashioned cocktails and in this regard, Pourhouse did not disappoint. When I saw Arsenic And Old Lace on the cocktail menu, my Cary Grant-loving, old Hollywood heart skipped a happy beat.

Serious about the sauce

A little further down Water Street is one of



▲ Clockwise from above: Pourhouse's roasted bone marrow, sea salt, pickled radish, parsley and grilled bread; Pourhouse's famed 38-foot bar where one can order the best of wines from BC's over-200 wineries. Their forte, though, is whiskey and its applications to cocktails; Salt Tasting Room's servers are one of the reasons the establishment has so much recall value. They patiently guide you if you need help deciding what meat, cheese and condiments to opt for, and then pair the perfect wines with your selection; Pourhouse's rustic apple pie with two scoops of ice cream is a hearty end to a hearty dinner which they pride themselves on making and serving.

Vancouver's oldest bars—The Lamplighter Public House. Like Gastown, The Lamplighter too has multiple personalities. On my first visit on a Saturday night, I saw a stylish, live-music joint with plenty of hoopla and lots of hustle—very much, very happening. On my revisit on a Monday night, it had transformed into your regular neighbourhood hangout, the perfect place to grab a stool at the bar, get a beer and catch up on sports after a long day at work. Then, I found out, there's



The Portside Pub hangs courtesy of Alayne Knoll



In a single evening in Gastown, it's impossible to do justice to everything the neighbourhood has to offer. So take my advice and take your time.

Pub Trivia Tuesdays, Bourbon and Bingo Wednesdays, live reggae on Thursdays—basically something for everyone, each night of the week. On the web, it is popular as a great place to meet single people and has also been voted as one of the best bars in Vancouver in 2012. In my

books too, a visit to The Lamplighter is a must, if only to raise a toast to the place that was the first to serve alcohol to the women of Vancouver.

A short walk from The Lamplighter, at the corner of Water Street and Carall Street, stands a statue of John Deighton, the eponymous founder of Gastown who, in his time, was lovingly called 'Gassy Jack' because of the rattling raucousness that he was. There he stands, almost at the helm of Gastown, watching his beloved neighbourhood tick and pulse with a timeless spirit.

A couple of steps from Gassy Jack is The Portside Pub. There must be a reason why pop/rock legend Prince chose The Portside Pub as the location for the launch party of his 2013 Live Out Loud Tour. And

unlike most places with active live-music culture, The Portside Pub has space—lots of it. Three levels, two bars and top-notch ambience coupled with a nod to what they call 'maritime pub culture'—replete with good beer, comfort food and designed with seafaring curiosities. The beer selection is a balanced mix of local and imported brews and the music—live or otherwise—is great. If you want to party

◀ Clockwise from left: The Lamplighter—the first to obtain a liquor license in BC and named after John Clough, a lighter of oil lamps in 1857—is touted as Vancouver's "busiest pub" and serves a large selection of craft beer and cocktails; As the weekend arrives, Portside transforms itself from a pub to a club. With over 24 craft brews on tap and throbming music, it's one of Gastown's most popular hangouts; Portside's 'maritime pub culture' decor is the pub's way of tipping its hat to Gastown's earliest inhabitants—the sailors and fishermen who came here in the mid-19th century looking for a better life and to Gassy Jack, of course, whose Globe Saloon used to stand just steps away.



Get lost in the city, Alayne Knoll

You can find information for:

The Salt Tasting Room at
www.salttastingroom.com

Pourhouse at
www.pourhousevancouver.com

The Lamplighter Public House at
www.donnellygroup.ca/locations/pubs/the-lamplighter

The Portside Pub at
www.theportsidepub.com

Guilt & Co at
www.guiltandcompany.co

the night away with your favourite bunch of people, this joint will ensure you go home happy and high.

The hustle, the hoopla

If The Lamplighter and The Portside Pub are popular and trendy, Guilt & Co is their grungy counterpart. Swanky and chic, it brims with oodles of street cred. Located underground, literally below Gastown on Alexander Street, Guilt & Co is where you should go for a satisfying fill of live blues, jazz and cabaret. There is an element of magic in live music—when it's good it has the power to yank you out of any kind of pit and bring you back to life. On my night at Guilt & Co, I soaked in the musical stylings of Jen Hodge All Stars—exquisite, by the way—and that, coupled with my fill of the strongest local IPAs was all I needed to be lifted from oblivion and transported into the age of the red hot. I left, wanting to come back for more, a sozzled bearcat with no room for bushwa.

In a single evening in Gastown, it's impossible to do justice to everything the neighbourhood has to offer. For me, time was my best friend. How else would I have discovered the singular charm of each of the places I visited and revisited? So take my advice and take your time. The cobbled



Alan Mathew/Steve Lupton/Canada

streets of Gastown will not let you down. Explore every interesting nook, indulge in delicious food, spend hours at a cafe and people-watch, learn Gastown's colourful history, make new friends and, most importantly, taste every local brew before you decide on a favourite.

▲ Above: Standing on top of a barrel of whiskey, John 'Gassy Jack' Deighton looks over the neighbourhood he founded—famous today for the countless establishments that serve the tipples and its varied concoctions. Below: British-Canadian singer-songwriter Tonye Aganaba performs at Guilt & Co, one of Gastown's prime haunts for live music. Fancy a game of Jenga while you listen to some upcoming talent and sip cocktails that have poems as descriptions? Guilt & Co might just be the place for you.



Guilt & Co (Image Courtesy: Ray McEachern of ROM Photography)

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to Toronto from Mumbai, Delhi and Brussels. From Toronto, you can fly to Vancouver using our codeshare partner Air Canada. If time permits, embark on the scenic transcontinental train journey aboard VIA Rail Canada from Toronto to Vancouver, in which you can admire much of what Canada has to offer, including the Muskoka Lakes and the Canadian Rockies.

Accommodation

From five-star hotels to comfortable hostels, accommodation in Vancouver is aplenty. If you're watching your budget, The Burrard (www.theburrard.com) on Burrard Street is a great option—trendy, colourful and cost-effective without compromising on amenities (free water, free Wi-Fi).

For more information

Log on to www.gastown.org or www.tourismvancouver.com