

Vancouver's Artistic Airport

Over the past 16 years, I have many times passed through YVR - Vancouver International Airport on Canada's west coast. Whether on a domestic or international flight, the ever-growing collection of art and architectural showpieces in every terminal and connecting link has something new to offer, something to surprise and delight, or something to greet with the familiarity of an old friend. In all my world travels, I have encountered no other airport that even begins to replicate this thoughtful, inspiring space - effectively an enormous art gallery through which more than 16 million people pass each year.



A full-time curator, whose position was first created by the Vancouver Airport Authority in 1994, takes her mandate very seriously to create originality and inspiration "on the fly", working in tandem with architectural and interior design experts equally dedicated to making YVR both distinctive and award-winning rather than a predictable shopping and eating environment. The Authority, with its community-based Board of Directors, is a not-for-profit organization that reinvests all earnings into airport development and improvements. Refreshingly, investing in the artistic side of YVR is a consistently high priority.

Anyone who has visited British Columbia appreciates the strength of its spectacular natural beauty, natural resources and distinctive aboriginal cultures. Those are the elements and unique sense of place deliberately showcased in this artistic airport, although there are also some wonderfully whimsical selections on display to do nothing more than bring a smile to the face of the harried traveler.



Most visibly, the spectacular contemporary aboriginal art has driven the artistic vision for an airport set against a dramatic backdrop of ocean and mountains. YVR houses the largest collection of Northwest Coast native art in the world. Arriving at the International Terminal, visitors heading into the Customs area are overwhelmed by towering 5.5 meter red cedar "Welcome Figures", colorful 5-meter-high aboriginal weavings hung as banners, and an enormous 6-meter diameter cedar Spindle Whorl carved by a Vancouver native artist to depict the theme and spirit of flight.

At the heart of the International Terminal, the bronze cast, six-ton Jade Canoe is the focal point of YVR's art collection. Created by Canada's most acclaimed aboriginal artist, Bill Reid, it has been hailed by art critics around the world as one of the most significant sculptures of the 20th century. Placing this imposing Haida Gwaii art work, fully accessible to all, at the center of an airport instead of in a museum is a bold statement in itself, with visitor photo ops numbering in the thousands each day.

More recently unveiled, The Pacific Passage awaits passengers arriving in Vancouver from U.S. destinations. Travelers enter through a traditionally-constructed post and beam longhouse doorway, emerging into a Northwest Coast world, complete with the sights and sounds of a sandy beach and lapping water, a 12-metre carved and decorated whaling canoe, and a spectacular thunderbird sculpture soaring overhead. "Am I really in an airport?" is a thought that immediately comes to mind!

Some design elements throughout the airport are more subtle such as ceiling lights and huge sweeps of custom-designed carpet each representing logs that commonly jam together at odd angles in the rivers and coastal inlets around BC's forestry communities. Don't forget to look up and down as you hurry to or from your gate!



Drawing inspiration from the natural beauty of the province, YVR's International Terminal also features an indoor creek with running water, plants, logs and intriguing glass-sculpted salmon sprinkled through the stream-bed. The area is surrounded by cafés, a full restaurant, shops, comfortable (non-airport) seating and original artwork. A large, 114,000-litre aquarium showcasing some 850 indigenous sea animals serves as its Pacific West Coast centerpiece. This is my favorite relax-and-decompress zone, another place to completely forget you are in an airport.

As Canada's second busiest airport, YVR (YVR.ca) welcomed 16.2 million passengers in 2009, representing 67 airlines serving 119 destinations. On the technical side, it is among the most modern and efficient in the world. Yet, it is the heart-side of the airport that defines its character and makes it a pleasure to visit and re-visit often.



Recent YVR Awards

- Rated second favorite airport in the world by Condé Nast Traveler magazine, 2008 Readers choice awards.
- Airports Council International's 2009 global airport survey of international passengers: YVR rated #5 in the world (15 to 25 million passengers category).
- UK-based Skytrax: 2010 award rated YVR the #1 airport in North America in a survey of international passengers.

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