

Beyond the rinks

Everywhere you go in Vancouver, Olympic fever

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BC Place Stadium and Canada Hockey Place from the bird's eye view. Photo: VANOC

VANCOUVER – With fans now counting down the hours until Olympic hockey kicks off, the excitement on Vancouver's streets is unmistakable.

Wander through the downtown core of the 2010 Olympic host city, and you'll spot people with Olympic jackets and accreditations everywhere. On spacious Georgia Street, giant red maple leaves and athlete photos adorn the sides of buildings like the Bay department store and the Hotel Georgia. Turn on to Granville Street, and Taiwanese lanterns mingle with totem poles in a special pedestrian section set up for the Games. Robson Square is packed with families at the public skating rink; the Main Press Centre beneath the white-sails roof of Canada Place is teeming with journalists from all over the world; even many restaurants are switching to 24/7 operations, hanging out international flags, posting cartoons of hockey players taking slapshots with chocolate-cake pucks.

Yet of course, the epicentre of excitement is down at False Creek. There, Canada Hockey Place, the main venue for men's Olympic hockey, and BC Place Stadium, the site of the 2010 opening and closing ceremonies, sit side-by-side. They are the two hottest places to be in town, and the eyes of the world really are starting to turn toward Vancouver now. The excitement reinforces the notion that the Olympics are bigger than any national or professional sports league, bigger even than sport itself.

If you're lucky enough to attend these Games in person, there are a million things to see, do, and experience even when you're not at Canada Hockey Place or the UBC Thunderbird Arena. Country houses, pavilions, and celebration sites abound, and in most cases, admission is free for the public. Generally, these places are open from February 12 onward, although some start earlier.

Just east of Canada Hockey Place is Molson Canadian Hockey House, a huge magnet for international hockey-themed hospitality and entertainment between February 12 and 28. The numbers largely tell the story at this tent-style facility: \$15 million for construction, 6,038 square metres (62,000 square feet), capacity of 3,000, a plethora of 103-inch plasma TVs showing Olympic hockey, and nightly concerts by Canadian rockers like Tom Cochrane and Colin James. Check out Hockey Hall of Fame memorabilia cases while mingling with ex-NHLers like Paul Coffey, Yvan Cournoyer, Grant Fuhr, and Denis Potvin. Wayne Gretzky Day is February 19, and the Great One will be in the house.



Molson Canadian Hockey House is ready for the fans. Photo: Lori Henry

Molson Canadian Hockey House will also be the site of the IIHF's Triple Gold Club induction ceremony on February 22. Banners already hang from the ceiling to honour the 22 inductees. There are still a few Fan Zone passes available at \$99 per day, though only on three days, and VIP passes range from \$425 to \$750. Check molsoncanadianhockey-house.com for more information.

Further down False Creek, pop into Russia's Sochi House for a preview of the 2014 Winter Games starting on February 11. This giant geodesic dome was originally built for the 1986 World's Fair and normally operates as Science World, but here the Russians will showcase their famously scientific approach toward sport. Watch classic Russia-Canada hockey games on the huge OMNIMAX movie screen, compete in a table hockey tournament, get autographs and photos with Russian greats like Pavel Bure and Vladislav Tretiak and more. Day passes are required. See sochi2014.com/en/russian-house for more details.

You can't play hockey on the Robson Square rink, but you can participate in a public hockey shootout competition in front of the Royal Canadian Mint Pavilion (500 Granville St.) between 11:45 a.m. and 1 p.m. on February 11. The prize is two tickets to the men's gold medal game on February 28. Overseeing the shootout will be the most popular Vancouver Canuck of all time, Trevor Linden, a 1998 Olympian. From February 12 onward, the Mint Pavilion will showcase Olympic medals, a million-dollar gold coin, and commemorative Olympic coins for sale.

Looking for somewhere energy-packed to watch Olympic hockey games you're not attending? Just west of Canada Hockey Place, LiveCity Downtown has huge video screens, in addition to the Canada and Manitoba Pavilions. The Bell Ice Cube is another nearby option at the intersection of Robson and Beatty. Scandinavian fans who don't mind heading into the suburbs can catch Swedish and Finnish games on big-screen TVs at the Scandinavian Centre (6540 Thomas St.) with a live feed from the Finnish broadcaster, YLE.

Other pavilions feature the culture, food, tourism, and entertainment options of various Olympic hockey nations. For instance, on Granville Island, the House of Switzerland has chocolates, cheese, and Swiss medal celebrations, while Atlantic Canada House (starting February 13) will dish up enough lobsters and lively fiddle music to get Sidney Crosby partying hearty.

Downtown Vancouver is laden with sports bars, from traditional packed-out haunts like the Shark Club (180 W. Georgia) to the upscale Red Card Sports Bar (900 Seymour St.), with brick-oven pizzas, more than 40 craft beers, and a classic Gordie Howe saying on the wall: "All hockey players are bilingual: they know English and profanity." At the Granville Room, patrons can sip a Double Lucky Loonie cocktail (whisky, maple syrup, ale, and liqueur) named after the 2002 Canadian men's and women's gold-medal hockey teams.

This is one of the world's top restaurant cities, and it isn't hard to dine in the style of hockey heroes. Roberto Luongo of Team Canada and the Vancouver Canucks often dines on lobster linguini at Cioppino's (1133 Hamilton St.) in trendy Yaletown before home games. Twin Swedish superstars Henrik and Daniel Sedin favour fresh sushi at nearby Honjin (138 Davie St.). Or head into Gastown, a few blocks away from Canada Hockey Place, and sample oysters and smoked sablefish at So.Cial at Le Magasin (200-332 Water St.), co-owned by former Canucks goalie Kirk McLean (a 1990 IIHF World Championship participant) and ex-coach Bob McCammon.

No matter where you go or what you do, you'll find hockey connections in the Olympic host city.

Pop into the Vancouver Public Library (350 W. Georgia St.) if you love to read about hockey. The Roman Colosseum-style building, within eyeshot of Canada Hockey Place, contains more than 1,100 hockey books, a testament to Canada's passion for the game.

Checking out some Olympic figure skating at the Pacific Coliseum? The former home of the Canucks and current headquarters for the WHL's Vancouver Giants was a host venue for the 2006 IIHF World Junior Championship. The 2003 movie *Miracle* with Kurt Russell recreated the American "Miracle on Ice" at the next-door PNE Forum.

Or what if you head up to the mega-ski resort of Whistler to watch Olympic skiing or hit the slopes yourself? You might find yourself relaxing at a spa afterwards, and the brand-new Le Scandinave Spa (8010 Mons Rd.), with its Finnish sauna and steam baths, is partially owned by former NHLer and 1996 World Cup of Hockey veteran Vincent Damphousse.

The list goes on and on. In Vancouver, you can shop for hockey equipment at Cyclone Taylor Sports (6575 Oak St.), in business for more than 50 years and named after the superstar scorer who led the Vancouver Millionaires to the city's only Stanley Cup in 1915. Video game lovers will be intrigued to learn that Electronic Arts operates one of the world's largest design and motion capture studios in nearby Burnaby, where the popular NHL series by EA Sports is created annually.

If you want to experience Canadian major junior hockey first-hand, even with the Giants on an extended road trip, drive out to Chilliwack (about an hour and a half east of Vancouver on the Trans-Canada Highway). There, you can watch the Chilliwack Bruins compete versus Vancouver on February 13 and against Seattle on February 16 at Prospera Centre.

For a bird's-eye perspective on Vancouver, from the forested acres of Stanley Park to the white-bubble roof of BC Place Stadium, head to the North Shore to visit Grouse Mountain, open 24/7 during the Olympic Games. It's hosting NBC's *Today Show*, and skiing, snowboarding, ziplining, and viewing bears and wolves in an on-site wildlife refuge are among the other diversions. Public transit (bus #232 or #236) goes to the base of Grouse Mountain, and an aerial tramway called the Skyride whisks visitors to the summit.

This is just a small sampling of what visiting hockey fans can experience in Vancouver in the weeks to come. And what happens inside the rinks at the biggest hockey tournament ever will only heighten the excitement everywhere else.

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