

# Rita & Ian's Newsletter (Issue 2)

January 25, 2009

The cliffhanger end of Issue 1 left our plucky heroes shaking off the remaining effects of jetlag and settling into their palatial new abode<sup>1</sup>.

That was on Friday. Saturday and Sunday were filled with the delights of the shopping malls of Victoria, as we needed to stock up on a number of items for the flat. Not the most exciting of errands, as you can imagine, so we'll mostly gloss over that. We did succeed in ordering ourselves a futon (should be here in a week or so), getting some very nice bamboo/cotton sheets (Rita was very pleased with these!), getting some pots and pans and things for the kitchen, and we also got a lovely rosewood coffee table for our "living room" (we have a studio flat, so one end is "living room" because that's where we live and the other end is "bedroom", mostly because that's where the bed is).

One thing that is super cool in Victoria is the bus system. Buses run all over the city, are frequent, not too crowded, and are easily accessible (motorised wheelchair ramps on all buses and the bus drivers are very efficient about using them). Even more amazingly, the buses all have bike racks. Up to two bikes can be stuck on the front of the bus and are carried free of charge! To FirstBus in Bristol, all I can say is: you SUCK!

We were pretty tired by Sunday night after all the running around, but we did have a slightly more habitable flat and a fridge full of food, so we were happy with that. Food shopping here is very good indeed: all of the supermarkets have plenty of vegan options, there's a wide choice of local vegetables, and everything is pretty cheap compared to the U.K. Very important for us!

Monday saw us starting our new jobs for real. Our place is about a 15 minute walk to the UVic campus, most of which is either on quiet residential streets or on paths away from the road. Once we reach the campus, the first order of the day is "The Rabbit Game". The UVic campus is populated by hundreds of feral rabbits descended from a few pairs that escaped or were released some years ago. The rules of "The Rabbit Game" require the players to compete to spot the first, second and third rabbits of the day. Depending on the lighting conditions and the coloration of the rabbits, this can either be dead easy (late start, bright sunlight, black rabbit against pale path or white rabbit against grassy background) or quite a challenge (early start, sun not yet up, brown rabbit against brown leafy background). The

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main prize in “The Rabbit Game” consists of being able to hoot triumphantly “I won! I won! I saw all three first!” or something like that. The main technical innovation in “The Rabbit Game” this week has been the development of techniques of indicating the presence of rabbits without swinging of arms or other pointing motions. A simple “Eep!” or “Look!” is enough to establish rabbit-spotting precedence, easily out-maneuvring arm-swinging, finger-pointing competitors.

We quite like the rabbits. Can you tell?

We should probably also record that the rabbits seem to quite like playing with cars on the campus ring road. The cars usually win, with predictably messy consequences for the rabbits. Very sad.

The ring road is, as you might imagine, a road in the shape of a ring that runs around the campus. Most of the university buildings are within the ring, and it provides a useful feature for orientation on campus. It takes a little while to get used to, since it’s quite easy to walk from one side of the campus to the other, aiming for a particular building, then to turn the wrong way on the ring road and end up back where you started.

Our departments are on opposite sides of the campus. Rita is in the new Bob Wright Centre for Earth, Ocean and Atmosphere Sciences, which is a very nice building with lots of lounge areas and squidgey sofas to sit on. There are probably also even some offices where people do some work! Ian is in the new Department of Social Sciences and Mathematics. Why social sciences and mathematics share a building sounds like a long and sad history, but at least it’s quite a nice new building and everyone has an office, which is a lot more than you can say about many academic departments. Maths has two floors of one wing of the building. The two wings of the building are separated by the “Ian Ross Memorial Garden” that we mentioned in the last newsletter. That hasn’t got any less embarrassing for Ian in the last week.

We’ve both mostly been settling in this week and doing administrative things. Ian has been trying to get some work done, but both of his bosses have been away, so it’s been pretty quiet. Rita’s boss is going easy on her for now, so she’s mostly been sorting out computing issues.

We went on one slightly amusing administrative adventure in the middle of the week, as we wandered down to the nearby University Heights shopping centre to open a bank account. The Canadian banking system doesn’t seem to have benefited from the period of cut-throat competition that led to the current relatively good service offered by U.K. banks. Yes, it is shocking to use the phrases “good service” and “U.K. banks” in the same sentence, but in comparison to the U.K., the banking system here is positively medieval.

We turned up at the local branch of the CIBC bank laden with all sorts of pieces of paper, passports, other ID, and so on. The conversation went something like this:

“You want to open an account? No problem! We can do that, for sure. You’ve got some ID? Social Insurance Numbers? Good! Now, do you understand how the transaction charges work? There are charges for: drawing money from a cash machine, making electronic transfers, writing cheques, and more or less any other financial transaction you can think of, apart from paying money into your account.”

“OK, we can live with that. We’ve seen that there’s an account that has a small number of free transactions per month and we can probably fit within that limit. Next: can you tell us about electronic transfers for bill payments and things?”

“Well, you can make electronic payments to other CIBC accounts.”

“Eh? What about other banks?”

“Oh no, you can’t do that yet. We’re working on being able to make electronic transfers to accounts at other banks, but we’re not there yet!”

“Oh, OK. Well, can you tell us the IBAN number for our account, so we can do a wire transfer of some money from the U.K.?”

“Um. IBAN number? What’s that?”

(It turns out that Canada does not use this eminently sensible, standardised, check-summed format for ensuring that international money transfers go to the correct account. Instead, you give the Canadian domestic bank code and account number, and hope that no-one mistypes or misreads it along the way, thus leading to your money ending up in a random account in Paraguay.)

“Never mind. Last thing: how do we go about getting a credit card?”

“Ooh, that might be difficult. You say you’ve just moved to Canada? And you only have temporary Social Insurance Numbers? And you don’t have any existing credit history in Canada? I don’t think we can give you a credit card at all! You might be able to get a pre-paid or secured card, where you deposit money to cover your credit card limit, but I don’t know if we can even do that for you.”

“Is there any way to transfer my 20-year credit history from the U.K. to get around all this?”

“Oh no! We can’t even do credit history transfers from the U.S.!”

So, we left the place with a joint checking account (balance \$0.00) and two cheap-looking bank cards that don’t even have our names on them, let alone any of the fancy security features you tend to expect from European banks. We are left feeling that the most appropriate word to describe the Canadian banking system is: *quaint*. It also seems as though it’s not possible to pay our phone bills with either cash or a credit card not issued by a Canadian financial institution. There was a time when the U.K. financial system seemed rather Byzantine and inconvenient, but it seems that they have nothing on the Canadians in this respect.

All this stuff is more amusing than frustrating for us, and it’s pretty clear that this will all become easier as we get more settled here, but it’s very interesting to see how different things are here.

Anyway, enough about administration. On to more exciting matters!

We’ve been running a couple of times in the last week, once down to Cadboro Bay, which is the beach closest to the UVic campus, and once around a trail that runs all the way around the campus.

Oh yes, there’s a campus beach (almost). How fantastic is that? The beach is in a little bay, and is covered by driftwood logs that have washed up after storms. It has a children’s playground with a big octopus slide (yay!) and is very very pleasant. It’s unfortunately quite a way downhill from the campus, making the run back up pretty tough in some places. We took a little detour on the way back through some woods called Mystic Vale, which are very pretty — lots of trees and moss and ferns. Other attractions at Cadboro Bay, we discovered the next day on a lunchtime walk, include Pepper’s Foods, a very good locally owned supermarket, a nice delicatessen shop and a bulk food shop. This last thing doesn’t sound very appetising, but it’s really good, and really quite unusual in the U.K. The place

is just full of bins filled with different bulk foods you can buy by weight: flour, rice, pasta, nuts, seeds, dried fruit, spices, tea, and lots of other stuff. We came back down later in the week and stocked up there and in Pepper's.

In other food-related news, though mostly to do with things you shouldn't eat as food (!), we've been making contact with some of the vegan groups in Victoria. Wednesday night saw us heading down to Green Cuisine for a meeting of the Victoria chapter of Friends of Animals, an animal rights group that publishes the Victoria Vegan, a good newsletter about animal rights and vegan food in the Victoria area. As well as the usual delicious Green Cuisine feed, there was some interesting talk there about the Newfoundland seal hunt (which is just bizarre, since it accounts for only about 5% of the annual income of the fishermen involved and costs more for the government to administer than the total revenue from fur sales — why not just give that money as grants to the fishermen to allow them to do something else?) and some other ongoing campaigns that F.o.A. have. We also got to meet F.o.A.'s Canadian correspondent, Dave Shishkoff, who's a vegan bike racer whose blog we found a little while ago when we were initially thinking about moving out here. Dave's a really nice and funny guy, and is also involved in the Victoria branch of Organic Athlete, a group for "sporty vegans" (some of them very very sporty indeed, much more sporty than we will ever aspire to be). Everyone at the F.o.A. meeting was really friendly and welcoming, and there was some interesting discussion. Thursday and we were at a meeting of the UVic Vegan Association (UVA) where, as well as excellent choc chip banana-oatmeal cookies from Erin, we talked about some basic animal rights stuff and had a general chat about veganism, environmentalism, social justice and cooking. Dave was there too: we asked him if there were any vegan events in Victoria he didn't go to, and he couldn't think of any! All of these groups are full of really lovely people, and they're making us feel very welcome. And we haven't even cooked them dinner yet!

By the end of the week, we'd accumulated another list of errands and chores, so after a little bit of a Saturday lie-in, we headed out shopping again. We got quite a few things we needed, and Rita also found herself a cheap second-hand bike, with which she is very pleased! Ian was shaking off the tail end of a cold, so was a grumpy git most of the day, but the lunch buffet at the Lotus Pond vegan Chinese restaurant and an absolutely delicious ginger mango mousse cake pudding from Green Cuisine cheered him up a bit.

Sunday we'd decided we would do something outdoorsy, since we'd come to Vancouver Island for that sort of thing, and so far, we'd only seen shopping malls. Fortunately, an opportunity presented itself in a hike arranged by some people in the maths department to celebrate the 250th birthday of Robbie Burns<sup>2</sup>. We woke up to beautiful clear skies, had a quick breakfast and walked to the UVic campus to meet up with our hiking group. In all, there were 17 of us, and, as well as being a really nice day, it offered a good chance to get to know a few of the people in the maths department. We drove up to the Gowlland Tod Provincial Park, which is only about 15 minutes outside of Victoria. It was pretty cold, so a decision was made to do a circular walk, instead of shuttling cars around so we could walk all the way from one end of the range of hills the park is centred round to the other. The walk was organised by Reinhard, who is very knowledgeable about the area,

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<sup>2</sup>Rita took some photos, which Ian put up here: <http://www.skybluetrades.net/burns-day-hike> (there are also more photos from Rita at <http://www.wania.net/photos.html>).

about walking and climbing, and about mushroom-picking (but he likes to keep his best mushrooming spots to himself!). Most of the people were from the maths department, with a couple of “accompanying partners”. We walked through forest for most of the day, with lots of viewpoints out over a fjord separating the Saanich peninsula from the main part of Vancouver Island. (The city of Victoria lies at the southern end of the Saanich peninsula, and we arrived by ferry just last week (!) at Swartz Bay, right at the northern tip of the peninsula. We’ve not even been to the main part of the island yet.)

It was a beautiful day, and we saw lots of trees and mosses and lichens. Best of all were the arbutus trees, also called “strawberry trees” because of the shape of their fruit. These are bark-deciduous, and most of them had lost the outer layer of their bark to reveal very very smooth new wood underneath. They were really rather stunning. In among the forest, the whole of the forest floor was carpeted in mosses. So so green! We also saw at least a dozen species of lichens, including some with really interesting huge flat leafy growths, definitely the biggest lichens either of us had ever seen. At one point during the day, we saw two pairs of bald eagles flying over the fjord. Unfortunately, by the time binoculars had been extracted from rucksacks, the eagles had gone. Still a wonderful thing to see. We walked for about five hours, with a break for lunch (during which Reinhard produced haggis<sup>3</sup> and scotch to honour Robbie Burns!) and were really pretty satisfied with our first taste of the great Canadian outdoors! We finished off the day with a trip to the pub, some locally brewed beer and a bit of food.

We’re hoping to go walking again next weekend, and then we have some more exciting plans for the weekend after that. Stay tuned!

Love from us both,

Rita & Ian

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<sup>3</sup>For German speakers: “Haggis is sowas wie Leberknödel!” For non-German speakers: you really don’t want to know.