

**GOOD TIMES**

Left: A visit to Seattle's famous Pike Place market; Below: Statues from contemporary Chinese artist Yue Min Jun's 'A-Maze-ing Laughter'

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Fish you were here

Visiting Seattle and Vancouver in winter is an experience to be cherished. **By Caroline Lim**



DECEMBER is a great time to visit Seattle, Washington. Maybe it's the nip in the air or the festive Christmas atmosphere, but walking the city's streets almost makes you feel like you've stepped into a remake of *Sleepless in Seattle*. Fairy lights line the streets, while buskers perform on busy street corners and smiling fruit vendors exhort you to sample the season's lush bounty.

The aroma of Starbucks coffee is everywhere. Add to that the charm of riding through the city in a horse-driven carriage, clip-clopping your way past commuters heading home as dusk falls, and you almost expect to see Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan materialise on a distant corner.

If this was the start of a dream vacation, we were off to a promising start. It was December 2010 and I was leading a group of six employees from PSA International – winners of our "Have Fish! Will Travel" contest to reward those showing the most positive work attitudes and care for fellow workers. It was inspired no less by the highly successful Fish! corporate philosophy which originated with a group of fishmongers in Seattle's famous Pike Place market.

The prize was a trip to the US and Canada, kicking off no less at the place where Fish! evolved from a simple retail concept to a globally accepted corporate practice. As expected, all we had seen on video and read in books about Pike Place was real.

Unlike their run-of-the-mill counterparts, this happy band of fishmongers was merrily bantering with customers while meticulously preparing their orders. Brave customers were led behind the counter to catch "flying fish" tossed from afar, with their bare hands, much like in a ball game. I tried my hand at it after reminding the "toss-er" to avoid my face, but it was a slippery miss. Still, the energy and fun blended with focused customer service was a real treat to see first-hand.

With our appetites whetted at the market, we set out to do what all Singaporeans on holiday do – look for the best food. We found it in the most unexpected places, too. At the top of the iconic Space Needle built in 1962 for Seattle's World's Fair, we dined at the revolving SkyCity restaurant. A tourist revolving at the top of the Needle. It was a tourist trap for sure, but it had the most delectable clam chowder which was described by a co-traveller as "a dish you wish would never end".

Then when we crossed over from Seattle to neighbouring Vancouver on the second leg of our trip, I chanced upon a to-die-for Indian basmati rice with butter chicken at the Fairmont Hotel overlooking the waterfront at Canada Place. It was so good that there wasn't a grain of rice left after I was done with it.

Shopping was the other essentially Singaporean thing we had to do, and we weren't disappointed. Our Christmas shopping was a breeze at the Seattle Premium Outlets where Coach handbags and out-of-season DKNY, Kenneth Cole, and Guess wallets, belts, and watches were snapped up at incredible knock-down prices. In

Vancouver, artisanal products at Vancouver's Granville Island Public Market and gourmet chocolate from Canadian chocolatier Rogers meant that we all ended up buying extra suitcases.

But our trip wasn't all about shopping and eating. Some of our most memorable moments were found in the simplest of pleasures. In Vancouver, for example, we were en route to our hotel when we noticed several life-sized "laughing men" statues in a green space amid busy traffic. Intrigued, we stopped to investigate. It turned out they were artworks entitled "A-Maze-ing Laughter" by contemporary Chinese artist Yue Min Jun. We were so enthralled by the expressions and poses of the statues that we could not help taking pictures of one another mimicking the statues.

And since it was winter and some in our group had never seen snow, we had to visit Whistler ski resort – said to be the largest in North America – some 125km north-east of Vancouver. It didn't take long for our child-like instincts to overcome the cold and we launched spontaneously into snowball fights.

For all the fun and camaraderie that we had, our trip also turned out to be an example of Fish! philosophy in action, with every team member playing a role from research to photography to planning restaurant meals. That meant a trip without a single hitch, tantrums or sulks. Instead, we came home with a suitcase full of memories and firmly established friendships to cherish.

btnews@sph.com.sg

The writer is global head of HR & corporate affairs, PSA International