

Voice of Aaron Chapman: Welcome to segment 3 of the west end car free day storytellers series.

Dina Del Bucchia has lived in the West End of 20 years. Raised in rural town of Fruitvale, British Columbia she loves to live near the sea and finds the mountains a comforting reminder of where she grew up. She's written four books of poetry, the most recent is *It's a Big Deal!* and has also written a collection of short stories, *Don't Tell Me What to Do* and she hosts the podcast *Can't Lit* where you can hear here interviewing writers and talking about books and stuff. You can find out more about her at dinadelbucchia.com or follow her on Twitter or Instagram @DelBauchery

Please make your way to the English Bay Bathhouse near the corner of Beach and Denman. You'll want to be on the higher level just off the Beach Avenue sidewalk above the historical bathhouse where Dina Del Bucchia will share her perspective of the area.

TITLE: Seeing the Beach

By Dina Del Bucchia

Voice of Dina Del Bucchia: You're currently on top of the English Bay Bathhouse. In front of you is English Bay, behind you the entirety of the neighbourhood known as the West End. Settlers saw the area known as the West End as a place that would be more for work: mining, farming, brickmaking, but that's not how it ended up. It became very residential. Unlike today, the rich owned giant mansions in the area to be their beachside homes, to be near this beautiful bay. Large single-family dwellings for the wealthy populated the area near the beach, not the dense housing of apartments and condos we see in the neighbourhood today. One thing that hasn't changed is that it has always been a hub of activity. In true City of Glass fashion a glassed-in dancehall called "The Prom" was a structure along the beach in the early part of the last century for several years. It was to the right of where we are now. And while the current concrete bath house was built in 1931, in the late 1800s the beach was divided by a giant rock with men allowed on one side and women on the other, and beachgoers would often change in the woods and brush which used to occupy the area. Now, thankfully, the bathhouse here offers gender-inclusive washrooms and change rooms. A very good change to see.

English Bay, or as it's also known First Beach, or as I call it simply The Beach, is definitely my favourite part of the West End. My friends often refer to it as my second home in summer, and if they're looking for me there's a good chance they'd find me basking in the sun if they came looking. And I'll keep doing it until my withered body turns to dust in a string bikini. And I'm not the only one. It's an extremely popular destination and its urban presence is what makes it dynamic and interesting. It's a space that's constantly changing, and there are always new people and a variety of creatures along the sand and shore. To me the beach is a place to observe, to see what's happening, to look.

In the early 1900s if you came to the beach you'd likely see Seraphim "Joe" Fortes, Vancouver's first official lifeguard. Born in Trinidad, he was a competitive swimmer who lived and worked in Britain for several years before making his way to the west coast where he lived out the rest of his life. He taught hundreds of the city's residents how to swim, and is officially credited with saving the lives of twenty-nine people from drowning, though unofficial records say he likely saved more than a hundred. There's a monument to him, a drinking fountain, across Pacific Boulevard. from where you're standing, in Alexandra Park, the one over there with the gazebo. The local branch of the library on Denman St. is named for Joe Fortes, as is the seafood restaurant on Robson St. that opened in 1986. It would be excellent if the beach too, was changed from English Bay to Joe's Beach.



Old Joe saved untold numbers of lives on the beaches of Vancouver during the summer months of 1904 -1930. Credit: VPL 50133

But soon those who weren't wealthy moved in, and you could see changes to the buildings, and immigration changed the neighbourhood even further in the 1950s. And you can see the result today with the many older apartment buildings alongside large towers and newer condos. People stacked together, one of the most densely populated areas in the continent. Even some of the original mansions are now subdivided and used as housing.

You're here on a walking tour to listen and look. As I already mentioned the beach is an excellent watching destination. To the right used to be a classic Vancouver Parks Board concession, which is now a classic Cactus Club with a to go counter. The beach is an excellent place specifically to watch someone have their beach stand French fries stolen and consumed by the very wily and mischievous seagulls; tipped ketchup left behind in the sand like blood at the scene of a crime. I love their squawks and screechy calls. I know not everyone agrees. But sharing the beach with others is exactly the point of a public beach. Even the sky scavengers and their sometimes enemies, the crows, and yes even my own sworn enemies, the Canada Geese. There are all manner of creatures down here. Once I even saw Mark McKinney from *Kids in the Hall* playing with his children on the beach and I didn't even bother him to fangirl because that's what you should do on the beach! Respect others and their space and privacy. Seagulls certainly don't see it that way. Be wary of them, stalking your snacks slowly when they think you aren't looking.

Speaking of creatures, several years ago a friend and I were swimming quite far out, just to the right of where the dock with the slide is usually placed in the water. It was during a heat wave and swimming in the evening after work was one of the only ways for us to stay cool, and to spend time outside of our respective old, and heat-trapping one bedroom apartments. Far cries from the dusty mansions of the rich who used to live here. We stopped to tread water and looked out to sea. A few feet away something emerged out of the water. The sleek and spotty head of a harbour seal. It swam near us, about five feet away. We were struck by how beautiful and also terrifying it was to be near a large aquatic animal. It blinked, took a breath with its nostrils and went back under the water. We continued to silently tread, waiting to see if it was swimming towards us or, hopefully, away. A minute later it appeared, to the west,

like on a mission. We gasped and laughed, continued to chat and tread water. Minutes later the same seal came by on its way back again... it seemed to look right at us. Maybe we all bonded.

Looking out from where you stand you can also see the many, many tankers waiting out in the open water. Seems like there are more every day. There was an oil spill here in 2015, from one of the cargo ships, and many seabirds were injured or affected by the spills. Sometimes what we see at the beach isn't joyful or easy, it's something we don't like.

Speaking of things people might not like: do you hate sunsets? Then you will hate this area in the evening because your eyes will be bombarded to some of the most glorious sunsets you've ever experienced. Avert your eyes if you don't want to see that breathtaking, coral majesty! Spare yourself from that particular delight, as I assure you that you will never recover.

Small pleasures of the beach are everywhere. If you walk east of the bathhouse, to your right, you could put on your jeans, whip off your shirt and pretend you're in the infamous *Top Gun* scene and play some beach volleyball where there are usually nets set up. And of course, benches abound on all sides of and in front of the bathhouse for people to sit on and continue to watch the world play out. Many of these benches have dedication plaques and they each tell their own story of who once came to this beach and those who loved them. Small stories engraved. And if you come on New Year's Day this is where you see thrill-seeking cold-fiends plunging their bodies into the chill water. I admire their toughness. And when it snows the whole area becomes a delightful expanse of cloud instead of sand. In the rain only the most hardcore beach lovers are out. Though that might be when you're most likely to spot a river otter fishing for snacks. They can often be seen chomping on sea-life on the rocks approaching second beach, west of here to your right, or you might find them diving in and out near the rocks at the edge of the beach (again also to your right).

Yes, it's a site for events, like the Celebration of Light Fireworks festival, and a place to get a hot dog from a stand on Pacific Boulevard, or ice cream when the artisanal ice cream truck shows up in front of the lifeguard station. And it's currently an ideal spot for social and physical distancing; or you could always make a sand trench to keep others out of your space. And the beach to me has always been all of these things: a gathering place, and a place of solitude and a place where we can escape whatever else is happening in our lives.

And of course, what's always been here is still here. The natural world. The ocean is nature, and with the trees and mountains, it's an enviable view. Animals are everywhere in our urban centre and on a single day you can see gulls, otters, seals, squirrels and songbirds, all frequent visitors. If you lift up a rock you might find the tiniest, cutest crabs scuttling away. And sometimes a long snake-like creature will come slithering up to you while you wade in the water and you shriek like a woman in a cartoon who's seen a mouse! Or...that could just be me.

In the heat of summer I love to see all types of bodies crowd onto blankets and logs, people bringing their meals and snacks from home and enjoying the sandy expanse. Music might drift in from teens escaping the suburbs and cranking top 40. Since the pandemic and calls for staying at home, the R&B musician and local resident Kentish Steele created the Mystic Beach garden, site of small concerts, flowers in bloom, and a recent summer solstice celebration, filled with candlelight and community on the longest day of the year. If you walk west you'll see it along the south side of the seawall at the foot of Chilco St. a block past the Sylvia Hotel.

It gives me so much joy to talk about one of the places in the city that makes me happiest, that allows for contemplation, relaxation and also there's always so much to see. It's the site of many books read and part of some of my own books were even written here. One thing that keeps me coming back to the beach is that it is always different and changing. Whether over long periods of time due to development, or throughout the day even, to admire the tide going in and out.

[sound of gentle lapping waves...]

Voice of Aaron Chapman: Thanks Dina! Dina hopes that if you run into her on the beach you do say hello, from a safe distance. She likes all flavours of ice cream, and will accept any donations of such in cones or cups. Dina is a presenter at a lot of literature events in town, so catch her at one of her events. She is a delight.

You can pause here if you wish to enjoy these as separate segments. We hope you're enjoying these stories from West End Car Free Day and We're looking forward to you joining us for the next segment. We'll see you next time!