

by **Chris Granet**

ON my third day in Seattle, something strange happened.

A hole in the low grey sky appeared and a bizarre yellow light shone down making everything happy and beautiful.

The cold and rain that'd soured my stay until then was soon replaced by warmth and high blue skies.

It was a new city. Off came the raincoats, out came the T-shirts. Children frolicked, couples sauntered, blossom glistened amid lush foliage. I now understood why it was called the Emerald City.

My initial impression had been different. We'd snaked into town along the traffic-clogged Interstate 5, cargo docks one side, gritty clusters of concrete and steel towers on the other – all under a scowling sky.

Now I could amble in the sunshine and take in the magnificent view across Puget Sound – the giant inlet of the Pacific Ocean on whose shore Seattle is built.

Whereas previously the ubiquitous ferries had drifted like ghosts lost in mist and drizzle, they now proudly sailed across the deep blue waters to the forested islands and snowy peaks of the fractured coastline in front.

This is a city surrounded by raw nature. It's where West Coast USA meets Canada, culturally as well as geographically. Seattle is liberal and forward-thinking like California, mellow and less-populated like their neighbour to the north.

It also has an entrepreneurial spirit that's given birth to businesses such as Microsoft, Starbucks, Amazon and Boeing, the company



HOTSPOT:
Pike Place Market for fresh fish and US goodies to take home



that provided the Dreamliner jets for Virgin Atlantic's new Seattle route flying daily out of Heathrow.

"There are two seasons in Seattle," our guide joked on my soggy second day there, "cold rain, and warm rain". Averaging 152 days and 34 inches of it a year, it's enough to put Manchester to shame.

Luckily there were plenty of indoor activities. Top of the list was Pike Place Market. It's one of the oldest farmers' markets in the States and Seattle's top tourist destination.

On the bustling street level you find all kinds of colourful local produce. The fishmongers at word-famous Pike Place Fish Market sing while they sling seafood to each other. On the lower levels you get

great craft and collectors' shops and can pick up cool souvenirs.

Another tour fave is the Boeing Factory in nearby Everett, the world's biggest building by volume. You see how jets are made on assembly lines stretching out to the horizon.

Seattle's most famous building is the sci-fi-like Space Needle. Along with the monorail, it was built for the 1962 World's Fair, and on a good day you get amazing views out of the colossal Mount Rainier. But it was not a good day and the aptly-named peak was lost behind dark clouds.

Smiles

"It's all sunshine and smiles now," said a lady to her friend as the train rattled its way above the rolling streets. And it was true. The city was glorious as I toured its centre.

First up was Seattle Waterfront, where you can take ferries to nearby islands or join the million people each year embarking on

cruises to Alaska. Instead I sat and ate prawn and chips at Ivar's famous fast-seafood joint. Nearby, tourists rotated through the sky on the Seattle Great Wheel, a cross between the London Eye and an end-of-pier big wheel.

From there I walked to Pioneer Square. Run down for years, its brick buildings now house arty shops and cafes. Just beyond were the two giant sport stadiums, where you can watch the Seahawks and Sounders play well at their forms of football, and the Mariners badly at baseball.

Turning north I hit the International Quarter, the centre of Seattle's sizeable Asian-American community. You can dine on great seafood, dim sum, and especially teriyaki – the city's signature dish.

I then, sadly, had to return to the airport. But as I took the train, something strange happened. Bizarre drops of water started falling from the sky. The sun disappeared along with the smiles, and the city was blanketed in grey again.

FACTFILE: Virgin Atlantic flies daily from London Heathrow to Seattle and is offering return economy fares from £479 per person. See www.virginatlantic.com or call 0844 209 2770. Seattle – 4 nights from £1,315pp including Virgin Atlantic flights from Heathrow and room-only accommodation at The Edgewater, with car hire included. See www.virginholidays.co.uk.

TRAVEL TIPS

- **GET a ferry to Bainbridge Island for spectacular views of Seattle and the mountains behind.**
- **VISIT Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. It is an excellent free museum explaining how Seattle was propelled from a small town to a city in the scramble to the Great Wild North.**
- **STAVE off the minus-eight hours jetlag by sleeping as late as you can the night before flying, then grabbing some shuteye on the plane. And pack your broly.**



COOL: Chris before sun came out