

Pete McMartin: Another day in paradise

Sunny and hot — is it a heat wave, or the wave of the future?

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 27, 2015



Vancouver, BC: JUNE 26, 2015 -- Danny McGuire (left) and Aaron Gilmore take to the shade to beat the heat while practicing yoga at Crab Park in Vancouver, BC Friday, June 26, 2015. The region is experiencing high temperatures and will do so for the foreseeable future. (Photo by Jason Payne/ PNG) (For story by reporter)

Photograph by: Jason Payne, VANCOUVER SUN

At 5 a.m., the white noise of the fans fills the bedroom. The pillow smells sourly of sweat. Light already leaks through the louvred blinds. Sun, you note. Again.

The morning coffee, a shower, a shave. An armouring layer of sunscreen. Outside, there is an unfamiliar humidity in the air, not the gentle maritime kind we're used to, but one more eastern in its prickly heaviness, the kind that in the thick, still heat of an Ontario morning would induce a shiver of discomfort the moment you stepped out into it. The body remembers.

The morning traffic goes through its motions. On the bus trip in, the regulars know enough to sit on the driver's side, where there's shade, where one can read. The riders on the passenger side bake and squint headlong into the climbing sun. The light is so bright it makes a noise in the eye, a cymbal crash. Above the passing farm fields a gauzy mist rises. The earth is perspiring, too. The mist will burn off long before midday.

At the Canada Line depot, you feel the heat radiating off the big cement stanchions as soon as you get off the bus. It's hard and enveloping, a warmth without any reprieve in it. The morning commuters mob the station platform and wait in the still air for the train. It's a riot of skin — the bare legs of young girls in Daisy Duke shorts, the construction workers' reveal of tattoos along their arms. And feet — all of them set free in flip-flops and flats and Birkenstocks and ungainly hiking sandals that older men in Tilley hats seem to favour, unfortunately so; and there is the lovely parade of painted toenails, with this season's fashion palette running from apple green to Barbie doll pink. Incongruous among all this bared flesh are the businessmen straitjacketed in their dark wool suits and ties. They are objects of pity. You poor bastards. Having to wear that on a day like today.

The office is an air-conditioned sanctuary, and after three months of sun, the urge to escape outside has waned. The weather has lost its novelty. On the plaza with the view of the harbour, the tourist groups with their backpacks lean up against the railings and wonder at the North Shore picture postcard. The dark bulks of Grouse and Seymour are silhouetted against the cloudless sky. Gorgeous, they say, marvelling at the view, but you want to go up to them and say, yes, it is gorgeous, but if you lived here you'd know something about it isn't quite right.

At lunch hour, the office workers spill out onto the plaza, staking claims to the patches of shady lawn under the plaza's trees. A young woman lies back and, using her purse as a pillow, dozes off. Another young woman drags a chair out into the sunshine and, hiking the billow of her flowered print dress up above her knees, she kicks off her shoes (bright red toenail polish), leans back, closes her eyes and offers her face up to the sun. The light glinting off the plaza's surface is blinding.

In past summers, when the weather doled out the hot days sparingly, an urgency gripped people to make the most of them. But with so many of them stacked up day after day, and now month after month, it feels as if a general lassitude has settled over the city, and not just among the lunch-hour crowd, but among the executives strolling the street in their loosened ties, among the bored shoppers in the malls, even among the car traffic. Under the cloudless sky, with the weatherman batting a thousand with a prediction of yet another sunny day, the city has slowed. Why hurry?

On the trip home, the faint funk of body odour rises in the packed train car. A moist sheen spreads across the forehead of the man reading a novel, while the pretty girl scrolling through her email pauses to wipe away the bead of sweat that has pooled in the little hollow above her upper lip.

Then it's back on the bus and out onto the highway, where the line of rush-hour commuter traffic backs up before the tunnel. The cars crawl forward, engines idling, windows up, drivers cocooned in air conditioning.

Finally, home. The neighbourhood's big cedars and Douglas fir trees stand so still in the hot afternoon air it's unnerving. The boulevard lawn, as dry as parchment, is crying uncle. My wife says, at her work, customers keep commenting on how great the weather has been, but that they were beginning to feel a little tug of anxiety, too, because it was so weird. You know, California, the drought marching up the west coast, all that stuff.

Was this a heat wave, they had begun to wonder, or the wave of the future?

pmcmartin@vancouversun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun