

OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: Uncovering a dark story in Canadian history



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We couldn't help noticing a collection of large boulders scattered around the park in front of the Steveston Tram museum. My friend, Rod, called me over and pointed to an inscription on the first of the boulders.

"Steveston Nikkei Memorial," it read in large letters. "Nikkei" refers to people of Japanese descent who are living outside Japan.

Steveston is the community at the extreme south end of Richmond, B.C., which in turn is just south of Vancouver. We were in Steveston as part of a tour of the area during the 2026 Travel Media Association of Canada annual conference, which was hosted by Richmond.

The Nikkei Memorial was set up in 2019 and the first inscription explains "This Nikkei Memorial marks the 75th anniversary of the forced removal of Steveston's Japanese Canadian community in 1942, during World War II."

This is something those of us who live in southwestern Ontario don't hear a lot about. In fact, this is only one of many stories of racism and cruelty that are glossed over or ignored in our comfortable communi-

ties. Think about the treatment of Black people escaping slavery via the "Underground Railway," who were not, in fact, well received in Ontario. Or the shipload of German Jews who were barred from landing in Canada, and who Prime Minister Mackenzie King sent back to Germany to die in concentration camps. Or First Nations people who continue to bear the scars of systemic maltreatment by the Canadian government.

I have come to believe travelling should involve significant doses of both entertainment and education. And sometimes, that education involves rather shocking revelations. I learned a lot during my brief visit to Steveston. The first lessons came from the stone monuments in that Nikkei Memorial.

During World War II, those in power decided people of Japanese descent were a potential threat, since Canada was officially at war with Japan. In Richmond alone, more than 2,000 Nikkei residents were relocated to internment camps in the interior of British Columbia, or to farms in Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario. Even more astonishing, some Canadian-born Nikkei people were deported to Japan, a country where they had never lived.

It gets worse. World War II ended in 1945, but it took four more years before the Nikkei were permitted to return to the B.C. coast. Surprisingly, some did!

Evidence of this officially sanctioned atrocity is everywhere in Steveston. We visited the Britannia Shipyards National Historic Site and the

Gulf of Georgia Cannery. A poignant poster about BC Packers explains, "At the height of the canning industry there were European, First Nations, Chinese, Japanese and Indian workers all working on the site. ... A surprising number of women worked here, some keeping their babies with them during the work day."

But "rigid racial separation was considered normal." And, come 1942, all of the Nikkei people were gone. There had been 250 families living on the Steveston waterfront. Then there were none.

At the Britannia Shipyards, we visited the small wooden home of Otokichi and Asayo Murakami and their 10 children. Otokichi was a prominent shipbuilder and fisher; Asayo worked on the canning lines and was a devoted gardener. Their family moved into the home in 1929, and they thrived until 1942, when they were sent into internment.

As noted, some of the Nikkei actually returned to their communities when that was allowed in 1949 – some years later than this happened in the United States. But they came back to nothing – their homes and their fishing boats had been seized by the government and sold, mainly to white buyers. The money raised was brazenly allocated by the Canadian government to pay for the cost of the Nikkei's internment.

There was evidence of this dark period in Canada's history all over Steveston, which is otherwise a delightful small community. But the good news is there is that evidence. The story of the Nikkei is being told in



(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTOS)

The onetime home of the shipbuilding Murakami family.

these historic sites. And finally, since 2022, it has been included in the history curriculum in British Columbia schools. Better very late than never, I suppose.

And it turns out the Nikkei story is not the only account of blatant prejudice visitors can discover at these meaningful historic sites. We also learned about the Chinese head tax, which had its greatest impact in British Columbia. Today, the City of Richmond's population is 70 per cent of Asian origin.

Chinese workers were welcomed during construction of the railway, especially the Canadian Pacific Railway which linked western Canada to the east. But when the railway was completed, white Canadians no longer wanted to share "their country" with Chinese immigrants. The head tax was implemented by the Canadian government. At first, any person

of Chinese origin immigrating to Canada had to pay \$50. By 1900, it was \$100. Three years later, it climbed to \$500 (more than a year's salary). Yet hopeful Chinese people paid (about 81,000 people up to 1923), often borrowing the money from employers. Imagine what happened to those people when the shipbuilding and cannery businesses shut down.

I had heard about Japanese internment, and vaguely knew of a "head tax," whatever that meant, but my day as a tourist in Steveston was an eye-opening one, an experience I highly recommend to any traveller. Not a lot of laughter, but a very healthy dose of learning.

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The boulders in the Nikkei Memorial, which commemorate the internment from 1942-1949, come from Québec – the farthest point in Canada where Nikkei internees were unwillingly sent.



This statue, at the Britannia Shipyards National Historic Site, is "dedicated to the pioneering Japanese fishermen."



A sculpture outside the Gulf of Georgia Cannery honours workers, including a Japanese woman.