

## [Hemingway House by the Sea](#)

"A Safe Haven in a Troubled World"

by  
Lisa Cole

One rainy Spring afternoon, I walk from my place beneath gentle showers of pink cherry blossoms to [Hemingway's by the Sea](#), a lofty Tudor-style Mansion, on the West side of Victoria. A robin is taking a furtive puddle-bath in the driveway. Another one is singing in the Garden. The salty wind is picking up, blowing in from Fleming Beach. I go to the side door and ring the bell, already starting to feel like I've just traveled to some exotic country, that I'm arriving somewhere in Europe or Africa or South America. And I've just walked a few blocks!



**Hemingways by the Sea-in Historic Esquimalt**

(Photo courtesy of Hemingways)

Ilona gives me a warm welcome at the door, leading me up the stairs to a beautifully decorated table where steaming coffee and tea and sweets are waiting. We sit and chat for a while, overlooking the patio on one side and the Safari Room, down the stairs, on the other.

"We've been open for seven years-- I moved here from Hamburg seven years ago," she says. The sunken Safari Room is right out of a Cuban hacienda, with a colossal floor-to-ceiling fireplace. The décor is eclectic and international, with masks from Africa, a Russian samovar and other precious items from all over the world. Ilona tells me her partner, Ricky, has followed the trail of Ernest Hemingway, through the Amazon of South America, to the plains and jungles of Africa, to Spain and China and back. A fashion designer originally from Montreal, it's easy to understand how Hemingway's gets its exotic style.

Ilona takes me on the grand tour, telling me large, impressive house was built in 1959 and had more added on to it in 1987. She takes me upstairs to the "Hemingway Suite," a spacious, elegant quarters with a King-size brass canopied bed, a romantic fireplace, and a balcony overlooking the Garden. There's a cute kitchenette and an ensuite bathroom with all the trimmings: a double Jacuzzi bath and steam bath as well

My room is the "Serengeti Suite", with its rich, golden carpet and invitingly warm ambience. The first thing I notice is the King-sized bed with its regal orange-silk canopy, and a print of a cheetah on the wall just above it. There's a regal velvet turquoise couch beside it, that can open into another bed. There are bamboo chairs, primitive musical instruments, carefully woven baskets and ebony carvings, all from Africa.

I notice a picture of a white-bearded traveler on the wall, drinking water from the brim of his hat, and I innocently ask: "Is that Ricky?"

Ilona laughs and tells me, "No, that's Hemingway!" and we both laugh at my mistake until there are tears in our eyes. "But it's true, they do look alike," she admits, and we laugh a little more. I've read *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises*, but have never seen a picture of Ernest til now. "Ricky took these in Africa, though," she points to the gorgeous prints hanging over the couch-- of mountains and zebras and wide open plains.



**The Serengeti Suite**  
(photo courtesy of Hemingways)

as 2 showers. The "Key West Suite" has an antique Queen-sized bed and a large bay window, and all the amenities necessary for a guests' comfort.

The suite is bright and airy with a striking view of the Olympic Mountains and a window seat where one can sit and dream the day away. On the other side, there's a fully equipped kitchenette with a toaster oven, coffee maker, toaster, fridge and sink. There's also a small dining area with a table to sit at and enjoy a home-cooked lunch. The windows from this end overlook the Gardens with their nesting-busy birds and colourful blooms blossoming, inspired by the rain.

In the bathroom there's a large soaker tub with a shower, and a wash area with lots of fuzzy towels and facecloths with zebra prints on them.

"Everyone always wants to book the Hemingway Suite," Ilona muses, "but they don't realize how nice the other rooms are, too." I agree with her. The Serengeti Suite, which is more of an exquisite apartment than a Suite, has its own personal charm.

She leaves me to freshen up and goes back downstairs while I wash my face, comb my hair and jot down a few quick notes at the table. I can't believe I'm in the city-- it's so peaceful and quiet, close to the ocean, in the middle of nature.

After, I go back downstairs      Then she remembers a time when three girls



**Hemingways by the Sea-Dining Room**

(Photo courtesy of Hemingways)

and join Ilona in the Safari Room for a drink of wine. The room takes me far away, to a place I've never been before. There are antiques and artifacts everywhere, so that I almost feel I'm in a gallery. There's a fully stocked bar in one corner of the towering room. Books abound upon the shelves. I browse through the picture book of Ernest Hemingway by Peter Buckley, amazed at how different he looks in every photograph. Outside the French doors is a large patio with a barbeque and a Hot Tub, a place for guests to get together and to relax beside the beautiful Garden. Ilona says, "We get people from all over the world, here. On our brochure, it says: 'All languages spoken, mostly by our Guests!' We've had actors and writers, everyone who comes here has a story to tell, is fascinating in some way."

Ilona makes me dinner, which is not a usual thing, but there are no other guests tonight. I am ready to bask in her hospitality, sipping my wine as I browse the books in her diverse library. After a delicious dinner of German sausages, rice and gourmet veggies with white sauce, I retire early for a long hot bath, a little cable TV, and a sound sleep.

I awake the next morning with renewed vigor. I shower and dress. Already the scent of fresh coffee is wafting up the stairs into my room, and other breakfast scents, too. Mmmm... smells like fresh

arrived, all sisters, dressed in long skirts. She says they were very, very shy, and would hold each other's hands when particularly nervous. Although they must have been in their twenties, it seemed as though this was their very first time away from home. Ilona, thinking they might enjoy it, recommended they go see the fireworks at Butchart Gardens, adding that there was great live music, but the girls recoiled, sadly, saying "We aren't allowed to listen to music." It turned out they were Amish, and listening to others' music was strictly forbidden. "But we make our own music," the girls brightened. "Would it be all right if we sing while we stay here?"



### View of the Outside Deck

(photo courtesy of Hemmingways)

"Of course!" answered Ilona, and from then on, Ilona and Ricky and the guests of Hemingway's were entertained by the angelic voices coming from the girls' room each morning. The longer the girls stayed, the less shy they became, and quite often they would come and sit with the other guests in the Safari Room at night. One evening, they arrived back from a day of adventures, eyes all aglow, "Ilona!" the most vocal of the trio announced breathlessly, "We've just been to the Butchart Gardens!"

Ilona smiled, "Did you hear the music?"

"Yes!" they smiled, all excited. "

It was just beautiful!" (Hopefully their relatives

bread!

aren't reading this!)

Ilona shows me to my table in the large dining room of hardwood floors, Persian rugs, another lavish fireplace, and brilliant wall-to-wall windows. "I know some restaurants with smaller dining rooms than this!" I exclaim as I take my royal seat at one of three tables. Ilona pours my coffee and offers me juice as well. Then, she serves me my first course of fresh fruit, bread and cereal, then crepes with orange confiture, whipped cream and icing sugar, then, to top it off, delicately sautéed vegetables and tiger shrimp.

After our long talk, and after filling myself to the brim with gourmet food, fresh juice and coffee, I pack up my bag and say good-bye. Ilona gives me a big hug. I feel like I've known her all my life.

"We'll see each other again!"

On my way home, looking up at the swirling cherry blossoms, I am feeling something akin to culture shock. I smile, realizing yet again how lucky I am to be living in this city, where all you have to do for a change of pace is walk a few blocks-- and suddenly, you're in a whole new country! [Check out Hemingway's by the Sea.](#)

**End**

"I won't have to eat for the rest of the week!" I manage to say between succulent bites. I haven't been this spoiled in years.

Ilona entertains me over breakfast with stories, recipes, and her witty sense of humour. I ask her about her most interesting guests ever, and she has to think about that one, saying, "They're all interesting!"