



# A Marvelous World in Miniature

James H. Hillestad discovers Miniature World, an astonishing attraction with more than 80 dioramas and displays, during a visit to British Columbia

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

In TS&MF issue 163, I wrote about a serendipitous visit to Quebec City in Canada, where my wife Carol and I chanced upon the annual International Festival of Military Bands. Adding to this unexpected delight was a visit to the Musée du Fort, home to a wonderful 30-foot diorama of the French and Indian War's Battle of Quebec on the Plains of Abraham.

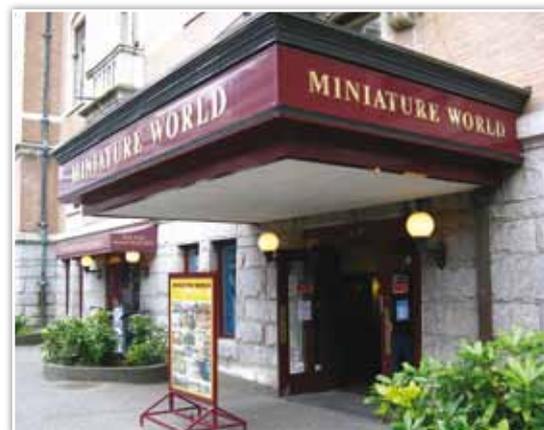
The stars were aligned for good fortune again during our recent visit to Victoria, B.C., Canada. High on our list of sights to see was the world-renowned Butchart Gardens, 55 stunning acres of flower

gardens and water features in creative displays and settings.

Along the way, I picked up a tourist-rack brochure for an attraction billed as "Miniature World: The Greatest Little Show on Earth." With less than high hopes, I gave it a shot. In retrospect, the shot was a veritable bulls-eye!

**ABOVE:** Re-creation of the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace.

**RIGHT:** Miniature World is located in Victoria's Fairmont Empress Hotel.



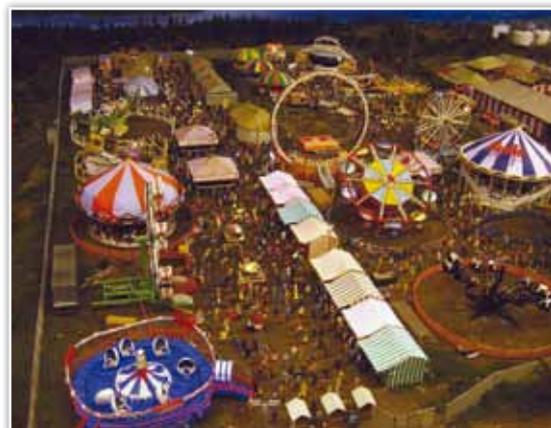


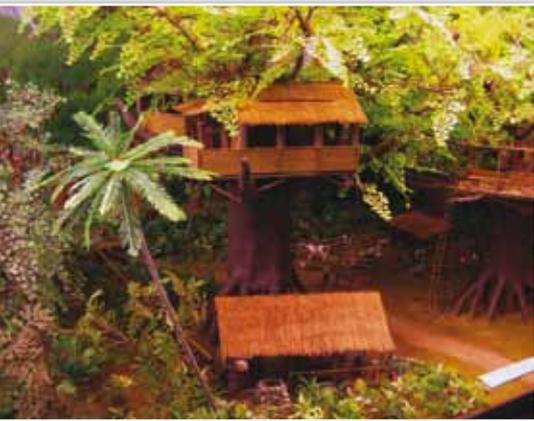
**ABOVE:** “The Enchanted Valley of Castles” at Miniature World.

**BELOW:** World War I British Sopwith Camels at an aerodrome in France in 1918.

**RIGHT:** Gulliver and Lilliputians at the Victoria attraction.

**BELOW RIGHT:** About 10,000 figures animate the 30-foot circus display.





**ABOVE:** Literary inspirations for displays include "The Swiss Family Robinson."

**RIGHT:** Diorama based on "The Adventures of Oliver Twist."

### DEVLIN'S BRAINCHILD

Miniature World is located in the majestic Fairmont Empress Hotel on Humboldt Street in the provincial capital. It was the brainchild of one George Devlin, whose imagination and creative drive made it a reality. Now Miniature World is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2012.

As the name suggests, it is devoted to miniature dioramas and displays -- more than 80 of them! Figures range in size from 10-mm to 70-mm. Most of them are 50 to 54-mm.

Devlin related, "I have always been attracted to model railroads and miniature scenes of all types. I met a couple of model artists (Don and Honey Ray), who retired from the traveling circus days in the late '60s and had taken up bird carving and creating models."

He continued, "At that time they were traveling with a model exhibit of Olde

**RIGHT:** "The Golden Years of the Horse-Less Carriage" has a park-like setting.

**BELOW:** "Bandits at Angels One Five" re-creates World War II's Battle of Britain.



*"The scenes are mind-blowing. Realistic topography, architecturally accurate buildings, complementary scenic backgrounds, along with variable accent lighting and sound effects all contribute to making first-class presentations."*

London Towne of 1670 commissioned by the Hudson Bay Company for viewing at all their stores in Canada. One thing led to another and I ended up buying the exhibit as well as 10 others that they had created."

"I also hired them to produce more for an attraction in the Empress Hotel," Devlin recounted. "We opened for

business 16 months later. As for the hotel, they were having difficulty leasing out their commercial space at the time and welcomed the opportunity to take in a long-term tenant."

"The Rays stayed for two years and then moved on," he noted. "By then we had about 15 exhibits."





**ABOVE:** The American Revolutionary War's 1777 Battle of Saratoga.

**BELOW:** London traffic outside a miniature Harrods department store.

**BELOW RIGHT:** World War II diorama titled "Canadians Enter Caen, Normandy, 1944."

"Since then, I have commissioned most of the work to other modelers and hired on a very talented young man, Peter Lock, to oversee the work of these modelers, and to also create many, many more model exhibits of his own for Miniature World, which he continues to do today," Devlin said.

### CIRCUS & CASTLES

The scenes are mind-blowing. Realistic topography, architecturally accurate buildings, complementary scenic backgrounds, along with variable accent lighting and sound effects all contribute to making first-class presentations.

One diorama, which depicts the building of Canada's transcontinental railroad, spans the country from Vancouver to the Maritime Provinces. Trains travel with a visitor viewing the ever-changing landscape. The size of the diorama is monumental – it's 100 feet in length!

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus display is a 30-foot extravaganza of circus sounds and





sparkling lights. It is populated by an almost unbelievable 10,000 figures.

Leaving the cacophony of the circus world, a visitor travels to the tranquility of the “Enchanted Valley of Castles.” Twelve of the most famous castles in Europe are showcased in a bucolic setting of rivers and mountains. Trains traverse valleys and tunnels. Gondolas ferry passengers to the lofty citadels. The effect is that of a wonderland.

## LONDON & LITERATURE

London is captured in dioramas of the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace and the thoroughfare outside the famous Harrods department store. These two scenes account for 40 buildings, 150 vehicles and 1,300 figures.

For a change of venue, there is “The Golden Years of the Horse-Less Carriage,”

**ABOVE:** The American Civil War's First Battle of Bull Run in 1861.

**BELOW:** The Battle of Britain dogfight is viewed through a window in a wall.



which features an array of early 20th-century cars, trucks, and fire engines in a park-like setting.

“The World of Dickens” re-creates the author’s iconic view of 19th-century London with dioramas based on “The Adventures of Oliver Twist,” “The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby,” and “The Pickwick Papers.”

Visitors will also find other dioramas with literary themes such as “The Swiss Family Robinson” and “Gulliver’s Travels.” There is even a 6-foot-tall scene depicting “Jack and the Beanstalk.”

## BATTLE SCENES

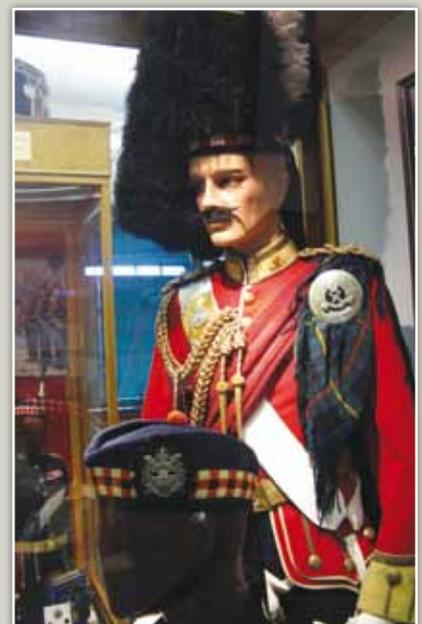
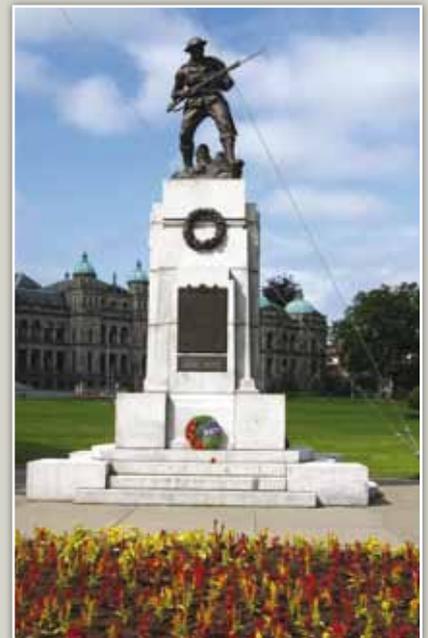
Battle dioramas range from the War of the Roses in the 13th century to World War II in Normandy.

Especially effective is one diorama that is displayed behind a round window in the wall. Its focus is German bombers being attacked by British fighters during the Battle of Britain. The title is “Bandits at Angels One Five,” which is the Royal Air Force code name for enemy aircraft at an altitude of 15,000 feet. Realistic sound effects add to the dramatic dogfighting action.

No article nor words can do this museum at the landmark hotel justice. You have to see it to believe it. If you have a chance to make Victoria your destination, the fantastic Miniature World will be a highlight of your visit. ■

## about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.



## Visiting Victoria Worth the Trip

In addition to Miniature World, Victoria offers many interesting sights for tourists, from Butchart Gardens to the British Columbia Parliament Buildings to the Victoria Bug Zoo (a favorite of my wife's).

The Bay Street Armoury is the headquarters of the Canadian Scottish Regiment (Princess Mary's) and home to the light infantry unit's museum. Displays include an extensive collection of campaign medals, a number of uniforms, wartime memorabilia and a weapons room.

On the main floor of the armoury, visitors can inspect an array of artillery pieces -- some vintage some current-day. The armoury is a 15-minute bus ride from Victoria's center on the harbor, and well worth a visit. Admission is free.

Traveling to Victoria is a pleasure. From Seattle, Wash., USA, we took the afternoon Victoria Clipper, a spacious hydrofoil which seats 200. The two-hour, picturesque ride to Victoria was accompanied by onboard food and beverages.

An array of hotels are situated within walking distance of the provincial capital's harbor.

Victoria is worth visiting. The people are welcoming and the sights are memorable.

--James H. Hillestad

**TOP LEFT:** Victoria monument to Canada's contributions to the Boer War, World Wars I and II, and the Korean War.

**SECOND LEFT:** Bay Street Armoury artillery displays include a circa 1895 13-pounder rifled muzzle loader.

**THIRD LEFT:** World War I Lewis gun and World War II Bren gun in the military museum.

**LEFT:** Bay Street Armoury displays include the full dress uniform of a lieutenant colonel, Canadian Scottish, 1938-40.

**TOP RIGHT:** Victoria's Peace Tulip Garden honors Canadian troops who liberated the Netherlands during World War II.

**MIDDLE RIGHT:** Medal and artifact room in the regimental museum.

**RIGHT:** The writer with two new friends in uniform, and for a backdrop the British Columbia Parliament Buildings.

