

WINTERING ON *Vancouver Island*



Spring arrives on Vancouver Island while the rest of Canada is still shovelling snow

By Rob & Wendy Lindsay



Every year, Vancouver Island's lure of a milder climate and an earlier spring attracts more and more older Canadians who want to winter where their dollar is really worth a dollar. We, too, tried a winter stay on the British Columbia island and had a wonderful time exploring.

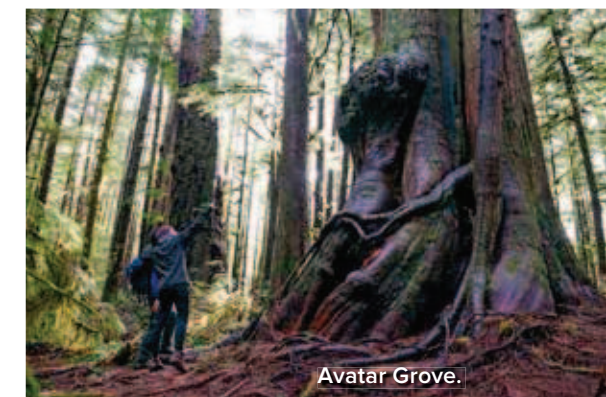


Our first outing from the Victoria area was a two-day road trip around the Pacific Marine Circle Route. We left Victoria along Highway 14, heading west past Sooke. Our first stop was Sheringham Point for a short hike to the historic lighthouse and a breath of refreshing sea air. That fresh air, of course, made us think a coffee stop at Shirley Delicious was a good idea. It was hard to choose among the delectable made-from-scratch baked goods. Out front was one of the many "little free libraries" we had seen on the island—this one was topped with a small red and white lighthouse.

Avatar Grove and Cow Bay

As we drove along the coastal highway, Douglas fir, tamarack, and cedar trees towered overhead, rainforest-high, and we caught glimpses of the Pacific Ocean through the thick vegetation. The road became increasingly rough as we got farther from Sooke.

Our next stop, French Beach Provincial Park, is an amazing spot. Lawns reach down to a sand and pebble beach that stretches for 1,600 metres (one mile). It's a



great beach for walking or simply relaxing on one of the park benches while watching the waves roll in. We were at this point about an hour's drive from Victoria, so anyone wanting a short trip could make this a half-day outing.

A fresh breeze blew off the scenic Juan de Fuca Strait, where, if we'd been lucky, we might have spied passing whales, otters, and seals—we did spot a sea kayaker.

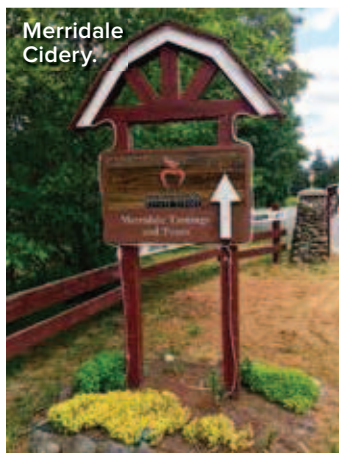
A bit farther along Highway 14, we enjoyed delicious homemade soup and freshly ground coffee at Cold Shoulder Café, a tiny mom-and-pop takeout coffee shop cheerfully run by Christine and Josh.

Soon we reached the small coastal village of Port Renfrew and our reserved log cabin at Wild Renfrew Seaside Cottages. Relaxing on our porch, gazing out on the gentle swells of the rising tide, it was hard to imagine we were

only two hours away from Victoria traffic—it felt a world away.

Part of Port Renfrew's fame comes from being the southern terminus of the world-famous West Coast Trail, where serious hikers register from May to September to make the five-to-seven-day backpacking hike across challenging terrain.

That afternoon, we drove to Avatar Grove with a guide from our lodge. The Ancient Forest Alliance and the Port Renfrew Chamber of Commerce had waged a passionate two-year campaign that succeeded in 2012 in preserving this unique area. Located in the Gordon River Valley about 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) from Port Renfrew, it's a magical spot where you feel as small as an ant walking among towering moss-covered ancient giant Western redcedars and Douglas firs that have lived through so much of human history.



Away we went to complete the Pacific Marine Circle Route, driving inland towards Lake Cowichan 61 kilometres (38 miles) away. In places, the gravel road was a small step up from a logging trail, which is fun for some drivers but could be a challenge for those comfortable only on wide paved highways.

Our first stop was at Fairy Lake to photograph the renowned tiny tree growing on the very tip of a partially submerged log. It's probably as photographed as Big Lonely Doug and good ole "gnarly."

Sunlight filtered through the tall trees hugging the highway and small streams trickled beside the road. When we stopped to take photos from the bridge at Harris Creek, the quiet beauty made it seem that we were all alone in the wilderness. However, the mood was shattered a few kilometres later when a large truck approached, flashing its lights, and we pulled over to yield more space to a heavily laden logging truck pulling an equally heavily loaded trailer. It was a sudden reminder we were in a logging area.

We passed through the verdant Cowichan Valley, home of many market gardens and a growing number of wineries, as we headed east to Cowichan Bay. Soon we were gazing out on a colourful village of houseboats floating in the ocean.

The shops in "Cow Bay" are independently owned—not a franchise or chain store in sight. The True Grain bakery, for example, mills its own organic flour. True Grain has such an avid following that the most popular loaves and cookies are sold out in minutes, but those left are equally delicious. Down the street, Wild Coast Perfumery will create a fragrance out of a blend of pure plant-based extracts customized just for you. Browsing in Cow Bay can take as long as time allows; unfortunately, we had to cut our exploring time short, as we had a lunch reservation 15 minutes away at Merridale Cidery & Distillery back in Cowichan Valley.

Merridale is a husband-and-wife operation with an eight-hectare (20-acre) orchard to supply their cider production. In addition, Janet Docherty and Rick Pines have a small-batch distillery to make gin, vodka, and brandy. They also offer a "forest walk" that is popular with families, cater weddings and events, and run a wonderful farm-to-table bistro. Still, Rick says, "We live and breathe the cider business." Janet says it's hard to say whether spring blossoms or fall apple time are more popular with visitors.

After a delicious lunch, we turned the car back towards Victoria.

Parksville and Tofino

The next part of our stay on the island was based in Parksville, 147 kilometres (91 miles) from Victoria. We headed up-island along Highway 1, towards the city of Duncan. The day was clear and sunny and the view spectacular as we crossed Malahat Mountain. We recommend pulling off at every scenic outlook, because the panoramic ocean views are considered the best in the world.

After Duncan, we pulled into the seaside community of Chemainus to stretch our legs and see Canada's largest permanent outdoor art gallery. It all began in 1982 with five murals depicting the local logging legacy. Year by year, more murals were added to buildings around town to depict local history; there are now more than 40. In 2009 and 2016, beautiful tributes to Victoria-born artist Emily Carr were added. It's like a treasure hunt walking around town trying to find all the murals; a map from the area's tourist office can lead you to them. You can also purchase a keepsake mural map that tells the background story of each mural.

We next arrived in Parksville, approximately 40 minutes north of Nanaimo. The city of around 14,000 has long been popular with wintering Canadians. However, it is rumoured that it's growing in popularity as a permanent retirement community for Vancouverites and Victorians escaping escalating housing prices; the numerous new subdivisions under construction seem to confirm the rumours. The locals refer to it as the Silver Tsunami.

Throughout the winter, we enjoyed seeing the palm trees around town and checking for early spring blossoms in the gardens as we walked past. Numerous oceanside parks nearby are great for beach-walking, too. Rathtrevor and Qualicum beaches are a couple of our

favourites. French Creek has a working harbour where it's fun to watch the fishing boats return to dock and listen for the harbour seals barking as the boats unload their catch.

We learned the hard way that we had to have dinner before eight in the evening, when everything closes—except Boston Pizza and Cedars Restaurant & Lounge.

Photos: Destination BC (map); courtesy of Merridale Cidery (apple trees in bloom); Lindsay Editorial (others).

Photos: Lindsay Editorial.



Tofino coast.



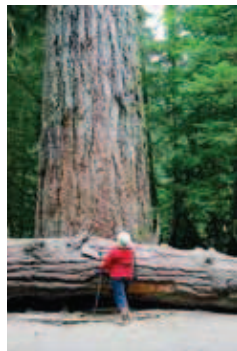
French Creek harbour.



The Grotto Spa is a beautifully designed building nestled within the resort. At the heart of the spa is the grotto pool. Imagine a sunlit mineral pool within a rocky grotto, a waterfall cascading into one



Cathedral Grove.



(106 miles) away along Highway 4. We were also looking forward to a stop at MacMillan Provincial Park to see Cathedral Grove. The park, about 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) west of Parksville and right off Highway 4, was created in 1947 to preserve and protect this grove of massive old-growth Douglas fir and Western redcedar trees. Some of these majestic trees are more than 800 years old and nine metres (29.5 feet) in circumference. You feel privileged to walk among them, listening to the sound of the wind and thinking there must be mystic messages floating in the ether, if only you could understand them. It's a mesmerizing and memorable experience, which we were able to repeat on our return journey. The park is the only highway-accessible protected old-growth forest in all of British Columbia and one of few in the world—surely a treasure to be preserved for future generations.

In recent years, the quiet fishing villages of Tofino and Ucluelet have been drawing tourists to storm-watch during the winter months. The thrill of experiencing the unbridled fury and force of the pounding Pacific Ocean and the sheer power of the giant waves is a magnet for many. The best time to storm-watch is early November to the beginning of March, when there can be 10 to 15 storm days a month.

Tofino is the first point of contact for these storms off the Pacific. The local tourist-office slogan is “Bad weather, good times.”

We had booked into Long Beach Lodge Resort, which is located on Cox Bay Beach. The lodge is perched above an expansive sandy beach, with an unrestricted view of the wild West Coast surf from the lodge's great room. Walking the beach and feeling the powerful pull of the wind and the sting of the salt spray makes you feel totally alive—and very wet, despite decent rain gear. Later we found it equally memorable to enjoy the nature view from inside, with a hot toddy in hand. We also had some delectably memorable meals at our lodge and at Shelter restaurant, which features locally caught seafood.

We headed back to Parksville, but our time there was drawing to an end. Still, we couldn't leave without once again experiencing the Grotto Spa at Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort and Conference Centre, which we had frequented before. The name Tigh-Na-Mara means “house by the sea” in Gaelic, but this “house” is actually a community of 192 handcrafted log cottages, suites, and condos within a magnificent setting of an arbutus and fir forest overlooking three kilometres (almost two miles) of sandy beach by the sea.

end and a small island in the middle. The water is body temperature and within minutes, the therapeutic minerals begin to soothe. Some spa-goers swim slowly, others simply sit and soak. Others float face up and listen to the tranquil water music, audible only underwater. Upstairs, a full range of naturally based spa treatments is available. You leave feeling regenerated and peaceful.

Saanich Peninsula

Patricia Bay Highway—“Pat Bay” for short—is what locals call Highway 17 from Victoria north to the Swartz Bay ferry terminal or Victoria International Airport in the beautiful Saanich Peninsula area.

With many quiet roads criss-crossing the peninsula, it's a wonderful place for a drive in the country. One day we decided to see if we could tour some lesser-known locations.

First up was Healing Farm, a certified organic farm about 20 minutes from Victoria. Mike and Sharyn Romaine grow more than 1,000 trees there, including apple, pear, walnut, hazelnut, and maple, and produce maple syrup, honey from their bees, and eggs from their free-range chickens. Their produce is sold at markets, stores, restaurants, and at the farm gate. The Romaines also offer a variety of themed farm tours such as raising chickens, keeping bees, and exploring sustainable farming. You can also arrange a tour combining them all. We tried our hand at collecting, washing, and candling eggs after a nice walk among the fruit and nut trees. In the commercial kitchen, we learned how the farm also produces dehydrated fruit leather, chips, and juice.

Ten minutes farther north, we visited Sea Cider Farm & Ciderhouse, a farm boasting panoramic ocean views and certified organic heritage apple orchards. The farm is open year-round from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily for tastings and tours. In addition to a variety of tasty ciders, the farm offers cider vinegar, local farm products, and an artisan lunch plate—also very tasty.

Back again on Highway 17, we travelled just beyond the Sidney and Victoria airports to visit Snowdon House Gourmet & Gifts. Founder Laura Waters originally planned to sell Christmas trees, but after considerable research, she realized that the farm (and the 1,600 Douglas fir trees on it) could be made more sustainable by harvesting the fir tips and making them into food and drinks. She now offers a long list of fruit-infused vinegars with a Douglas fir essence. We had a taste of

her “West Coast Bread”—just add a favourite beer or Douglas fir essence

Resources
ParksvilleQualicumBeach.com
tourismvictoria.com
VancouverIsland.travel

to the bag of flour mix and bake—it was delicious. It makes an excellent host gift. Snowdon House is also a B & B.

We decided to stop by Roost for a relaxing meal in its Vineyard Bistro. Roost Farm Centre began as and still is a family farm. Much of what is produced and grown on the farm—wheat, eggs, blueberries, sheep, wine, and seasonal veggies—is used in the bistro. The red spring wheat grown and milled on the farm is used in the bakery on a daily basis. The estate wines can be purchased by the bottle or by the case. Tours of the farm and vineyard can be arranged in advance (be sure to ask about the owner's collection of antique vehicles).

In our book, no stay on Vancouver Island would be complete without at least one visit to The Butchart Gardens, which is open every day of the year. Even in winter, the garden paths are open to walkers, and most are wheelchair accessible. Avid gardeners may enjoy the bonus during the winter months of seeing the structure of each garden, which is normally shrouded in foliage. It's amazing to think that the Sunken Garden was once a limestone quarry.

In 2004, on its centennial, The Butchart Gardens was designated a National Historic Site. Even after more than 100 years, it's still family owned and operated.

To truly lift your spirits, step inside The Gardens' Spring Prelude indoor garden. From January 15 to March 17, what is normally the Blue Poppy restaurant is transformed into a wonderful feast for the senses, open daily from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Magnolia and cherry trees blossom overhead, daffodils and tulips bloom at your feet, and koi drift lazily in the stream under the footbridge. Instant spring!

This final spring fix just might help get you through the last remnants of winter when you head back home. ■



Chilham Village collectibles shop, Qualicum Beach.

Our favourite spot for lunch became Lefty's Fresh Food, partly because the food was always so reliably good and partly because of the adjoining bookstore—what a great combination on a winter day. We also went to the Farm House restaurant for their all-day breakfast. This homey spot boasts décor such as the large salt and pepper shaker collection gathered by Ken and Jackie, who've run the restaurant for 16 years. We particularly enjoyed the bakery items brought in from Portofino Bakery in Victoria.

A fun place to check out is Coombs Country Market on Highway 4, which offers an eclectic choice of groceries, local cheeses, and snacks. It's also entertaining to watch the goats grazing on the grass-covered roof. Next door were a couple of shops, including Stairway to Hemp, that were ahead of their time when we visited.

We had heard about storm-watching in Tofino and decided to explore this pastime, as the area was only 171 kilometres

Photos: Lindsey Editorial.

Photos: Courtesy of The Grotto Spa (pool); Lindsey Editorial (others).