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The 481-yard par-4 17th hole at Bear Mountain's new Valley course

## LESS RAIN, MORE FAIRWAYS – golfing Vancouver Island

by *Crai S. Bower*

Everyone knows Canadians are mad about hockey.

But they are also crazy for golf.

And though many a maple-leaved snowbird migrates to Florida, Palm Springs and the Southwest, they also fly west to Canada's mildest climate, Vancouver Island. The influx of half-frozen duffers to Victoria and its environs sustains an abundance of exceptional golf courses that can be played 12 months a year.

Thirty minutes after entering Inner Harbour by seaplane, I arrive at Bear Mountain Resort, the Northwest's first golf village. Jack Nicklaus selects his signature courses carefully, so it was with some fanfare when he decided that his company would design not one, but two tracks. Though the Mountain Course receives the most mentions, I'm more excited about the

recently opened Valley Course. The holes fall easily within the landscape, winding past granite boulders and offering much more forgiveness than its alpine brethren, which have been known to frustrate the average golfer.

The \$3 billion dollar project's CEO and President is local Len Barrie, a former NHL journeyman who invited some of his former teammates, including all-stars Mike Vernon, Ray Whitney, Joe Nieuwendyk and Rob Niedermayer to invest in what has become one of Canada's top ten golfing destinations.

The Mountain Course itself, a Steve Nicklaus design (with father Jack's consultation), streams effortlessly through the ravines and peaks of the twisting topography. The first three holes portend this shotmaker's layout, as Douglas firs stand sentry and white sand bunkers lay strategically in wait.

I first realize I'm somewhere special at the 186-yard 4th, where the green levitates above Highlander Forest. The course then ventures further into the woods as fairways lead up slope and down valley before arriving at the 11th, an island green that is Vernon's favorite.

"I used to play TPC Sawgrass quite a bit," the two-time Stanley Cup champion muses, "So I was excited to find a hole here so similar to their famous 17th."

For many others, all drives lead to the 14th which certainly stands among North America's most spectacular golf perches. As I approach the green (secretly applauding the mandatory cart policy), Victoria, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, even faraway Mt. Rainier inhabit the vista. Beyond this precipice looms the much-discussed 19th "Betting Hole," an inventive aside that appears to hover in midair along

### details details

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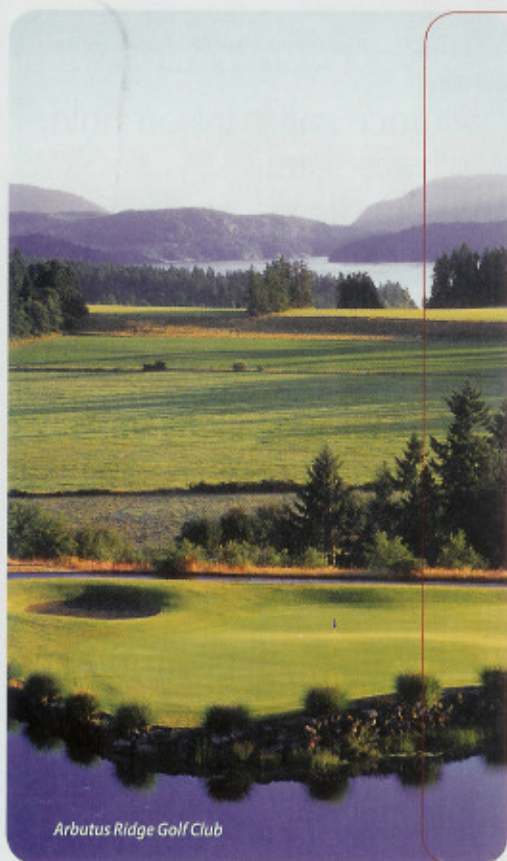
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Arbutus Ridge Golf Club

*The influx of half-frozen duffers to Victoria and its environs sustains an abundance of exceptional golf courses that can be played 12 months a year.*

the ridgeline. The wager is simple: hit the green or lose the bet (and your ball).

Back on the course, the golfer drops out of the clouds at the 16th, a 181-yard par-3 descending seven stories from tee to green. Having returned to earth, the finishing hole flows along a stream and, like the peninsular 11th, requires an intimidating carry over water.

The resort-membership arrangement keeps the clubhouse interesting as well, especially over the already famous "Investors Weekend," a combination of long dinners, a few meetings, lots of golf and plenty of private shenanigans in the hush-hush bunkered investor's locker room.

"Membership courses can feel like ghost towns," Barrie observes. "This combination of resort golfers and members keeps the energy level up all the time."

About 20 minutes down the road awaits Olympic View Golf Club, one of GolfBC's eleven jewels in the province. I wonder why I haven't stowed my tent in my golf bag as I discover Douglas fir needle-strewn paths leading to sequestered greens. This afternoon, the deer-to-golfer ratio is easily 4-1. The trolls lurk as well – forest play means pitching errant tee shots from off the pine straw.

Multiple holes at Olympic View warrant

"signature hole" status. But the 17th takes my breath away, a 417-yard trek drawn narrow as a ballerina's waist leading to an elevated green framed by a 60-foot natural waterfall.

A second waterfall guards the 420-yard 8th hole, which demands accurate positioning and plenty of brawn. I particularly enjoy the 169-yard 11th, a shot deep into the woods to a three-tiered green. I play the arboreal back nine solo, except for my gallery of rabbits and mule deer. Still, the distant crack of ball against bark indicates I am not entirely alone.

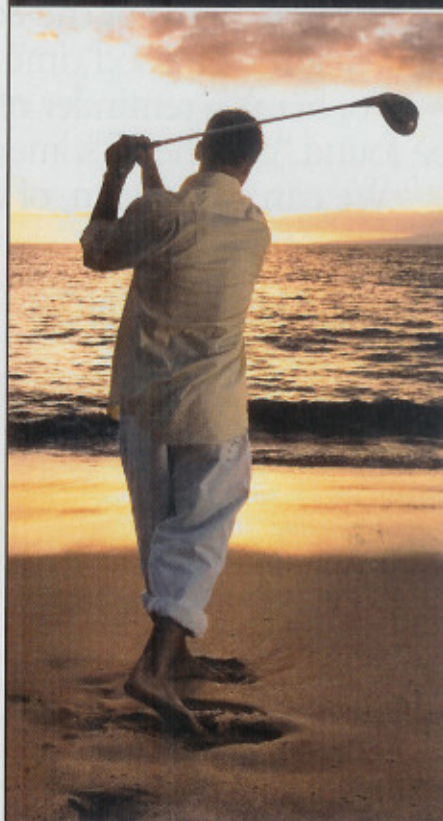
Next morning, I head out to Arbutus Ridge Golf Club, another GolfBC property. While neither as secluded as Olympic View nor spectacular as Bear Mountain, this track features ocean vistas and challenging holes amid a parkland setting so authentic, I expect to meet picnickers out for a stroll. Climbing uphill on the endless 421-yard 18th, I sink my final putt and throw my white towel into the bag, my golf cravings sated for another week.

Vancouver Island receives just under half of Seattle's annual rainfall. The climate invites Canadians from every province and territory to come and sample the island's 40-plus courses.

Americans would do well to head northwest as well.

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