

# Business Edge

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## **Alberta jet-set sold on Island golf scene**

### **WestJet service to Comox gives prairie duffers quick access**

**By Mike Dempster - Business Edge**

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Calgary's Judy Gee and her two children never worry about getting a tee time - even in the dead of winter.

Their home course, the Pheasant Glen Golf Resort on Vancouver Island, is open year-round. In fact, if the bug to play really hits, the family can take a 9:15 a.m. WestJet flight out of Calgary International and be on the first tee at 11 a.m. local time.

Once there, it's like Old Home Week. The Island's central west coast has become a Prairie getaway, where almost half the people Gee sees come from Calgary or Edmonton.

"The hardest part of the whole procedure is being able to get to the airport in Calgary," Gee laughs. "The weather can be treacherous in the winter. But once we're in the airport, we breathe a sigh of relief. It's like we're almost there."



*Photo courtesy of Brent Morrison Golf Academy*

The Pheasant Glen Golf Resort in the Qualicum Beach/Parksville area offers golfers the Vancouver Island experience.

Six years ago when Gee and husband John - he prefers flyfishing to golf - bought a home in Qualicum Beach, they were one of the first Alberta families to invest in the area, a 25-minute drive north of Nanaimo.

Not any more, says Barrie McWha, Pheasant Glen's executive professional and general manager.

"We're almost a bedroom community for Alberta. We see Alberta, particularly Calgary, right behind Vancouver as our core market. To a lesser extent, Edmonton is also part of that market."

For golfers, the appeal is simple. Once on the tarmac at Comox Valley Airport, it's a prairie duffer's paradise. (Just ask one avid Pheasant Glen member who regularly flies out of Saskatoon at 6 a.m. for a late morning tee time.)



*Photo courtesy of Pheasant Glen Golf Resort*  
? Bill Dutton, Pheasant Glen Golf Resort joint owner, with wife Donna.

From the airport, it's a 40-minute drive to the Qualicum Beach/Parksville area where six semi-private courses await: Pheasant Glen, Fairwinds, Morningstar International, Arrowsmith, Eaglecrest and Qualicum Beach Memorial. Or, for those who want to play immediately, Crown Isle Resort and Golf Community is a quick five minutes from the airport.

In large part, the boom in golf course activity can be traced to March 2001 when WestJet began regular daily service to Comox, which also opened a new terminal one year ago.

McWha says that the Alberta "rubber-tire market" has always been a strong component of Island golf, but the air service has added a whole new fly-in market to boost the game and is fuelling a red-hot housing market to boot.

Bill Dutton agrees. He and wife Donna are joint owners of Pheasant Glen and the ex-Calgarians now live in a log home on Pheasant Glen's ninth fairway.

Dutton, the former chairman of the board of Upton Resources and its founder, took over Pheasant Glen in 1997 after the course went into receivership.

Known as Glengarry Golf Links, it was an executive course. Today, it's a 6,600-yard par-72 layout with six new holes and five others that have been modified.

Since taking over, rounds played are up by 30 per cent annually - attributed to a mix of factors that include better maintenance, the new layout, plus direct air service from Calgary.

"I see terrific potential for the area with WestJet (now flying into) Comox," says Dutton.

"I think older people who can't afford the health costs of going to Florida see the West Coast as the best alternative. It certainly has a lot over the Prairies. You have to spend a couple of winters here to realize it."

Because of that optimism, the Duttons plan to break ground at the end of this year on a 225-unit resort, at a cost of \$65 to \$75 million.

Jason Andrew, director of golf at Crown Isle Resort and Golf Community, says Crown Isle is also expanding. Last month it began work on a lodge and spa.

"In 1999 when I arrived here, the only dirt being turned was when somebody hit a wedge fat," he laughs. "We've gone from 24 villas to 92. The (new) lodge and spa will add another 100 rooms."

Andrew says two factors have taken his golf course to a whole new level: WestJet's arrival and the four-lane inland Island highway that reaches as far north as Campbell River.

"It's created an ease of travel that's meant everything to the area," he says. "If WestJet stopped tomorrow we'd have some issues, no question about it."

Andrew says because of the fly-in traffic, the golf course now sees golf-itchy Albertans in February. April and May are exceptionally busy for Prairie traffic, plus late in October and November.

In Calgary, Judy Gee says any time of year is her time to play.

She and her children, Daniel, 15, and Jennifer, 11, spend July and August in their Island home, and fly over at spring break, Christmas, Thanksgiving, "any time we can."

"The weather's great," she says. "At New Year's, we had sunshine every day we golfed. How can you beat that?"

Web Watch:

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