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SWEET DREAMS ON THE Vancouver Island GOLF TRAIL

by Andrew Penner

THOSE OF US WITH GOLF IN OUR VEINS HAVE MANY THINGS IN COMMON. We love the outdoors. We love the camaraderie that the game makes possible. And, perhaps more than anything, we love to dream. We dream about that syrupy-smooth technique that has long evaded us. We dream about a 350-yard drive (I'd say 300, but those days are over). And, perhaps our favourite, we dream about the ultimate golf adventure. In fact, this quest for adventure, a new and better golf experience, is a passion, a duty, that we take quite seriously. Those who declare a love for the game, for golfing adventure, should fix their eyes – and their golfing dreams – on the Vancouver Island Golf Trail.

The Vancouver Island Golf Trail was not the first golf "trail" to be created. That honour goes to the tremendously successful Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail in Alabama. Since 1990, when the RTJ Trail was born, many other "trails" have been charted and mapped. There are golf trails in many different states, many countries, including such unlikely locales as North Dakota and Arkansas. Even the Scots have jumped on board with a recent entry. This much is true: there are now many golf-rich destinations, many "trails," that adventure-seeking golfers can dream about and explore.

So what makes the Vancouver Island Golf Trail extra special? When it's all said and done, what makes this 10-course, 250-kilometre trail one of the greatest? Well, for starters, it's on Vancouver Island. And that kind of head start is almost unfair.

Voted by *Conde Naste* as the top island destination in North America for four years in a row, Vancouver Island is a 550-kilometre long playground of the utmost beauty. Amidst the giant cedar and fir trees, the charming seaside towns, the harbours, the gardens, there is a lifetime's worth of attractions and activities. Whale watching, salmon fishing, hiking, sailing, ocean kayaking, mountaineering, antiques – and, of course, golfing – have all made this island what it is: simply one of the finest vacation destinations in the world.

Victoria, the capital city of British Columbia, is often called "The City of Gardens." Consider the temperate climate, the hundreds of species of fauna and flora blooming in every month of the year and you've got yourself a botanical utopia.

But now it's time to dream a little golf – the real reason why a visit

to the island has been drifting through your mind. There is no better initiation to this journey than the amazing new Bear Mountain Golf and Country Club in Victoria. Designed by Jack and Steve Nicklaus, Bear Mountain is an \$18-million golfing paradise that tumbles through a rugged alpine setting. Shooting up Mount Finlayson, with glorious views of Victoria at the top, the layout at Bear Mountain is an exhilarating ride that will be seared in your memory for years. "There are 18 signature holes," says Jack. Sounds like a cliché – that is, until you play it. With the unveiling of a new 65-room luxury boutique hotel, this escape just got even better.

After exploring Victoria's inner harbour, a place renowned for its charming restaurants, grand hotels, museums, boutiques, and buskers, you'll want to test your game at a couple of other great courses in the area – Olympic View and Arbutus Ridge.



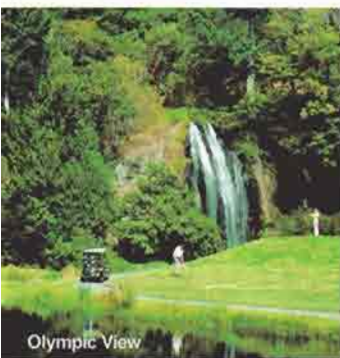
Speaking of dream-like swings, when he was an amateur, Tiger Woods made a trip to Victoria and played Olympic View. Impressed with the layout but none too intimidated by it, Tiger blasted a tee shot of ridiculous length on the closing hole, easily knocked his ball onto the par-5 green in two and made a ho-hum eagle. Besides the waterfalls, rock bluffs and the spirited route, it's worth experiencing this course just to try and pull off some Tiger-like magic of your own!

From Victoria, the trail heads north, along the scenic Island Highway and over Malahat Mountain. A round at Arbutus Ridge – which is on the way to The Cowichan Warm Land, your next overnight stop on the trail – is a reminder that you are, indeed, on a trail of supreme beauty. By now, you're getting accustomed to the dazzling shorelines that are christened with water-smoothed rock. You've seen moss-coated trees hanging above the foamy sea. You've witnessed a fiery sunset over a harbour swarming with sails. You're beginning to see that you chose the right trail.

About 60 kilometres north of Victoria, tucked in a gorgeous valley, are two more courses worthy of being on this trail. The adventure of what is known as The Warm Land (named because of its award-winning vineyards and fertile farmland) begins with the Cowichan and Duncan Meadows Golf Clubs. Both courses here offer pastoral golf experiences that speak volumes about the easy-paced lifestyle



Duncan Meadows



Olympic View



Fairwinds



Storey Creek



Bear Mountain



Crown Isle

that's ingrained on the island. They are warm and friendly places with outstanding playing conditions and just the right amount of challenge. But both have their own distinct character. Cowichan is an older, classic course with tree-lined holes and smallish greens. Duncan Meadows is a more contemporary layout. It's been singled out by *SCORE* golf magazine as one of the most underrated courses in all of Canada. (Tip: Before playing in The Warm Land, head to the Cherry Point Vineyards and grab a shot – or two – of their award-winning Blackberry Port, then watch yourself play the golf of your dreams.)

After a gorgeous one-hour drive, you'll come to the oceanside area of Parksville and Qualicum Beach. Here you can sample a fantastic trio of courses – and explore one of the finest marine environments on the island.

Fairwinds Golf & Country Club, Morningstar International, and Pheasant Glen (formerly Glengarry Golf Links), are all ripe with character and provide for excellent experiences. Designed by architect Les Furber, Fairwinds is a tucked-away haven that caters to boating enthusiasts and golf-lovers alike. The 18-hole layout at Fairwinds is easily one of the most scenic courses on the island. Perhaps overlooked because it plays just under 6,200 yards, Fairwinds is the type of golf course that rewards smart shotmaking, not brute strength. (Another tip: After your round at Fairwinds, explore the marina, take a hike along the coast, watch the sea lions or rent a boat and do some fishing. This is the Pacific paradise of your dreams.)

Morningstar, also a Les Furber design, is the feisty 7,000-yarder that can challenge the best. It's gently rolling, winds through thick forests and incorporates many water features. Morningstar has hosted numerous tournaments, including the Canadian Tour, and

might be the toughest track on the island. Bring a sweet swing!

After a pleasant round at the newly renovated Pheasant Glen course (home to an excellent golf academy if your swing is not too dreamy), the Island Highway will beckon once again. At kilometre 219 (from Victoria) you'll have reached the North Central Island – home to two of the top-ranked courses on the island.

The Crown Isle Resort, which quite possibly features the grandest clubhouse in Canada, can certainly be a highlight on the trail. Here architect Graham Cooke sculpted a superb track that flows through spindly pines and gently rolling terrain. Beautifully shaped with plenty of variety, Crown Isle is, according to *SCORE* magazine, one of the top-100 courses in the Nation. Staying course-side in a luxury villa is definitely the way to go!

The most northerly course on the trail is a favourite for many. The Storey Creek Golf Club is one of Les Furber's finest. Located just south of Campbell River, Storey Creek offers one of those rare experiences where every hole is totally isolated. The course, which plays to a par of 72 and tips out at 6,700 yards, crosses creeks and meanders through a magnificent mixed forest. "People leave here pleasantly surprised at the quality of the course," says Head Professional, Paul Dashkewytsch. "It's an extraordinary golf experience."

In a way, that's what The Vancouver Island Golf Trail is all about. Great golf – sometimes astonishingly good – on one of the world's most sought after islands. The Vancouver Island Golf Trail is surely one of the best golf adventures to be found. Regardless of the courses you play or the stops you make, you'll be able to lie down at the end of a memorable day, pull the covers over your eyes, and very happily dream a little dream. ●