

# GOLFER

*golf and leisure across the globe*



**IT WAS FORTY  
YEARS AGO  
TODAY**

JOHN SAMUEL • JULIE GOYDER • GRAHAM JONES • MICHAEL PATRICK SHIELS • DAVID WYKE

# The Vancouver GATEWAY

OPENING UP A WORLD OF WHALES, WELCOME AND THE WHISTLER.

WORDS: JOHN SAMUEL PHOTOGRAPHY: ARCHIVE, CANADA

Let's do what George Vancouver did for Captain Cook. Navigate. Ten hours' aboard Air Canada's flight out of Heathrow, we bank over the skyscrapers, avenues, emerald parks and blue-grey waters of the proudest West Coast city of them all. We land, and head south through Vancouver's suburbs. We've a bridge to cross. Then West. Yes, West. This is Big Country. A BC Ferry across the great wide Strait of Georgia. And there we are. In Victoria, Vancouver Island. And a nice cup of tea waiting for us.

Yes, this is a Course Guide to all that's best in West Coast British Columbia golf. With a difference. Any GPS system on the all-but-obligatory electric carts will tell you what distance there is to the hole. Will order your halfway burger even as you depart the seventh green. Save your skin with the speed limiter on the steepest path of the course. This guide tells more. About the smiley wagon gals bringing up spares of Coke, Iced Beer, ham rolls and muffins on the front and back nines. An Aussie gal to print you out the Oval Test close of play scores. A mini-skirted local beauty to pose for the family album. Our youngest party member can't take it. "So nice. All that goodwill. It's not England. It's not real!"

But real it was for George Vancouver, born Kings Lynn 1757, died 1798 Richmond, Surrey, leader of the expedition meticulously mapping a major part of the Pacific coast, 1792 to 1794. So, back to Destination One – Vancouver Island. Population 700,000. At 12,000 square miles, largest Pacific West Coast Island. To its capital, Victoria, a city of 315,000, legislative capital of all British Columbia, a province of 365,948 square miles – little less than Europe up to the Russian Urals. And, back to prime numbers for we golfers, the centre for a dozen visitor-friendly courses together marketed as the Vancouver Island Golf Trail. A further one by Greg Norman, the The Cliffs over Maple Bay, comes on-song in 2006. (It won't be easy)

For British trailblazing purposes we have two golf samplers – Olympic View and the Nicklaus family's creation at Bear Mountain.

And much else. Indeed it's the "much else" which in the briefest while will help sell us Canadian golf. You don't have to stay in a penthouse suite of the Victoria Regent overlooking the eighth busiest harbour in Canada – busiest, not least, for the seaplanes skimming in and out, engines muted, great birds to the Kwakiutls and Nootka. Nor talk tourist needs over Thai appetisers at the Queen Mother Waterside Café – yes, they really want us. Victoria's No 1 industry is tourism, above lumber, fishing or agriculture. Over on the mainland, Sea to Sky golf is equally big business, designer courses available now from Vancouver up to Whistler Mountain, 70 miles away.

Probably because they know the British have hundreds and hundreds of golf courses back home, the Island starts us off with – how did you guess? – whale watching. Orcas. The Killer Whales a breathless David Attenborough sees leaping out of the surf to

devour poor seal and sea lion babes. These larger than life dolphins don't habitually eat humans, not if you don't go too close, and, truth to tell, Great Pacific Adventures unleashes another secret weapon – Rory Bremner's nephew Mike, a locally based marine biologist who flies our motorised raft at speeds up to 50mph to a large patch of water off the US San Juan Islands.

There, with feeling rather than satire, he tells

us how Ruffles and Co have their being. Ruffles is a whale 25 yards long and weighing 17,000 lb, recognised by the individual notches of his 6ft dorsal fin. The pods of 30 or 40 are named here almost like automobiles, J,K and L, and slow and careful steering acquaints us with the very recent science of Orca watching. Ruffles, it turns out, is just a big baby, well nannied by his Grandma, born 1907, who helps him shop for sea lion, seal and, bouche amuse no doubt, the odd salmon among the millions to-ing and fro-ing the coastal tides. Vroom! That's a ten-foot high blow. Swoosh! That's a vertical leap like a submarine-launched rocket breaking surface.





*More British than the British, maybe,  
but West Coast North America looks  
forward rather than back ...*

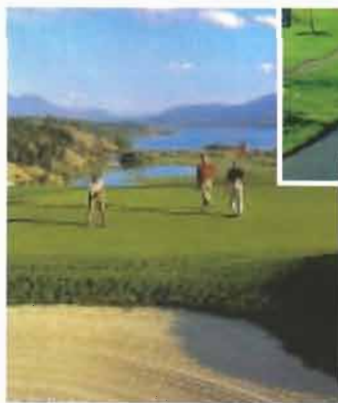
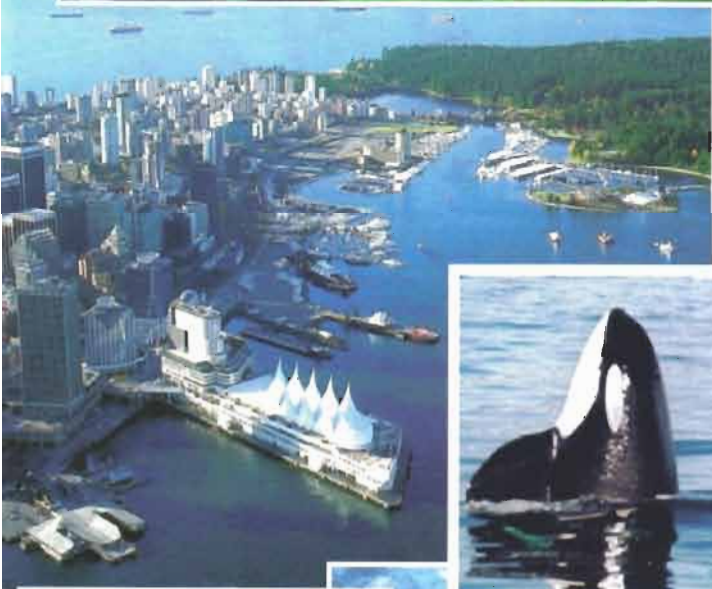
It's easy to go on without reference to golf. Back at the bustling harbour, Mandy, in flowered Edwardian boater and full-length gown, escorts us over to the Fairmont Empress Hotel, end of the road even for Canadian Pacific hotels in that epic era of Trans-Canada railway building, for a stack of saucy tales and, of course, early afternoon tea from one of seven flavours. Dinner there has the service of three sommeliers guarding a wine list of 500 labels. Tapestry covered walls rise to a richly carved ceiling, hosting Queens and Kings attending BC's proud capital city over the decades – Victoria was founded in 1843 by the Hudson Bay Fur Trading Company.

More British than the British, maybe, but West Coast North America looks forward rather than back and eager fingers now reach for golf bags as Larry, our driver, drops us off at the Olympic View clubhouse. Here, there is a view not of the Seb and Ken Show but the Cascade mountains of Washington state – fiery, volcanic sierra, as we know from Mount St Helens, some, nevertheless, snow-capped, and the straits before them boiling with giant mammals and fish.

Inside, another view, that of Tiger Woods, snapped after a round here as the young US Amateur Champion, and of course he is all smiles. What else? You don't have to be a Tiger Woods to enjoy Bill Robinson's risk and reward challenge – 6,534 yards off the blue tees, 6,120 off the whites, in 550 acres of virgin forest, 14 holes involving water, most notably the 60-foot cascade providing a stunning backdrop to the 417-yard seventeenth.

As is standard in North America, handicap is adjusted to a slope rating – here it is 124 off the whites – and no British-style nonsense of playing only the shorter tees midweek. Here you tee off according to handicap, say nought to 15 off the longest, with mid and longer handicaps off the white and ladies off the reds as usual. The greens, as almost everywhere, are little short of Augusta – fast, and rewardingly true.

Vancouver Island has less rain than any place in populated Canada. Golf is played all year round, with April 30 to October 10 prime season. Green fees for the most part are sound value – as little as £27 midweek at Olympic View, £32 from Friday to Sunday – but the budget should allow around £15 for power carts, a necessity on some courses, if not here. The casual player can expect to pay £20 for hire clubs, but they will be quality items.





Bear Mountain, our next stop 30 minutes' north of downtown Victoria, has the classic imprints of Nicklaus father and son, in this instance Steve. No-one eats honey off the gold tees, not with a slope rating of 152, par of 72 and length of 7,212 yards, prised in 2003 from two square miles of forested slope and valley. But if this sounds daunting it is only the start. A huge chunk is going to real estate, as a panzer regiment of earth-moving equipment presently suggests.

In 15 years' time it will be nothing short of a multi-million dollar Golf City, with palatial clubhouse, obligatory luxury hotel, wellness centre, avenues of "townhome" and condominium, withal anchored to two courses – a second is being built by 2007. It is the vision, primarily, of a National League ice hockey player named Len Barrie whose whip-round among a set of fellow players offers a pension prospect worth the notice of David Beckham and Co.

Back on the Nicklaus course, it is not quite as tough as it might seem. Jack, as ever, offering alternative routes for the shorter hitter – even across the many water hazards – and offering fair vistas, none better than his so-called nineteenth hole, a spur of land set above the sentinel furs of the 14th green. Here he has shoehorned in a 141-yard "Betting Hole", treat it as you will, on a green seemingly floating in space, the city of Victoria far below. Beyond it, the Juan de Fuca Strait, Olympic Mountains with snow-capped Mount Baker to the fore, and, at last, to the West, the Pacific Ocean. Well, if you want a speculative opportunity, why not start here ... [www.bearmountaingolf.com](http://www.bearmountaingolf.com) ... but don't blame me, etcetera. Price of a round for the casual visitor: around £50, including compulsory cart – quite some bargain while they search for custom.

There's a lot of speculation about, as we quickly note after crossing the wide Georgia Strait, making for Horseshoe Bay to the north of Vancouver city. Here is where the "Sea to Sky" highway up to Whistler Mountain Resort begins, never forgetting Whistler is now the Number One ski resort of North America, grown from a village, I recall, as lonely and independent as Carrbridge, Scotland, when it staged its first World Cup downhill race, circa 1972. Except that Carrbridge has no black bears and grizzlies, and Whistler certainly did – still does, in fact, though in choosing it for the 2010 Winter Olympics the IOC were no doubt persuaded they're rather more active in the Yukon.

Halfway between Vancouver and Whistler, Furry Creek was largely dynamited out of the mountainside facing Howe Sound for a 6,025-yard par-72 whose eccentricity and charm is summed up by seven par 3s, five par 4s and six par 5s. It is a great good fortune to be playing with the General Manager, Alan Hedley, whose 12-handicap and Leeds accent is a calming influence for the Corridor of Uncertainty excited by the first hole, labelled cryptically "The Drop Zone." "It's what it means," says Alan. "Two hundred feet vertical and 352 yards, water ont left. Tek 6-iron and it it stret." Sorry Alan, that's our Geoffrey of course.

Alan's advice for the most photographed short hole in BC Golf – the 211-yard 14th, sinuously curving out in to the Sound – is a merciful "Look ... enjoy." My first ball disappears cryptically into its boulder-strewn neck. A companion over-hits, then retrieves four balls from the rocky foreshore beyond the green. None of them are his.

*It is a great good fortune to be playing with the General Manager, Alan Hedley, whose 12-handicap and Leeds accent is a calming influence for the Corridor of Uncertainty excited by the first hole, labelled cryptically "The Drop Zone."*

*"There is mountain golf and golf in the mountains. Big Sky is very, very playable, walkable and traditional in a setting that is absolutely mind-blowing."*

Robert Muir Graves may have been the name of the designer, but Admiral Ozawa would do for one or two of the kamikaze sections, and little wonder the electric carts have speed limiters. So, a golfing experience not to be missed, any more than clubhouse dining in the poised elegance of a Japanese garden scene, angular picture windows overlooking a tumbling waterfall. No surprise this was a Japanese venture, now taken over by GolfBC, masters of Olympic View and another ten BC courses.

Do skiers golf? Do golfers ski? Whistler, up beyond the Sound, its 7,000-foot mountains a Winter paradise, will surely find out as it offers a four-season facility with designer golf from Palmer, Nicklaus, Cupp and Trent Jones, a four-course Passport package available from as little as £150, depending on time and season. Jeff Stipek, an executive with Intrawest, the prominent Whistler developer, once explained the four-season strategy as follows, "Where ski hills can easily accommodate thousands daily, a golf course can only manage 180 in a typical day. You expand that with clubhouses which are welcoming to non-golfers, and trail systems alongside fairways encouraging to cyclists, walkers, rollerbladers and so on. You speed up play with carts allowed on fairways. You use elevation, natural slope and thinner air – at 9,000 feet around 15% more in ball flight – for your course design. Greens and tee boxes are state of the art, but edging and trimming more rustic."

Whistler shares some of these elements, but is closer to the sea than an Alpine resort, and its clutch of top-rate courses are a mix of mountain and valley characteristics. Twenty minutes down from Whistler at the village of Pemberton, Big Sky is a pancake-flat course with the 8,800-foot Mt Currie rising above it, a huge whorl of green and granite-grey ... Robert Cupp, who schemed the exquisite 7,001-yard, par-72, says, "There is mountain golf and golf in the mountains. Big Sky is very, very playable, walkable and traditional in a setting that is absolutely mind-blowing." Some of our number played it twice in the day, they were so taken. It has a subtly intellectual challenge. Smooth, level bent grass fairways cry out for a well-swung wood, but every shot needs careful appraisal, streams and ponds factored in to thoughtful bunkering. Greens and tees are a joy.



*Nicklaus North is rightly proud that it is the only course in the world where Jack has given his name.*



Nicklaus North is rightly proud that it is the only course in the world where Jack has given his name. The par-3 seventeenth would be the signature hole, but for the fact that Nicklaus is sternly on record that every hole is a signature hole. The last of the great courses opened at Whistler – in 1996 – its par-71, 6,925 yards hug the shore of the glacier-fed Green Lake. Independent lakes and ponds and Fitzimmons Creek add to water hazards on 15 holes, but Nicklaus, ever fair, has them sighted from every hand-mown bent-grass tee. Landing areas are generous, but the 226-yard 17th, typically, 188 off the Whites, has a green jutting in to Green Lake with a vivid curl of bunkers for three-quarters of its circumference, the sand backed by a ball-saving rock wall from which, if stance is affected, Nicklaus generously offers a free drop.



Sadly for our packed schedule, Arnold Palmer's innovative Whistler, managed by Intrawest, was a step too far – it is an eminently walkable course – but one treasure remained. The Trent Jones Junior Chateau Whistler. It is 6,635-yards of unalloyed golfing pleasure hewn out of the flank of Blackcomb Mountain. The 400-foot elevation change represents a major feat of engineering. Driving the cart track is a delight in itself. Even if the score becomes secondary in such context – rock-strewn streams, granite canyons and peaks, stands of mighty Douglas fir, silk-smooth fairways and greens – there is a pleasing fairness to it.



Après golf is as good as it gets in a town which knows its après ski. For the family it is everything from bear-watching to plastic jumping castles. At the top end, you could spend your entire holiday in the restaurants, bars, malls, pools, beauty salons and alternative playgrounds of the 558-room Chateau Whistler Resort, voted No 1 in Canada by *Conde Nast Traveller*. Bear-watching aside, there's bald eagle spotting, white-water rafting, or simply the Canadian passagiata around traffic-free precincts. "The skier knows much about it. Now it's up to the golfer," says Andy Tremlett, of MW, the mountain golf specialists hoping to welcome the British to this new-old market. "You are among friends. And it's wonderful value."



Golf with the Whales ... Golf with the Bears. Who's to argue?

WG

Helpful websites:

[golfvanancouverland.ca](http://golfvanancouverland.ca); [golfbc.com](http://golfbc.com); [bearmountain.ca](http://bearmountain.ca); [victoriaregent.com](http://victoriaregent.com); [greatpacificadventures.com](http://greatpacificadventures.com); [golfwhistler.com](http://golfwhistler.com); [fairmount.com](http://fairmount.com); [bjjskygolf.com](http://bjjskygolf.com); [tjgolfwhistler.com](http://tjgolfwhistler.com); [mountainwild.co.uk](http://mountainwild.co.uk); [canisgolf.com](http://canisgolf.com)

