

# Vancouver Island promotes itself as an all-year golf mecca

The island has a 'golf trail' of 11 high-end courses between Victoria and Comox

BY JACK BRANSWELL

When Canadians think of golf destinations, their minds wander to Prince Edward Island, Banff, Whistler, the Muskokas or even U.S. sun destinations. Surprisingly, Vancouver Island has been left off the map.

Consider that map redrawn with the advent of the Vancouver Island golf trail and a golf boom on the island.

When Bear Mountain, one of the jewels in the island golf crown, opened in 2003 it was the first new course on the island in 12 years. Now a second course is slated to open in 2008 at Bear Mountain, just outside of Victoria, and two other premium courses are also in the works for the next two years — the Cliffs Over Maple Bay, a Craig Norman course and Centre Mountain, a Robert Trent Jones design.

What happened? Well, Bear Mountain happened.

The Jack and Steve Nicklaus-designed course literally changed the island golf landscape. "Bear Mountain has really created a lot of interest in the region," said Jim Lee, the president of the Canadian Golf Tourism Alliance.

"People have always thought of this as an area where you can play golf year round," but the addition of the top-name designers (Nicklaus, father and son) "has provided an additional reason for people to bring their clubs."

Bear Mountain is sculpted out of the mountain ridges around Victoria and is owned by a group of NHLers, former and present, including Len Barrie, Mike Vernon, Rob Niedermayer, Joe Nieuwendyk and Rob Blake, to name a few. The course has the posh Bear Mountain Resort Hotel on it and a whole swanky community is developing around it. There may be more backhoes than birdies to be had here.

Jason Lowe, the president of Golf Vancouver Island, an umbrella group of golf and travel partners promoting the island as a golf destination, says the year-round play and the quality as well as variety of courses is really hitting home with golfers.

"If people want to stretch their vacation dollar and if they don't mind putting on a couple of layers of clothes [for winter play]," then the island is a tempting choice for golfers. With a new float-plane service from Whistler to Victoria,



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## Jason Lowe, the president of Golf Vancouver Island, hits a drive at Olympic View.

people can even golf and ski in the same day at world-class venues.

Lowe also says the island can lay claim to being a true golf trail. "It has a beginning and an end and you can fly into or out of either one [Victoria or Comox]," he added.

The trail is made up of 11 high-end courses that start in Victoria and go up to Campbell River, that's about three hours of driving — the kind you do in a car, not on the course — between all the courses.

The Cliffs Over Maple Bay and Centre Mountain will most certainly be added to the trail when they are ready and there are rumours that another Nicklaus course will be built in Ucluelet, on the western side of Vancouver Island.

There are 50 courses on the island spread out in many different terrains and with some spectacular views of the Olympic mountain range and Mount Baker in Washington State.

Among the must-plays are Bear Mountain, Olympic View (both in the Victoria area), Storey Creek (Campbell River), Morningstar International Golf course, and Fairwinds Golf Club, both near Parksville.

Depending on where you are used to playing, Vancouver Island golf is fairly priced for the quality and there are lots of bargains to be had, if you are flexible

## If you go

■ For booking a stay-and-play package or just a few rounds on the island, the consortium Golf Vancouver Island ([www.golfvancouverisland.ca](http://www.golfvancouverisland.ca)) is a good place to price your holiday and find out what packages are available. It also has a good golf map that shows you the course location and links to course web sites, which have photo galleries and, in some cases, helicopter fly overs of the holes.

■ If you want to do the whole trail, figure on it taking at least 12 days. A shorter version, which still hits all the highlights, can be done in six days of golf. If you only have three or four days, then just play the courses around Victoria and Comox.

■ For photo galleries of some of the courses mentioned in this story, visit: <http://www.canada.com/topics/travel/activities/golf/index.html>

on when you play — both time of day and season. Bear Mountain's green fees for example range from \$130 to \$75 in low season (November to mid April), but even in the summer, twilight rates are \$85.

At Olympic View, which is really good value for the money, rates are \$75 to \$35 (January to mid March and Oct. 30 to the end of December).

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Jack Branswell is Travel Editor for [canada.com](http://canada.com)