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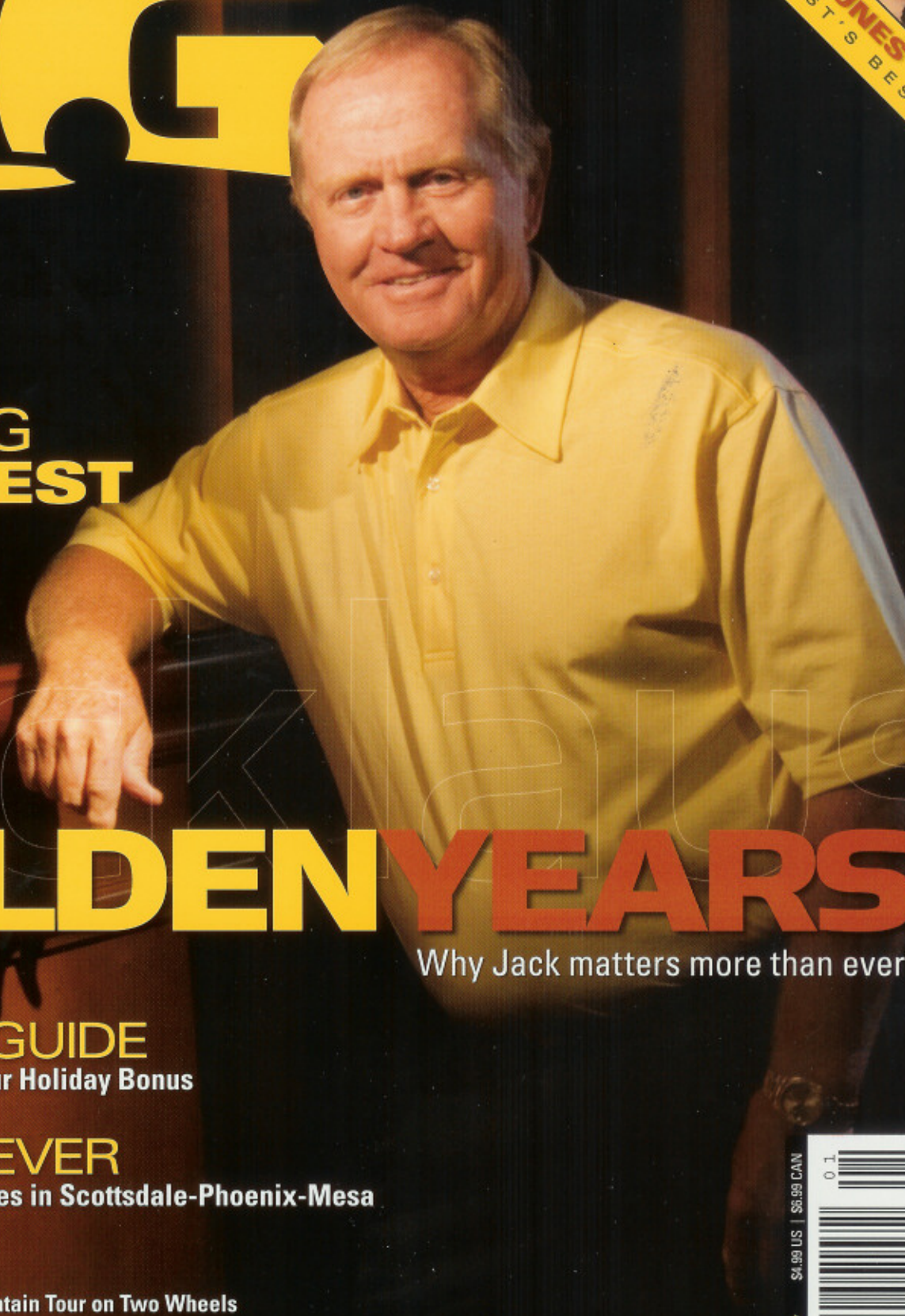
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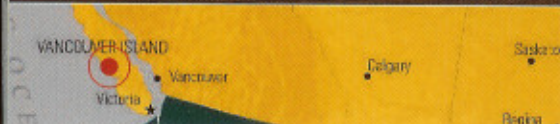
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Color us converts to the Canadian way of playing, presenting and promoting golf in the great north.

For American West Coast wanderlusters, Vancouver Island is the perfect dip into British Columbia's waters — a 300-mile-long, 100-mile-wide outpost of genteel, affordable hospitality and breathtaking wilderness.

Walk into any clubhouse and you're an instant local. Smiles stretch as freely as the beer flows, and it flows by the mega-liter from hotel bars and neighborhood pubs. The golf flows well, too, in that unhurried and open Canadian way, through dense forests, along sun-kissed hillsides and across pine-studded granite ridges. More than 40 courses are lined up and ready, most of them along the island's eastern shore. At least a dozen of them are among the nation's best, authored by the likes of prolific Canadian legend Les Furber, American giant Jack Nicklaus and, very soon, Australian superstar Greg Norman. They range from classic parkland-meets-forest forays such as Storey

Creek, halfway up the island in salmon country, to modern mountain beasts like Nicklaus' Bear Mountain at its southern tip, with a city view that's so good, you've got to make a mid-round 19th-hole stop to get it. And the vistas at nearby Olympic View are astounding, as well — No. 17, for instance, features a behind-the-green manmade waterfall that actually fits its surroundings, more of a wispy veil than a thunderous curtain.

"As far as settings, the golf is eerily representative of the entire island," says Jason Lowe of Golf Vancouver Island, a marketing alliance. "We have so many activities that relate to the golf experience. Every golfer is looking for something different in a course. Variety is a strong point on Vancouver Island. It keeps it fresh."

So why not start with fresh salmon, plucked from the Campbell River with the help of a guide, followed buy a round at Storey Creek? With a quick connecting flight from Vancouver to Comox airport, such

a fishing-and-slicing foray is easily pulled off. Further down the island's east shore is Parksville, where Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort pampers without losing the island's frontier mojo. Its new private spa bungalows complement the original oceanview condos and larger log cottages with spacious and well-appointed layouts, kitchens, fireplaces, big bedside bathtubs, the whole deal, but look at the window and you're bathed in a pristine north country glow filtered through

adversary. Most holes wind in and out of the forest primeval, while each nine's opener and the final stretch slide heathland-style into the well-bunkered, well-mounded open.

While the big snowcapped peaks fade into the rear-view mirror the farther south you go, the terrain remains breathtaking. Arbutus Ridge and Olympic View illustrate the point beautifully. Bill Robinson laid out both of these tree-lined treats, the former a lower-lying, closer-to-the-sea affair, the

players and encompassing 1,000 acres on the flanks of Mt. Finlayson, above Victoria. The front nine moves down and through a broad valley, and it's gorgeous every step of the way, but the back nine seals the "wow factor" deal. The near-island green at No. 11, the bunkerless No. 12, the waterlogged Redan-styled No. 13; they set the table for the Nicklaus crescendo, which starts at the No. 14 tee, gains volume up the par 5's steep and bunker-riddled fairway and onto its

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big conifers. Or keep going to Nanoose Bay and Fairwinds Golf & Country Club, another Furber design snaking over forested hills above a marina that can handle craft up to 150 feet long. Lakes or streams hug half the holes, and the highest spots on the back nine, such as the tee at 330-yard No. 16, give great views of the strait and surrounding mountains.

If it's midsummer, include a sidetrip to Morningstar International Golf Course, where improvements in drainage and maintenance have turned a true split-personality course into a worthwhile and winsome

latter a bigger-shouldered circuit climaxing with the aforementioned waterfall and boasting one of the deepest bunkers in creation, at the short par 4 No. 12. Then there's No. 17 with its waterfall — it might be the island's prettiest hole overall — and the par-5 finisher with a monster rock guarding the left side.

Bear Mountain is a pure Nicklaus course with big greens, wide landing areas, copious bunkering and a personality as dramatic as Jack's major wins. It's a new kind of Vancouver animal, part of a massive resort project developed by a group of NHL

mountaintop green, then hits its highest note at the course's shortest hole, one that doesn't show up on the scorecard until players land safely back on earth, three equally excellent holes later.

Capping a Bear Mountain round off with microbrew in the clubhouse, then heading down to Victoria for a night of fine dining, perhaps high tea at the Fairmont Empress and clubbing on the Inner Harbor, then bedding down at the Delta Victoria Ocean Pointe — sounds like the perfect end to another long, languid summer day on Vancouver Island. **FG**

Added-Value: Bear Mountain's unique, in-round 19th hole.

