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Bear Mountain 11th hole

Four Great Golf Getaways

on Vancouver Island

BY ANDREW PENNER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GOLFVANCOUVERISLAND.CA

There's something about being on an island that makes a holiday that much sweeter. Islands have a way of upping the leisurely power of a trip. But let's face it, when a chunk of land is surrounded by water, you're somewhat stuck. You are, whether you like it or not, staying put. It's when you just accept this, or better yet, revel in it, that you can really leave the stress behind and bask in the beauty of really being "somewhere." In the case of a stick-swinging spree to Vancouver Island, landlubbers can enjoy some of the greenest, grandest, most glorious courses in all of Canada. So whether you get there by boat, plane, ferry, canoe or the doggy-paddle (not recommended), you'll have a golfing getaway to remember.

Certainly, not all islands – especially when it comes to their golfability – are created equal. For example, if you love to watch divots fly, the Galapagos Islands are not the ticket. If you want to see otherworldly wildlife, absolutely. For golf, Vancouver Island is first-rate – a destination that packs some punch. Incidentally, if you're seeking other recreational opportunities, like fishing, touring history-rich cities, great cuisine, etc., you're also going to the right place. Condé Nast, one of the most influential travel magazines in the world, has for the seventh consecutive year voted Vancouver Island as the number one island destination in North America. Divots aside, this island is still a major force on the world stage.

But naturally, for golfers, seeking landscapes draped with bentgrass and flecked with flagsticks is of the utmost concern. You need to go somewhere where your cravings for the game can be satisfied. And when you consider these four options for your next golf getaway, you'll soon realize that golfing on Vancouver Island – any month of the year – is about as satisfying as stick swinging can be.

Victoria

Victoria is a city that's easy to fall in love with. Not overly big (Greater Victoria's population is still under 400,000), Victoria's vibrant seaside character and old-world charms make it one of the greatest destination cities in Canada, if not the world. Museums, gardens and regal hotels bite into the must-see inner harbour. If possible, a stay at the Fairmont Empress Hotel is ideal. Not that the Empress is super close to the golf (it's not), but there's nothing better than being in and around Victoria's famous inner harbour.

But now to the golf. Bear Mountain is the new kid on the block in Victoria. Except this is no "kid." This is a big, bellowing beast that will try to eat you. With a slope rating of 152 from the deepest, darkest tees, Bear Mountain is understated as being a "bear." But man, getting eaten alive will never feel so good. Located on the north end of Victoria in Langford, Bear Mountain, a Nicklaus design, makes a strong case for the finest new course built in Western Canada since Greywolf opened in 1999. This is a thrilling up-the-mountain-and-down experience that, regardless of what you shoot (and yes, it could be high), will keep you on the edge of your seat throughout. Tough, teething holes such as the 493-yard fourth, shoot through tree-lined seams and feature wildly undulating greens that can frustrate even the most sober players. But if you can absorb a few lost balls, and most people can, then Bear Mountain is a place you'll want to return to again and again.

To cap off your Victoria golf getaway, a round at both Olympic View and Arbutus Ridge would do the job nicely. With waterfalls, wildlife and a spectacular layout amidst soaring fir trees, Olympic View is easily one of the best public courses on the island. Arbutus Ridge, too, is highly regarded and offers golfers a manageable 6,200-yard course with some stellar views. Regardless of how many holes you get in on your Victoria golf weekend, this is a place, a city, which leaves landlubbers dreaming of majestic marine magnificence for years.



Cowichan Golf Club Green

Cowichan

Take a scenic 30-minute drive south from Nanaimo and you'll find yourself in the warm, cozy confines of the Cowichan Valley. The climate here is so good, the growing season and soil so fine, that numerous wineries have set up shop on the sunniest slopes. A taste of Cherry Point's famous Blackberry Port and you, too, will be singing the praises of this fast-growing micro wine region. A taste of Merridale cider and you might start looking for property. It wouldn't be a bad call.

The area's two favourite golf courses – Cowichan and Duncan Meadows – are complete opposites, but both fine places to test

your game. Cowichan is an older, well-established club with narrow fairways (maybe go to the wineries after you play?) and small, classic greens. The tight, tree-lined holes require precise shot-making with a heavy emphasis on a creative short game as well. Cowichan exudes that warm, inviting character that can only come from a mature, established club. A.V. Macan, perhaps the greatest golf course designer to hail from the Northwest, laid out the initial nine holes back in 1947.

Duncan Meadows is leaner, longer and more typical of today's brawny championship venues. The course has seen some extensive renovations in the past few years and has always held its own when hosting a prestigious tournament. In the 2004 Canadian Club Champion's Championship held at Duncan Meadows, the winner was just three under par for the tournament. And in the 2003 Canadian Senior Men's Championship just five players broke par on the tricky, water-laced route. With a few more tees in the works, the course will soon tip the scales at 7,000 yards. Regardless of which style of golf you prefer, a weekend of wine and golf in the Cowichan Valley is always a good thing.



Duncan Meadows Sunrise

Oceanside

The Qualicum Beach and Parksville area – officially known as “Oceanside” – has a character all to itself. Here local fishermen and tourists compete for seats in the local watering holes, with fresh fish and chips the order of the day for everyone. Unquestionably, the numerous things to see and do in this area – strolling along the beaches, seawalls and marinas, shopping at the world-famous farmers markets, and enjoying spa treatments at some amazing resorts – will tease you into thinking your time is better spent off the fairways. However, if you forego the golf, you'll be missing out on some of the island's best-kept golf secrets.

Not that tearing yourself away from places such as the Tigh-Na-Mara Resort, with its gorgeous tucked-in-the-trees setting and world-class spa (your bones will thank you for spending some time in “The Grotto”) is going to be easy, but a round at nearby Morningstar is pretty sweet in its own right. Designed by architect Les Furber, Morningstar gently rolls through towering stands of fir and spruce and is a long, enjoyable challenge. If you can escape the difficult twelfth – a narrow, downhill par four with a green defended by a pond and a massive sleeper-lined bunker – you can breathe a little easier for a few holes. But there's a good chance you'll have had your hands full with the more secluded front nine. In fact, the stretch of holes from the third to the seventh, which includes a number of long sweeping par fours that can wreck your card in a heartbeat, is about as good as golf on the island gets.

Located a few miles inland from Qualicum Beach, and gaining plenty of steam as a must-play course, is the Pheasant Glen Resort. The long-term plan here, which includes a four-star hotel, cottages and destination spa, will give the already popular layout a major

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boost. The route here drops down an escarpment and parades through low-lying meadows and woodlands. Plenty of elevation change, some tough plateau greens and a warm, tranquil environment make for a great day at Pheasant Glen.

For your weekend finale at Oceanside a round at the sporty Fairwinds Golf Resort would be fitting – that is, if you can pry yourself from the beach or the spa. This Les Furber design isn't overly long, but it's fairly narrow with great views, interesting greens and is always in great shape.

North Island

The North Island areas of Comox, Courtenay and Campbell River are now, thanks to the arrival of major carriers to the Comox Valley Airport, a breeze to get to. And this, if you don't like to waste any time getting your ball airborne, is a Godsend. In fact, you can leave Calgary at 10 a.m. and be picking your partners on the first tee at Crown Isle before noon.

And location aside, Crown Isle is one of the island's best. A smooth, contemporary Graham Cooke design, Crown Isle is a big golf course with an even bigger community surrounding it. When it's all said and done, Crown Isle will be home to over 5,000 residents on 831 acres. Even now, with its massive clubhouse and world-class amenities, there is a spacious, inviting atmosphere here that's still gaining momentum. The location is perfect, the access is supreme and the course – ranked in Canada's Top-100 – is outstanding and in great shape year round. Looking for a course-



Crown Isle Clubhouse Lights

the sounds of metal on ball echo in the hushed playing channels. With its quaint clubhouse and unpretentious character, Storey Creek is a great get-away-from-it-all experience. If you fancy Chinook salmon the size of small children, squeezing in a half day of fishing at Painter's Lodge would be the perfect après golf excursion.

Now the toughest decision of them all: which "destination" to choose for your next Vancouver Island Golf Getaway? Good thing there's more than one weekend on the calendar! **MC**

ANDREW PENNER IS A FREELANCE WRITER BASED IN CALGARY.



Fairwinds, birdseye fairway

side retirement home in a beautiful, easy-to-get-to island town? You found it.

But before you leave for home you also need to find your way to Storey Creek. A half-an-hour's drive north of Comox near Campbell River, Storey Creek is about as serene and secluded as golf gets. Every tree-lined hole is unto itself, a private arena where

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