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Victoria's secret is out

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Great golf arrives on Vancouver Island

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In a roadside restaurant, halfway between Parksville and Victoria on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, the family of five noisily settled into their chairs for dinner at the table next to us and began to pepper the friendly and chatty waitress with questions.

"What is there to do around here?" asked the dad. "We're over from Vancouver for a couple of days for a wedding, and we've never been outside of Victoria."

"Oh, I'm going down to the river after work. It's a great spot," said the waitress, fanning herself with a menu on an unseasonably hot July day.

The dad seemed hooked. "Nice, eh?" he said.

"Oh, you betcha," said the waitress.

The conversation in those pleasing Canadian accents went on, but I became lost in a comforting thought: I wasn't alone in my naivete about the island. Even Canadians living



Picturesque Fairwinds Golf Club is on the water in Nanoose Bay, convenient to other family-friendly activities in Vancouver like kayaking. (Copley News photo)

away had no clue about the incredibly diverse and wonderful natural playland that extended hundreds of miles beyond the city limits of Victoria.

Talk to Southern Californians, and it's fairly surprising how many have visited British Columbia's enchanting capital city, Victoria, at least once. Many are like me. Seattle and Vancouver had been the primary destination, but they were lured to take at least a day trip to Victoria, to stroll the narrow streets of this very British seaside city, to enjoy high tea at the ivy-covered Empress Hotel or take in the magnificent expanse of North America's most beautiful backyard, the Butchart Gardens.

To me, Victoria WAS Vancouver Island. For all I knew, the island wasn't much bigger than Catalina.

Then the golf reviews started rolling in. As a golf writer, I get dozens of notices a year about up-and-coming golf destinations, but those involving Vancouver Island truly intrigued me.

The word was that an entire master-planned community and resort, Bear Mountain, was being built near Victoria around a centerpiece of 36 holes designed by Jack Nicklaus, and that the Golden Bear has another course on line for the island's west coast, at a \$600 million resort next to Pacific Rim National Park.

Greg Norman, meanwhile, is shaping another piece of land on an east coast bluff some 40 miles north of Victoria.

West coast? East coast? Just exactly how big is this island? I was rather embarrassed by my ignorance. It's the largest island off the North American West Coast, about 325 miles long, 90 miles wide. It's big enough to have a newly established "golf trail" that includes 11 championship courses over a 155-mile stretch from Victoria to the prime fishing territory of Campbell River.

Nicklaus and Norman. Those are names that get a golfer's attention, and as it turns out, the buzz about the new courses is beginning to bring more and more Canadian and American tourists to the island for its golf. Most of the island's courses are under \$100 for individual bookings.

Fledgling destination
"Vancouver Island as a golf destination is just in its infancy," Cory Betz tells me as we play a round at the gorgeous, tree-lined Morningstar Championship Golf Course, about a half-hour's drive north from Nanaimo, where my wife, son and I arrived via ferry after three fabulous days in one of our favorite cities, Vancouver.

Betz is the personable head pro at Morningstar who came to the island four years ago to escape the harsh winters (think "Fargo") in his native

Saskatchewan.

"The state of golf is still growing here," he says. "Vancouver Island has been good for the old country club courses - Victoria Golf Club is over 100 years old. But Vancouver Island is just getting into the golf resort market. We've got great golf now, but we're just entering a period of big, world-class resorts."

Most of the courses on the golf trail didn't pop up yesterday. For the last couple of decades, in particular, courses have been developed to meet the demand of older Canadians who come to the island in retirement. It is said that for every resident who moves away from the island, two new baby boomers arrive, and a lot of them are playing golf.

Shielded by the coastal mountains, its water warmed by the Pacific Ocean's California Current, the island has the most agreeable year-round weather in all of Canada. It gets about two-thirds the rain that Vancouver does, and golf is played there every month, although it averages a chilly 38 degrees in January. In fact, the ski-golf double can easily be accomplished on a winter day.

"The real sleeper," Betz says, "is how good the summers are. I came for the winters, but the summers are spectacular."

Basically, coastal temperatures don't get much above 80, and you're never more than about 45 miles from the ocean. What they have that we don't is dense forest that runs to the coastline that makes for the kind of scenic golf we can only find in California at Pebble Beach.

On the fifth hole of our round at Morningstar, Betz proudly points to an enormous

nest in a tree just off the fairway. Two bald eagle chicks were hatched there in the spring, and their heads are beginning to crest the top of the nest. Mom, the stark white feathers on her head so beautiful, shows up with food, and if there wasn't more golf to be played, I could sit there for hours, taking pictures.

Those are the kind of experiences we just don't get at home. Another comes at the Olympic View Golf Club, about a half-hour outside of Victoria. Perched high in a forest, the course offers a panorama of the snow-capped Olympic Mountains in Washington. Later, the feeling is more mountain meadow as the holes open up between the forest. There are a couple of breathtaking waterfalls.

The aptly named Fairwinds Golf Club is on the water in Nanoose Bay, just a few minutes from Parksville.

It is one of the most enticing features of the island: There is so much to do for families, the golf only needs to be a fraction of it.

There is virtually every outdoor activity available here: mountain biking, rock climbing, skiing, snorkeling, fly fishing, ocean angling, shopping in any number of small villages, or just lazily tubing down one of the many rivers.

Our family's two favorite pastimes on the trip went from the languid to the totally wild.

Our Quality Resort Bayside Hotel was average in its accommodations, but spectacular in its location. Our room was on a cliff at the water's edge of a large bay, and each morning we would awake to a low tide that exposed thousands of yards of sand, with only small pools shimmering in the sunlight. It made for wonderful beachcombing, and we could have come home with dozens of whole sand dollars if we hadn't let them be.

Fun for my 9-year-old son, but not nearly as memorable as

the WildPlay Element Parks we found on the drive from Parksville south to Victoria. WildPlay was originally opened when entrepreneurs built a bridge for bungee jumping. But as that craze ebbed, they hit on a new, better idea supposedly originated in the forests of France. Tree-Go is basically an obstacle course built 70 feet above the ground, with swaying ladders, Tarzan swings, tightropes and zip lines running from tree to tree. The full adult course can take as long as two hours to complete, and there is a smaller course perfect for kids.

Storybook City

We saved Victoria for last on the trip, and truly, it never disappoints. We arrived at the Hotel Grand Pacific at dusk (it stays light well after 9 p.m.), and upon her first view of the inner harbor, my wife said, "It's a storybook city."

That it is, with its white lights rimming the Parliament Buildings, the yachts swaying calmly in the harbor, and the horse-drawn carriages clicking down Government Street. Everything you could possibly hope for, from the street performers to the Royal BC Museum to the many restaurants and pubs of downtown, is within easy walking distance.

Adding to all of this, golfers get the treat of the spectacular new Bear Mountain Resort. Built in the rugged foothills of Mount Finlayson, looking down upon Victoria's skyline, Bear Mountain is the 1,300-acre dream project of former NHL star Len Barrie, who enlisted the funding of many other hockey players to develop Vancouver Island's first master-planned community.

There's every reason to be believe this will be B.C.'s new Whistler.

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