

The other side of Vancouver Island

Jeremy Ferguson



The Island's oft-neglected east coast offers locavore cooking, calm winter fishing and close encounters with sea life.

Visitors roaring off the boat for a fast look at Victoria and a \$60 cuppa tea at the Fairmont Empress have missed the boat. Postcard-pretty though the B.C. capital is, it barely hints at the wonders of what locals know as "the Island." For a sense of genuine exploration, the ticket is a breezy road trip up the island's oft-neglected east coast.

The distances aren't great – only 458 kilometres in all – and winter is no great concern, with daytime temperatures even at the northern end hovering at a very mild six degrees or so.

The pauses include a modest aquarium that delivers immodest results, **Canada's most dedicated locavore restaurant**, the casual acquisition of 80-million-year-old souvenirs and a magnificent and calm archipelago for winter fishing.

Stop 1: Sidney

While it's true that some wags refer to it as "Scooterville" – referring to a population of seniors twice the size of Victoria's – Sidney is an especially affable seaside city. It looks out on the Strait of Georgia or, as it's about to be renamed according to aboriginal history, the Salish Sea (this, on top of the renaming of the Queen Charlottes as Haida Gwaii, could have monarchists burning their powdered wigs in protest). Sidney has a fine hotel, the Sidney Pier, a handful of restaurants as good as any in Victoria and 12 bookstores within a four-block radius. It's a place where most people actually read. Sidney's bona fide tourist attraction is the Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre – think Monterey Bay Aquarium on a much smaller scale. Located in the Sidney Pier, the 17-aquaria complex reveals a local marine ecosystem as spellbinding as it is fragile. Jellyfish and sea nettles captivate visitors at the outset as choreography. Their dance is something to behold, the orange nettles leaving trails of flame as they cascade to the *zzzt* of digital cameras: tiny creatures kick-starting a very large sense of wonder. Among the centre's four galleries, the Gallery of the Salish Sea reminds us that 99 per cent of the living space on Earth actually lies underwater, that we're odd men out in nature's grand scheme. It brings you nose to nose with fishes from salmon to wolf eels. The popular fave is the Giant Pacific octopus, whose shape keeps changing as it negotiates its grotto. Greek chefs look on covetously.

Stop 2: Courtenay

Courtenay lies 3 1/2 hours north of Sidney, but spelunkers may come to a screaming halt 63 kilometres south of town at Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park. The caverns are rife with underground rivers and waterfalls, fossils and crystal formations. Helmets, lights and maps are available for independent explorers.

But Courtenay's claim to fame comes through a different passion: It wants to be foodie capital of the island. Assembling and showcasing the produce of the ultra-fertile Comox Valley, it has accumulated considerable credentials.

Courtenay's proudest restaurant is called Locals. Chef Ronald St. Pierre has done what other chefs only talk about: His restaurant is almost entirely about ingredients. He pulls it off with style and largesse. He shines the spotlight on local producers – Prontissima for pasta, Island Bison for buffalo, Christine's Quackery for duck – at every turn. Wasabi comes farmed by Nature Springs Wasabi, and it's the real thing, not the horseradish and food colouring used in most of Canada's sushi houses.

When you offer eight species of fresh fish from ling cod to sablefish, you're brave. When you offer each in five ways from steamed to stir-fried, you're very brave. Seared albacore loin reveals the St. Pierre modus operandi, the nicely seared tuna served with a brace of vegetarian sushi rolls and, as accents, soy ginger dip, chili oil and cashew coriander pesto. Bison tournedos bring juicy Campbell River bison medallions wrapped in double-smoked bacon, charbroiled, set atop a bed of perfect lentils and garnished with caramelized onion and lavender confit. It's a wonderful dish.

Even the drinks are local. Try a robust Red House Ale from Surgenor Brewing Co. Or a silken cabernet sauvignon from the Beaufort Vineyard and Estate Winery. Never heard of them? Don't snicker: The husband-and-wife winery walked away with a gold at the 2009 All Canadian Wine Championships.

For seasoned fossil hunters, another draw is the presence of 80-million-year-old souvenirs, fossils of creatures 15 million years older than T. rex. Seems 80 million years ago, the Courtenay and Puntledge River areas were a marine version of Jurassic Park. Steven Spielberg might love the elasmosaur, a fearsome marine reptile 12 metres long, with ferocious teeth and a turtle-like body. Its skeleton was unearthed near-fully preserved on the Puntledge River in 1988.

"It's an ongoing process," explains Pat Trask, assistant curator of the Courtenay and District Museum and Paleontology Centre. "The island is always rising. The mud keeps pushing up, bringing fossils to the surface. The rivers wash forest away. The fossils arrive on the surface."

The Courtenay River estuary is a remarkable fish and waterfowl habitat, home to bald eagles, great blue herons, gulls and 13 species of raptors. In winter, expect up to 3,000 trumpeter swans on the wetlands of the river's east side. With wingspans of more than two metres, the swans alone justify the journey.

Stop 3: Port McNeill

It's three very scenic hours north to Port McNeill, a friendly town of loggers, fishermen, outfitters and artists. This is the gateway to the wild and misted Broughton Archipelago, B.C.'s largest marine park.

What amazes anglers is the astonishing calm of the archipelago. Miraculously, there's no swell. No being flung around like rag dolls while reeling in a winter salmon or halibut, the chinooks up to 20 pounds. Local fishing outfits, including Code 3 Charters, take anglers out 12 months a year. Leisure Suit Charters specializes in winter steelhead fishing from heated drift boats.

As important, McNeill is a 40-minute ferry ride from the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations community of Alert Bay. This is the home of the remarkable U'Mista Cultural Centre. Its heart is the Potlatch Collection, a trove of 450 ceremonial masks and artifacts of regalia outlawed as subversive and seized by Canadian authorities in 1921. The masks were eventually returned, often from private collections, until the 1970s and 1980s.

Powerful expressions of a culture on the rebound, they haunt those who look at them – and continue to do so on the return journey to the realm of the familiar and predictable.

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Pack your bags

WHERE TO STAY

Sidney Pier Hotel 9805 Seaport Place, Sidney; (866) 659-9445; www.sidneypier.com. From \$139.

The Old House Village Hotel and Spa 1730 Riverside Lane, Courtenay; (888) 703-0202; www.oldhousevillage.com. From \$129.

Black Bear Resort 1812 Campbell Way; Port McNeill; (866) 956-4900; www.port-mcneill-accommodation.com. From \$105.

WHAT TO DO

Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre www.oceandiscovery.ca

Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park www.hornelake.com/caving_programs.htm

Locals (250) 338-6493; www.localscomoxvalley.com

Courtenay and District Museum and Paleontology Centre (250) 334-0686; www.courtenaymuseum.ca

U'Mista Cultural Centre Alert Bay; (250) 974-5403; www.umista.ca

WHAT TO DO ON THE WATER

Code 3 Charters (250) 956-0002; www.code3charters.com

Leisure Suit Charters (250) 902-9493; www.leisuresuitcharters.com

Cruise of the Columbia III The annual voyage (in June) of the Columbia III (www.mothershipadventures.com) focuses on the ancestral waters, culture and history of the Kwakwaka'wakw people. It carries up to 10 passengers through the breathtaking Broughton Archipelago and includes a day exploring the masks and totems of Alert Bay.