

# Golf junkie's fix

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By Joel Schlesinger

British Columbia's "super natural" reputation takes on a whole new meaning for avid golfers looking for the ultimate golf getaway.

With hundreds of world-class courses, many with adjoining resorts with top-notch accommodations, dining and entertainment, the only problem a links-loving tourist faces is this: so many great courses, yet so little time.

"When golfers are thinking of golfing B.C., they often think 'I've got to go to the Okanagan; I've got to go to Vancouver Island, and I've got to go to Whistler.' Sometimes, they do it all in the same trip," says Jason Lowe, general manager of Arbutus Ridge Golf Course near Victoria.

Lowe is also president of Golf Vancouver Island, representing 12 of the island's best courses from Victoria to Campbell River.

The consortium is the perfect one-stop shop for a golfing weekend or extended golf-centred vacation on the number-one rated island vacation destination in continental North America by Travel + Leisure magazine.

For those making a weekend jaunt to B.C.'s capital, Arbutus Ridge offers golfers dual opportunities: great golf and fine wine.

"We're surrounded by nine wineries," he says. "Vancouver Island is in its infancy, but people will feel like pioneers discovering some very nice wineries."

Also near Victoria is Olympic View Golf Club. This public, 18-hole golf course will get you as close to nature as you can get. And it's only 20 minutes' drive from Victoria.

"It sets itself apart from others in that it takes the golfer in the wilderness," says Ken Langdon, sales and events co-ordinator at Olympic View Golf Club. "You wander off into the forest and you don't come back until the 18th hole."

The nice thing about golfing in Victoria, he says, is it's golfing in Victoria.

"Victoria is a real vacation destination, and golf is at the top of the list for many people as a vacation activity."

As one of the top tourism destinations in Canada, Victoria has so much more to offer than golf.

Indeed, a visit to Bear Mountain, Cordova Bay, Arbutus Ridge and Olympic View for some rounds of golf shouldn't be missed, and plenty of tour agencies — Golf Central Tours and Golf Vancouver Island — can arrange a worry-free, golf-filled tour of the region, he says.

“They'll really go out of their way to get you a well-priced inclusive vacation that includes travel, green fees and accommodation.”

On the mainland, the pinnacle golfing experience for many is a trip to Whistler — another mecca of tourism for the province.

Golf Whistler offers deals on golf packages at the regions premier golfing destination, such as Nicklaus North, Chateau Whistler, Whistler Golf Club and Big Sky Golf and Country Club.

“We know when people come to Whistler, they're not just coming to play Big Sky, or Nicklaus North,” says Chris Wallace, general manager of Big Sky. “They're playing three or four courses.”

“For Big Sky, the thing that makes us stand out is last year we were British Columbia's PGA Facility of the Year, so we were ranked the number-one public course and number four overall in the province when you include private courses.”

It's also ranked in the top 30 by GolfDigest.

“Those are two awards that were really huge for us. GolfDigest is almost the Bible of all golf magazines,” says Wallace.

Most hotels in Whistler offer discounts on tee times during the season. And Big Sky will pick up golfers from town to drive them to the course. It also offers a unique experience called the 19th Hole, in which guests are flown by helicopter to the top of Mount Currie to drive balls off a 3,000-metre peak before heading to play the course.

Of course, when it comes to golf destinations in B.C, you can't forget the Thompson-Okanagan region, an area about the size of Ireland that features 74 courses, says Ellen Walker-Matthews, spokeswoman for Thompson-Okanagan Tourism Association.

“People like Greg Norman, Richard Zokol, Fred Couples, Robert Trent-Jones and Dave Barr have all designed courses in this region,” she says.

“That's pretty significant for golfers who want to try some amazingly challenging courses.”

And the region is more than happy to oblige golf junkies who could golf them all but maybe only have a weekend or a week for just a taste of what the region can offer.

“There are several hotels that offer golf packages,” says Walker-Matthews, adding Tourism Kelowna and Tourism Kamloops offers packages through their websites. “They have options where you can golf at a number of courses where they can get you special rates.”

Those looking for a truly unique experience may want to try staying at Sparkling Hill Resort, next to Predator Ridge Resort, one of the top golfing destinations.

“Sparkling Hill is European-inspired spa with the only cold sauna where you can go in at -30, -55 and -100 C for five minutes into the sauna,” she says. “The whole experience between golfing at Predator and staying at this Sparkling Hill is something that can’t be duplicated in Canada.”

If heat is more your style, you can head south to Canada’s only desert in Osoyoos, featuring Nk’Mip Canyon Desert, Osoyoos Golf and Country Club and Sonora Dunes Golf Course.

“There’s fabulous accommodation either at Spirit Ridge, Watermark or Walnut Beach.”

The simple fact is a golf lover can’t go wrong in B.C, says Walker-Matthews.

“There are a wide variety of topography and golf courses throughout,” she says.

“You can have almost as many golfing experiences as you can think of.”

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