



## Tides and treasures in Parkville Qualicum Beach

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More from Andrew Penner, Calgary Herald

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Caption: Endless tidal flats in Parkville are perfect for beachcombers. Credit: Andrew Penner



The attendant at the visitor centre didn't mince words. "It's extremely difficult to find the glass floats and other treasures. Most people go away empty-handed. But good luck! You will need it." So, with zero confidence and a search area that was kilometres long, we hit the public beach in Parkville and began our quest for "Tidal Treasure." As it turned out, our hunt had quite the conclusion.

From October to May, Tidal Treasures — an event where locally made, handcrafted glass art pieces are hidden daily on the beaches by "float fairies" — is proving to be one of the more popular promotional events in Parkville's history. (And, no, I did not realize that float fairies existed.) However, ask anyone who has spent time in this beach-lover's paradise, there are many things that lure people to the Parkville Qualicum Beach region on Vancouver Island.

Located twenty minutes north of Nanaimo (approximately an hour north of Victoria on the Island Highway), the neighbouring communities of Parkville and Qualicum Beach are an oceanside oasis for tourists of all stripes. Wineries, waterfalls, old-growth forests, great restaurants, beachside resorts, fabulous golf courses, eclectic markets, world-class spas, hiking trails, wildlife tours, waterfront boardwalks, kayaking; indeed, the list of things to do, places to go, in the area is exhaustive. As my wife and I found out, one short weekend in May can hardly do it justice!

But, first and foremost, this seaside hot-spot on the "left" coast is famous for its amazing sandy beaches. Thousands of tourists flock to the region each summer to soak in the sun and saunter along kilometres of soft-sand beaches. For good reason, the region has been dubbed "Canada's Riviera."

And when the tide goes out, as it does every day (times vary, check the charts), the vast tidal flats are exposed and the limitless sea of sand becomes a beachcomber's dream: Sand dollars, star fish, clams, crabs, colourful shells — and, yes, "tidal treasure" deposited by those lovely "fairies" — are just some of the trinkets, the precious bounty, that can be had.



However, before my wife and I could go searching for sea treasure (we scheduled this for our last day), we went searching for golf balls. We found a few (sometimes ours) at the Morningstar Golf Course. Designed by Canadian architect Les Furber, Morningstar is a pretty parkland course that parades through towering cedar, fir, and pine just minutes from Parkville's quaint downtown.



The par-4 12th at the Morningstar GC in Parkville. ANDREW PENNER /

Although soft from plenty of spring rain (they typically golf year-round on Vancouver Island, except this year when numerous courses were closed for weeks at a time due to the unusually cold and snowy winter), the undulating greens, ball-hungry ponds, and deep bunkers were more than adequate in terms of testing our rusty games. Unfortunately, our birdie sightings would have to wait until our walk in the woods at the Milner Gardens & Woodland.

Visited by royalty (Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, Prince Charles, and the late Princess Diana have all strolled these fabled grounds), Milner Gardens & Woodland is a pastoral 70-acre estate near Qualicum Beach that boasts an ancient Douglas-fir forest, a historic collection of rhododendrons, beautiful ocean views, and the restored Milner House, where tea, scones, and delicious homemade soup are on the menu.



Dawn Penner walking along the trail at Milner Gardens & Woodland. ANDREW PENNER /

For "foodies," visits to Morningstar Farm (home of the Little Qualicum Cheeseworks and the Mooberry Winery), Coombs Old Country Market (a.k.a. "Goats on the Roof"), and the Qualicum Beach Farmers' Market are highly recommended. Or, if you want to sample basically all of the local gourmet "treats" in one sitting, you can enjoy endless tapas at the Treetop Tapas & Grill at the Grotto Spa at the Tigh-Na-Mara Resort.

Voted the No. 1 spa in Canada by Spas of America, the Grotto Spa is an escape unto itself. With the gorgeous mineral pools, unique West Coast-flavoured treatments such as "forrest bathing" and, yes, dining in your spa robe, this world-class spa is worth the trip alone.

For us, a visit to the spa — as well as our newly-renovated suite at the fabulous Tigh-Na-Mara Resort — was definitely a highlight.

On our final morning, as we peered out of our window and surveyed a scene of endless sand melting into the shimmering sea, the excitement of finding "Tidal Treasure" got us moving.

After searching the shoreline for an hour, or so, in front of our resort, we shifted gears and drove five minutes to the public beach in Parkville where, apparently, many of the glass treasures had been found. We looked under rocks, in clumps of beachgrass, under the boardwalk. Nothing. With our feet now tired from the search, we sat down on a log and checked the time. Our flight back to Calgary was just a few hours away.

"I guess we're not going home with treasure," I pined.

"But you have cheese from Little Qualicum," she said. "And hot sauce from Coombs Market."

"And I have you, dear," I said. "And you're also hot." She smirked, feigned a little catwalk move, and fainted on the beach beside a piece of driftwood. And there it was, right in front of her eyes, a shiny little glass sand dollar, wedged in a water-worn chunk of wood.



Dawn Penner holding her "Tidal Treasure." ANDREW PENNER /

The moral of the story? No matter how "cheesy" it may seem, always compliment your spouse. And, when you need a little seaside sojourn on Vancouver Island, Parkville is a pretty good option.

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