

SUN'S TRAVEL

'PERFECT COMBINATION'

Vancouver Island city of Parksville offers ultimate golfing experience in relaxing environment



WES
GILBERTSON

If you're passionate about pars, you have probably convinced your loved ones to plan vacations around professional tour stops, must-see courses, signature holes and a wide assortment of layouts from every best-of list in every golf publication.

So just imagine their reaction when you pitch this destination.

The charming community of Parksville, located along the Salish Sea on the gentle east side of British Columbia's Vancouver Island, is home to Canada's top-ranked spa and a gotta-see-it-to-believe-it stretch of beach, too.

And fear not, you'll find plenty of great golf.

"To me, it's just a perfect combination," said Paul Drummond, the general manager at Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort & Conference Centre and a board member for Golf Vancouver Island. "To go and play a round and then come back and have a massage or jump in the whirlpool or walk on the beach ... It is such a relaxing destination. We always talk about reconnecting with family, friends and nature."

The beach at Rath Trevor Beach Provincial Park should probably be classified as the world's largest sand-trap. Except that once you find this bunker, you won't want to escape.

This is the escape.

At high tide, you could cover the distance between



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Fairwinds Golf Club in Nanoose Bay offers up superb views of the Salish Sea. Inset: The beach at Rath Trevor Beach Provincial Park could be classified as the world's largest sand-trap.

Tigh-Na-Mara — the 22-acre spread features rustic log accommodations and their Grotto Spa has been crowned as Canada's best two years running by Spas of America — and the calm waters of the Salish Sea with a pitching wedge. At low tide, though, it would probably be a Par-7, with a full kilometre of sand between your toes before your feet get wet.

Thanks goodness you don't have to rake your footprints.

"It's just such a great environment for families to build sand-castles or for a couple to go for a nice romantic walk," Drummond said. "It doesn't matter how many people are out on the beach at low tide, there is always space where

nobody is around. It's brilliant that way."

Parksville is about a two-hour drive north of Victoria, although the fastest route to the first tee is a non-stop flight from Calgary to either Nanaimo or Comox.

This is a golf destination

that, quite frankly, doesn't get enough love.

Maybe because your birdie-seeking buddies are trying to keep the secret to themselves. Maybe they simply return home talking endlessly about the beach.

The Vancouver Island Golf

Trail features 13 courses spread across 250 kilometres, including four top-notch tracks within easy driving distance of Tigh-Na-Mara or another home-base in this family-friendly area.

Morningstar Golf Club in Parksville has a history as a proving ground for the next wave of wannabe stars, a frequent site of the spring qualifying school for what was formerly known as the Canadian Tour. This is where Mike Weir earned status as a minor-leaguer before eventually adding a Green Jacket to his wardrobe. If you want to master the 6,983-yard setup, you'll need to avoid the deep bunkers.

Just up the road in Quali-

cum Beach, Pheasant Glen Golf Resort will co-host the Canadian Men's Amateur Championship next summer. It will be a worthy challenge for low-handicappers but won't overwhelm the rest of us. And with no real estate in sight, you can breathe easy even if your ball starts to sail off-line.

Headed a wee bit south, Fairwinds Golf Club in Nanoose Bay offers up superb views of the Salish Sea — none better than the vantage point from the elevated tees at No. 16, the highest point on the property. Fill up the camera roll on your iPhone and then grip-and-rip at the green, which is just 330 yards away

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Paul Drummond, General Manager at Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort & Conference Centre, Vancouver Island.

The newest addition to the trail is Nanaimo Golf Club, a historic semi-private hangout that is the handiwork of renowned designer A.V. Macan.

It's no secret that Old Man Winter was hard on Vancouver Island, where the courses are typically open year-round, but any evidence of that is now long gone.

"What we're really promoting with the Parksville and Nanaimo grouping is that you have this new golf destination that not a lot of golfers have experienced yet," said Golf Vancouver Island's Chris Elder.

"The golf courses aren't going to beat you up — they're very fair — so you're going to get a good golf experience. Like the entire golf trail, you're going to find really friendly locals. And you also have one of the best beach areas on Vancouver Island. That's a great spot to go after your round and unwind on a kilometre of sandy beach when the tide is out," Elder said.

Since you'll be burning enough calories with a wide array of outdoor activities, there is one more experience that you absolutely must try before heading home.

Tigh-Na-Mara's Grotto Spa offers Endless Tapas at Tree-top Tapas & Grill, an appetizer adventure that is enjoyed in a robe and includes so many small-bite courses that you'll lose count.

We're talking well into double-digits. And doesn't every golfer stop adding 'em up at seven or eight?

"It takes a couple of hours to get through it," Drummond said. "So you better go with somebody you enjoy



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Pheasant Glen Golf Resort, above and inset, will co-host the Canadian Men's Amateur Championship next summer.

talking to."

You won't be in a rush to leave.

That goes for the spa, for the beach, for the entire area.

In fact, picking your golf lineup could be the most stressful part of the entire trip. "This is just a really relaxing environment, a place to get away from it all," said Ryner


Wilson, golf shop manager at Fairwinds.

"Everybody is just in a great mood because they're outdoors, they're enjoying nature, they're getting away from the busy city. And the whole area has a very friendly, small-town type feel to it.

"That's what we're all about

— relaxing and unwinding. And at the same time, there are some good, challenging golf courses."

For more information, check out golfvancouverisland.ca and hellobc.com.

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