

Trip Dispatch: Fins and Skins along the Vancouver Island Golf Trail

The northern tip of the golf trail provides some of the best fishing and golf in Canada.

Jason Scott Deegan

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1 of 4 **Guide Jamie Turko keeps a watchful eye on the swimmers floating in the river current, while they're snorkeling for s**
Jason Scott Deegan/Golf Advisor

CAMPBELL RIVER, British Columbia, Canada - I'm flying like Superman, and I'm not sure I like it.

Maybe I was never made to have super powers. Maybe I should be channeling my inner Aquaman instead. Whatever the case, my adrenaline is racing. I'm "flying like Superman" -- the river guide Jamie Turko's words, not mine - while floating down the Campbell River. My arms are straight over my head and my legs parallel to the river bottom. I'm speeding through the river's swift current like a human torpedo. How these salmon are swimming past me "up stream" in the opposite direction, I'll never know. On land, I looked ridiculous in my all-black wet suit,

The day before, I felt a similar surge of excitement reeling in a 13-pound wild Coho salmon on a fishing boat excursion near Quadra Island. I'm not much of an outdoorsman, but a "Fins and Skins" golf trip to the northern rim of the Vancouver Island Golf Trail in October has convinced me to rethink some priorities. This city slicker from California's overpriced and overcrowded Silicon Valley could use a little more nature in his life. These once-in-a-lifetime encounters with Mother Nature were spread across three beautiful fall days on the island. Leaving behind traffic jams, cell phones and office hours sure felt good for the soul, whether I was wearing a skin-tight wet suit or a comfy golf polo playing three different courses.

Day 1: Crown Isle Resort & Golf Community

Flying into the tiny Comox Valley Airport from my connection through Vancouver delivered me right to the front door of the [Crown Isle Resort & Golf Community](#) in Courtenay. The "resort" side of Crown Isle consists of 90 villas lining the first fairway within easy walking distance of the clubhouse. My second floor unit with a full kitchen and gas fireplace felt like a palace easily big enough for a foursome, although there was only one bed.

The 7,024-yard course, designed by Canadian Graham Cooke, celebrated its 25th anniversary this year. The first major change since its 1992 soft opening was recently completed, altering the par-4 13th hole to make way for more housing at the back of the development. I was surprised to hear the cost of some of the houses lining the course that caught my eye. I had no idea the west coast's boom in real estate prices had extended so far what I consider "off the grid." Turns out, the cost of living and colder winter months has many Vancouver mainlanders looking to escape to the island's milder climate where golf can be played year-round. The resort/community website listed lots costing more than \$300,000 Canadian and homes ranging from \$740,000 to \$1.1 million.

You can hit the big stick often at Crown Isle Resort & Golf Community in Courtenay, B.C. -- you just don't need one this big! Mike Bailey/Golf Advisor

The course itself challenges with a handful of doglegs and ponds, mostly notably on the par 3s at no. 4 and no. 16. The fifth hole is the most treacherous par 5, despite being the shortest at 502 yards. Water skirts up the right side of the dogleg right, always lurking. So many par 4s dogleg one way or the other, often with a bunker at the corner to carry or avoid. The 17th hole features a split fairway with a bunker and trees guarding the middle.

The Timber Room Bar & Grill, a nice pub and patio, is great for post-round libations. After a chilly day, our group retreated to a private room with its own fireplace for a nice meal to fuel up for the adventures to come.

Day 2: Storey Creek Golf Club

A frost delay derailed what would have been the round of the trip. My group could only squeeze in 12 holes of the glorious [Storey Creek Golf Club](#) in Campbell River an hour from Crown Isle. The tagline, "A Course in Nature," certainly applies. Thousands of trees, instead of hundreds of homes like at Crown Isle, line the 6,696-yard layout. What's interesting is not once did our foursome hit it into the forest. The fairways were plenty wide. We did find our fair share of water and wetlands, however. Two par 5s - the dangerous 4th and 12th - claimed at least a couple victims.

notch. After the first two par 4s, the combination of holes goes 3-5-3-5-3-5 finishing the front nine with a nasty par 4 over a pond. Throw in the awkwardly cool 276-yard 12th hole and Storey Creek is a charmer. Score Golf rated Storey Creek No. 50 among Canada's top public courses in 2017. It is generally regarded as one of the best values in the country.

After golf, we checked into another charming spot, the Painter's Lodge, a famous salmon fishing lodge on the banks of the Discovery Passage. John Wayne, Bing Crosby and other Hollywood icons visited long before me. The resort campus consists of the main lodge, an outdoor pool and hot tub and a series of cabins and outbuildings. My "room" on the second floor in a separate building had two floors - a loft bedroom upstairs and a living room and bathroom and deck downstairs.

Painter's Lodge sits on the Discovery Passage in Campbell River on Vancouver Island. Jason Scott Deegan/Golf Advisor

Where everybody gravitates is the water out back. Since I had purchased a one-day fishing license with a salmon stamp prior to the trip (costing roughly \$15), check-in for the fishing excursion was a breeze. Wearing bright yellow waterproofs, I headed out onto the water with three others in Captain Steve Hiebert's boat. Hiebert, who runs Maximum Chrome Fishing Charters, raced up the passage to what turned out to be a lucky spot. He dropped in four lures 90 feet to 120 feet down as we munched on lunches and relaxed. The weather was perfect and the water like glass.

As the rookie, I got to haul in the first bite. Fortunately for me, my catch got the hook wrapped up in its snout and didn't put up much of a fight. Since laws prohibit keeping wild Coho (only farm-raised), we tossed him back. A few minutes later, we had another one on the line, this one bigger, up to 16 pounds.

The other boats came up empty-handed except for one small catch. Nobody came home disappointed with the experience, though, or went hungry at dinner that night. Painter's Lodge brought out at least four platters of massive salmon cooked to perfection. If only the chef would bottle and sell the hotel's signature salmon sauce, a spellbinding whiskey-honey-carmel glaze.

Grizzly tours, whale watching and helicopter tours are also available through Painter's Lodge.

Day 3: Campbell River Golf & Country Club

The final day came full of surprises. I didn't have many expectations for the [Campbell River Golf & Country Club](#), the first "new" course in British Columbia since the nine-hole [Quadra Island Golf Club](#) opened in 2011 (a round I would have loved to play. See [Mike Bailey's thoughts from Quadra Island in 2014](#)). Cooke's complete redesign and the dedication of the new owners, the Mailman family, to building a first-class, innovative facility at Campbell River left a lasting impression on me. I see it as a [blueprint for future renovations](#) at many shorter courses and ranges built pre-1990s.

Cooke's 6,141-yard, par-70 routing is full of nuances - seven par 3s, five par 5s (all with a real challenge) and fast and hard-to-read bentgrass greens. The mostly flat terrain is very walkable and conducive to quick rounds of less



hotel with a conference center, restaurant and spa, possibly by 2020-21.

The Velocity Lounge brings a Topgolf experience to the Campbell River Golf & Country Club on Vancouver Island. Jason Scott Deegan/Golf Advisor

Where the Mailman family really delivered is the construction of the Velocity Lounge and Driving Range. This is the range of the future with eight all-turf hitting bays with indoor seating to stay open at night and for all seasons. It is lighted with sky-high netting to keep balls off the first and the 18th holes that line either side. The Velocity Lounge comes equipped with Toptracer Range, the same golf-shot tracking software available at Topgolf facilities. Golfers can practice by using the Launch Monitor function or the "What's in My Bag?" feature to gather distance data on every club they hit. Or you can do what my foursome did at the grand opening: Goof around by playing games in between bites of tasty appetizers and sips of beer. We played simulated shots from [Harbour Town Golf Links](#) and [Pebble Beach Golf Links](#). We had a long drive showdown. But mostly, we just hung out, chatting and laughing at one another's golf swings.

As much as I love the game, the fondest memories were made on the water. During our river float, we got up close to some amazing wildlife - two bald eagles sitting side by side on debris in the river and a sea lion and a trio of sea otters swimming near the ocean inlet. This is what people come to see on Vancouver Island. The golf is merely a distraction from all the other outdoor pursuits. Plan your own fins and skins experience at the website golfvancouverisland.ca.

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News

Jason Scott Deegan

Jason Scott Deegan has reviewed more than 700 courses and golf destinations for some of the industry's biggest publications. His work has been honored by the Golf Writer's Association of America and the Michigan Press Association. Follow him on Twitter at @WorldGolfer.

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