

SOAR

In-flight
Magazine for
Pacific Coastal
Airlines

THE GREAT *Wilderness*

Prince George
The base camp
to the North

Gathering
with the eagles
in the Harrison River Valley



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Oceanfront lodge property, private estate or group purchase opportunity! **33.7 acres** on the **BC mainland coast in Johnstone Strait**. Multiple dwellings, workshop, moorage and substantial infrastructure in place, zoned for residential and commercial use. Beautiful views in this appealing coastal location with easy access to miles of Crown land to explore. **\$1,345,000**



Ocean Falls Residence

Comfortable home on two lots, in the small hamlet of **Ocean Falls on BC's central coast**. Excellent access to explore the central coast's myriad inlets and waterways! The **2400sqft** home offers all the living on the main floor, with storage and workspace on the basement level. **\$155,000**



Zeballos Residential Lot

Embrace small town coastal living! Here is an opportunity for someone looking to move to the west coast, or to establish a summer base for fishing. This lot is **0.30 acres** with electrical and water service. The **Village of Zeballos** has road access (gravel) and is in one of the premier fishing regions on the west coast of **Vancouver Island!** **\$64,900**



Rupert Inlet, Kenny Point

West Coast off-grid cabin on **99 oceanfront acres in Quatsino Sound!** State of the art off-grid infrastructure, quality-built and attractive one bedroom cabin with wood finishing throughout, offering modern conveniences. Very private property on northern **Vancouver Island.** **\$1,150,000**



West Coast Accommodation Opportunity

8,340sqft multi-use building in a unique 4 wing design with central corridor. **19 bedrooms, 4 full kitchens, laundry rooms** and one wing currently used as storage. Zoning allows multiple uses while the layout and configuration would lend itself to a variety of uses! In **Tahsis**, a major fishing destination on **Vancouver Island.** **\$580,000**



Campbell River Development Property

0.78 acre cleared lot zoned multi-residential in a mixed-residential neighbourhood. Quick access to main transportation routes into town. Close to schools, rec centre, college, shopping and park trails. Surrounded by stunning natural beauty, **Campbell River** is a growing, active city with a need for all types of housing. **\$895,000**



Sointula Oceanfront Home

Custom-built **2948sqft 8-year-old** home, featuring local woodwork and thoughtful design, on a generous **0.45 acre** lot with **188 feet** of walk-on beachfront. Outstanding views across **Broughton Strait** and over to **Vancouver Island**. Ready for new owners looking for a west coast island lifestyle! There is regular ferry service to **Sointula (Malcolm Island).** **\$1,199,000**



Oceanfront Family Home, Haida Gwaii

2457sqft 4 bedroom home on the shores of **Bearskin Bay** in the **Village of Daajing Giids**. Lots of recent upgrades, large oceanside deck, walk-on beachfront with flat lawn. **10x24** workshop/shed and additional under-deck storage. Zoning allows for short-term rentals and secondary suites. Experience the natural beauty of **Haida Gwaii!** **\$735,000**



Discovery Islands property

1.62 acres on the protected inside tidal waters of **Busby Island**, across from **Owen Bay** on **Sonora Island**, with approx. **219ft** oceanfront. Water access, with internal roads on **Busby**. Beautiful and popular coastal recreation area with great access to some of the best fishing and wildlife viewing this region has to offer. **\$99,000**



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



After a long and rainy winter, I'm excited that spring has finally arrived. As we welcome this blooming season, I hope you take the time to enjoy the sunshine and warmer temperatures. To our valued passengers, thank you for welcoming yet another spring with us. Your unwavering support keeps us warm all year long.

On April 6, we proudly celebrate 20 years of service to the beautiful city of Trail. Since 2006, we have connected Vancouver with the western Kootenay region, providing fast and reliable travel throughout the year. Spending two decades serving the Trail community is a milestone we are truly grateful for. On behalf of everyone at Pacific Coastal Airlines, thank you for making this achievement possible. These 20 years are a direct reflection of your loyalty and support for us, and we look forward to many more years together.

Spring is also a meaningful season for aviation. On April 26, we recognize World Pilot's Day, followed by Aviation Maintenance Technician Day on May 24 and International Flight Attendant Day on May 31. As a British Columbian airline, we take great pride in our small but mighty team who continues to move aviation

forward every single day. Thank you to all pilots, flight attendants, aircraft maintenance engineers, customer service agents, ramp agents, cargo agents, dispatchers and operational leaders for your dedication, professionalism, and exceptional service in bringing communities closer together. We are especially grateful to our teams for their positive spirit and for truly living our motto, "People Friendly. People First." We celebrate and appreciate you every day!

This spring is filled with milestones and meaningful moments for us and the communities we serve, making the season especially memorable. Most importantly, we thank our valued passengers for standing by our side. We truly cherish your support and are honoured to be part of your travel journeys. We look forward to welcoming you onboard again soon!

Sincerely,

Quentin Smith

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Photo courtesy Tourism Prince George



Photo courtesy Tourism Harrison



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Cover photo courtesy: Tourism Harrison

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Published by Black Press | blackpress.ca - 818 Broughton Street, Victoria, BC V8W 1E4

SOAR magazine is published six times per year and is distributed on all Pacific Coastal Airlines flights. The points of view or opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher or Pacific Coastal Airlines. The contents of SOAR magazine are protected by copyright, including the designed advertising. Reproduction is prohibited without written consent of the publisher.



MEET A PACIFIC COASTAL EMPLOYEE: JAMIE



Location: Vancouver

Time with PCA: 10 years

Position: Saab Captain

Job description:

Currently a Captain on the Saab 340. I also train and test our pilots in the simulator and teach ground school classes.

Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in North Vancouver and now reside in Tsawwassen.

Who is your family?

Mom, Dad, and an older sister. My wife and I are expecting our first child this spring.

What path did you take to get to this job?

I enrolled in the BCIT Commercial Pilot program and then became a flight instructor for 2.5 years before being hired here at Pacific Coastal Airlines.

What do you like best about this job?

The people and the schedule. It's like a small family, you always know who you're flying with which I enjoy. And it's nice getting to be home most nights and work normal hours, not a lot of flying jobs can offer that.

What are your hobbies outside of the job?

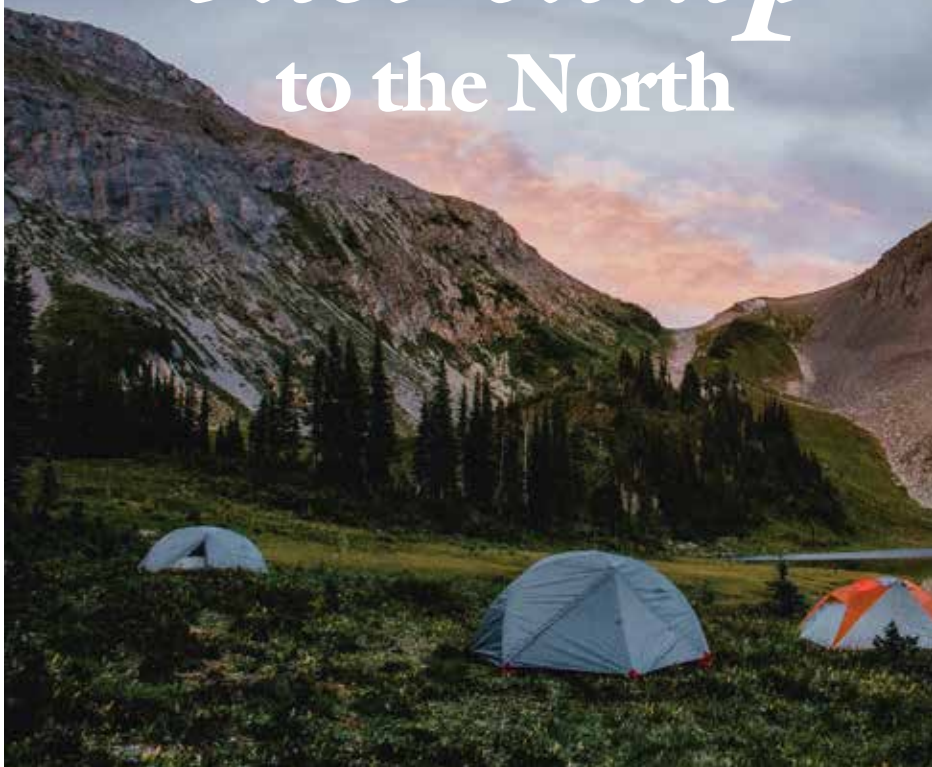
Golf! The great thing about Vancouver is you can play all year round and with a baby on the way I need to get out as much as I can.

What is your favorite thing to do in your city?

Taking our dog for a good trail walk or hike, and golf!

PRINCE GEORGE

The *base camp* to the North



Peel back the layers of Prince George and discover surprises around every corner

Words by Natalie Bruckner | Photo courtesy Tourism Prince George

As you begin the descent into Prince George, the meeting of the Fraser and Nechako rivers comes into view. From above, it becomes clear how the city is shaped by this confluence, a bustling urban centre set within a vast northern landscape.

But beyond the rivers, forests of subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce stretch across terrain shaped by ancient glacial till, while more than 1,600 rivers, lakes and creeks surround the city, emphasizing the expanse that defines the area.

This is Prince George, otherwise known as PG and the base camp to the North. From its doorstep, roads and trails lead outward into the surrounding wilderness, offering access to the region's diverse landscapes and to the enduring history and culture of the Lheidli T'enneh people, whose stewardship continues today.

Prince George may wear its industriousness openly, but spend time here and another layer emerges. Visitors find a place where small-town friendliness meets city amenities, where cafés and galleries sit just steps from nature, and where the city quietly connects residents and visitors to the wilderness beyond.



Fang Mountain
PHOTO BY MICHAEL STANYER

LOCAL LEGENDS AND HIDDEN GEMS

No visit to Prince George would be complete without meeting Mr. PG, the town's beloved mascot. Turning 66 this year, the big smiling face has inspired songs and earned recognition far beyond the city's borders. Standing eight metres tall, he recently claimed the top spot in the Great Canadian Landmark Contest hosted by Municipal World, a fitting tribute to a symbol that embodies the warmth, humour, and pride of the community.

Just north of the city, the **Huble Homestead Historic Site** offers a step back in time. Opening May 16 within Giscome Portage Regional Park, this heritage attraction brings the stories of early settlers to life, inviting visitors to walk among original structures and imagine the daily rhythms of a bygone era on Lheidli T'enneh keyoh.

For those curious about the region's history and natural richness, Prince George offers experiences that go beyond the everyday. Northern B.C.'s largest museum, **The Exploration Place**, features hands-on exhibits in science, history, and Indigenous heritage, giving visitors a deeper understanding of the land and its people. **The Central BC Railway and Forestry Museum** traces the industries that shaped the region through heritage locomotives and historic buildings. Nearby, Goodsir Nature Park showcases the area's plant diversity with more than 2,000 plant species carefully cultivated over decades by founder Jim Good.



Huble Homestead Historic Site
PHOTO BY DAN POUSETTE

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

From the city's doorstep, Prince George opens onto the northern backcountry, drawing visitors eager to explore. Trails, lakes, and waterways lead into landscapes that range from serene to challenging, offering both adventure and quiet reflection.

On the water, the Nechako and Fraser rivers beckon paddlers, while serene lakes provide space for kayaking or drifting beneath the sky. Trails twist through forests and along rivers, challenging mountain bikers and fat bikers at **Pidherny Recreation Site**, or offering gentler rides along the **Heritage River Trail**. In spring, if you're lucky, ski slopes at **Purden, Hart, Powder King** and the **Caledonia Nordic Ski Club** still welcome those chasing late-season snow, while ice fishing lingers into the tail end of the season for those seeking calm northern moments.

Beyond high-energy pursuits, the region offers quiet immersion in some of B.C.'s most remarkable landscapes. **The Ancient Forest/Chun T'oh Whudujut Park**, one of the few inland temperate rainforests in the world, lets visitors wander among towering western red cedars beside a waterfall, tracing boardwalks that carry centuries of history beneath your feet. Closer to town, the 106-acre Forests for the World park and Shane Lake reveal more than 15km of trails, picnic spots and docks, perfect for pausing to take in forested panoramas. **LC Gunn Park** rises above the Fraser River on bluffs that reveal sweeping views of

Ancient Forest/
Chun T'oh Whudujut
Provincial Park



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the surrounding wilderness, rewarding quiet walks or evening reflections.

While exploring, keep your eyes and ears open as Prince George is home to one of the highest densities of moose in North America. The city is literally teeming with wildlife. Cougars, wolves and bald eagles can also be spotted nearby, while grizzly bears, beavers, and caribou inhabit the surrounding backcountry. Adventurers should remain mindful and prepared when exploring.

FOODIE FAVOURITES

One surprising fact about Prince George is its thriving culinary scene, one that warmly embraces independent eateries. Ask the locals where they like to eat and drink, and you'll uncover a world of flavours, all without leaving the city.

Betulla Burning Pizzeria Napoletana is one of those places that makes you stop mid-bite. A lavender crème brûlée to finish, anyone? At **The Twisted Cork** downtown, comfort food gets playful with elk sliders, lobster-stuffed chicken, and familiar dishes with unexpected twists. Then there's **Northern Lights Estate Winery** that sits on the banks of the Nechako River, and tasting its fruit-forward wines makes you understand why Prince Georgians rave about the harvest coming alive in a glass.

Betulla
Burning
Pizzeria
Napoletana
PHOTO BY
ANDREW STRAIN



This Spring

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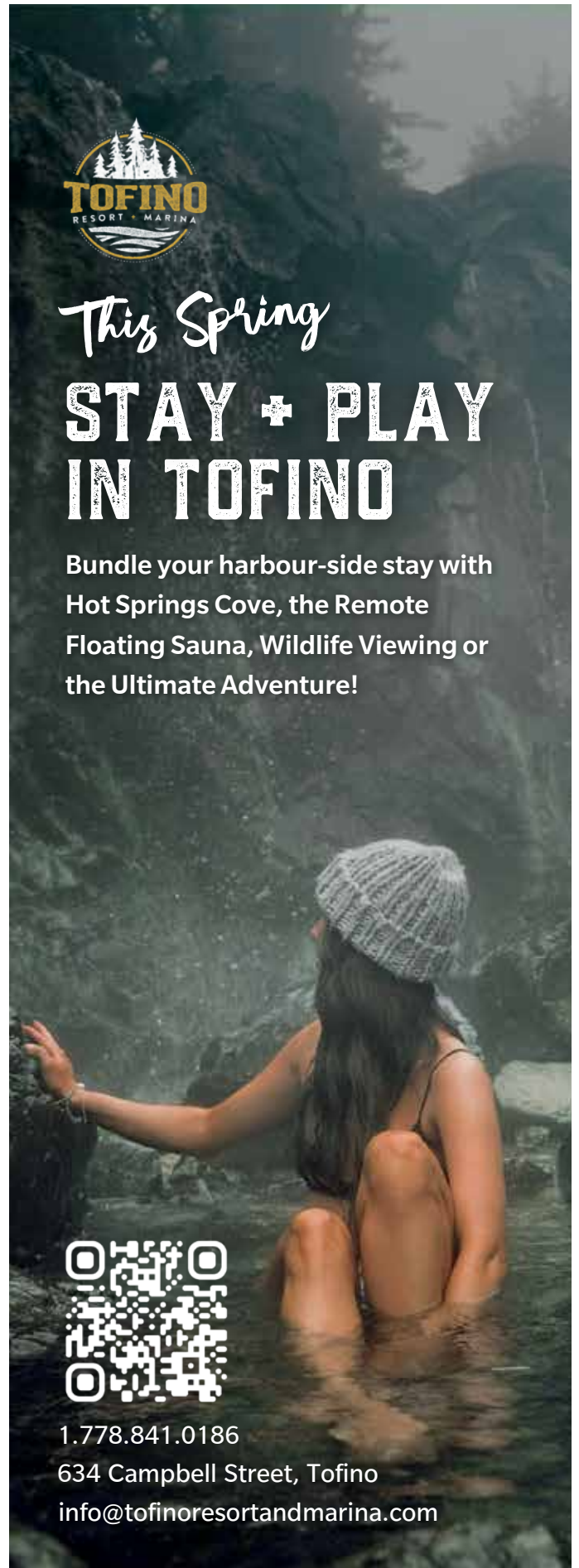
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Neighbourhood favourites have their own charm. **The Wall of Fame** sandwich shop on 10th Avenue feels like the heart-beat of the community (try the Jiggy With the Piggy burger and you'll see why). **Sim's Lunchbox**, a cozy family-run spot, takes you straight to Seoul with bibimbap, yaki soba and bulgogi. **Daydream Doughnuts Café** is impossible to resist, but come early because the shelves empty fast. And then there's the **House of Ancestors Café** that serves bannock doughnuts, a subtle nod to local heritage that stays with you long after the last bite.

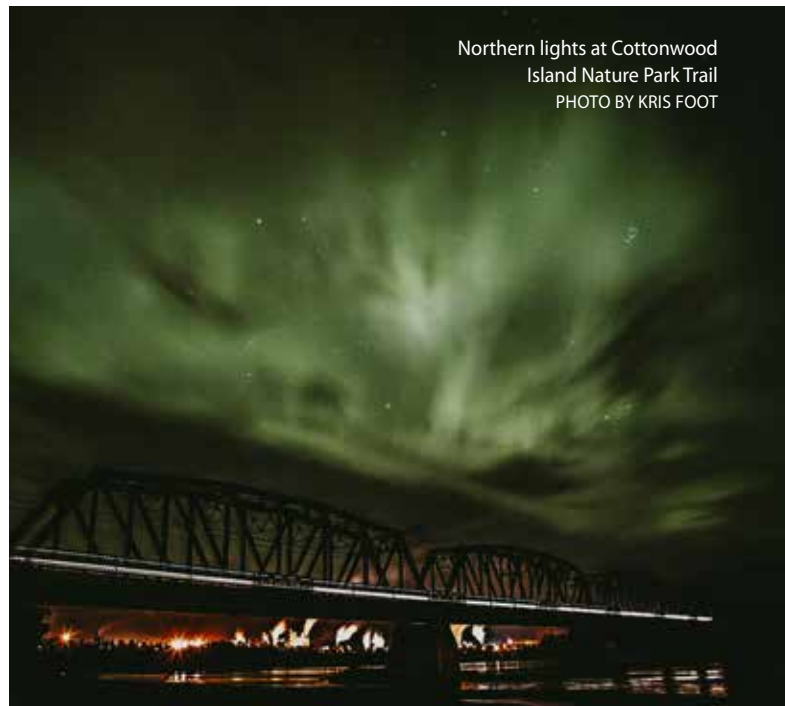
Craft beer and cider are equally inviting. **Trench Brewing & Distilling**, **Cold Front Cider**, **Slaughterhouse Craft** and **Deadfall Brewing Company** pour small-batch drinks locals swear by. Neighbourhood bars such as **The Black Clover** and **The Dudley** are perfect for more traditional vibes after a day of exploring.

LIGHTS UP

On clear nights, the sky can come alive with the Northern Lights, a dazzling swirl of green, pink, and purple dancing across the horizon. Most often seen from fall through early spring, recent years have even delivered glimpses into late spring and summer, adding a touch of magic to long northern evenings.

Just a short drive north, the **Salmon River** offers quiet rocky shores and a calm riverbed where you can watch the colours ripple above. A short hike to **Teapot Mountain** and nearby lakes, including Tabor, Purden, Norman, Bednesti, and Summit, provides dark skies perfect for spotting the display. For a guided

Northern lights at Cottonwood Island Nature Park Trail
PHOTO BY KRIS FOOT



experience, the **Royal Astronomical Society of Canada's Observatory** can help you trace constellations. Just check ahead, and when you go, dress warmly.

Visitors to Prince George encounter surprises in every layer of the place, and the more time spent here, the more those layers reveal themselves. Stop by the local tourism office to discover more events and activities bringing the city to life this spring. 🇨🇦

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ROBSON LOST IN THE
CLOUDS. Owen Perry

INTO THE GREAT WILDERNESS

ALONG THE LEGENDARY ROUTES OF
NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA, VAST
LANDSCAPES, HISTORIC HIGHWAYS AND
INDIGENOUS STORIES SHAPE ONE OF
CANADA'S MOST AWE-INSPIRING JOURNEYS.

WHERE THE ROAD RUNS WILD



Road-tripping through Northern British Columbia reveals one of Canada's most legendary drives, tracing Highway 97 (the famed Alaska Highway) north through vast landscapes of waterfalls, wildlife, and geothermal wonders. Start at Dawson Creek, then wander among waterfalls and dinosaur trackways at Tumbler Ridge UNESCO Global Geopark. Continue to Muncho Lake Provincial Park, whose brilliant jade-green waters are famed for fishing, before reaching the Yukon border via Liard River Hot Springs—one of the largest natural hot springs in Canada. For a more remote route, the Stewart-Cassiar Highway begins in Terrace, accessible via daily flights from Vancouver. Highlights include the volcanic landscapes of Nisga'a Memorial Lava Bed Provincial Park—the first park co-managed by a First Nation and BC Parks—and the Salmon Glacier, the world's largest road-accessible glacier. Adventurers can hike in Kinaskan Lake Provincial Park and paddle in the aquamarine waters of Ta Ch'ila Provincial Park (Boya Lake).

TSE'K'WA NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE REOPENS UNDER INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

Tse'k'wa National Historic Site—a sacred gathering place for the Dane-zaa People for over 12,500 years—has reopened to the public, offering a rare glimpse of early human history. Also known as Charlie Lake Cave, it is recognized as one of the most significant archaeological sites in Canada. First excavated by Simon Fraser University in 1974, Tse'k'wa reached a historic milestone in 2024 when the university returned the archaeological collection to the newly built onsite repository. The moment marked a powerful example of Indigenous-led stewardship, led by the Tse'k'wa Heritage Society—a partnership of Doig River, Prophet River, and West Moberly First Nations. Now one of the few Indigenous-owned and managed National Historic Sites in Canada, Tse'k'wa invites visitors to walk in the footsteps of the earliest inhabitants of this land—an experience that deepens understanding of people, place, and time.



TSE'K'WA NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE. Abby Cooper

WHERE LAND MEETS STORY

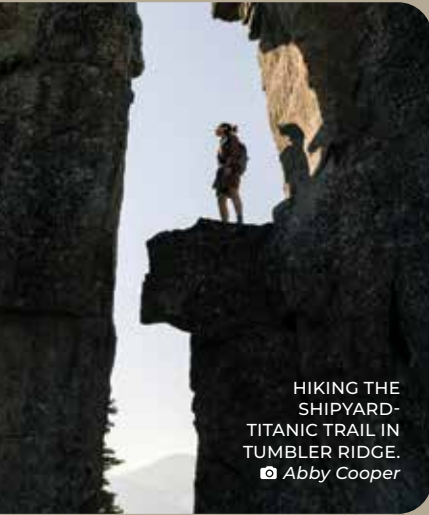
Travellers can deepen their connection to land and culture through Indigenous-led tours and historic sites between Terrace and Smithers. In the Nass Valley, home to the Nisga'a Nation, visitors can follow the 340-kilometre (211-mile) Nisga'a Lands Auto Tour, an 18-stop, self-guided route through Nisga'a Memorial Lava Bed Park, where volcanic landscapes

carry both geological and cultural meaning. Along the Skeena River, the Kitselas Canyon National Historic Site reveals over 6,000 years of Gitselasu presence,



DROWNED FOREST IN NISGA'A MEMORIAL LAVA BED PROVINCIAL PARK.
 © Andrew Strain

with ancient village sites and the option to explore the river on a tour with Northern BC Jet Boat Tours. Totem poles stand as storytellers across the region: at Gitwangak Village with the commanding "Man-Crushing Log"; at Gitanyow, where cedar poles mark history and territory; and at 'Ksan Historical Village, a reconstructed Gitxsan village. For a guided experience, Witsuwit'en Cultural Tours shares traditions and ancient history in the dramatic Widzin Kwah Canyon.



HIKING THE SHIPYARD-TITANIC TRAIL IN TUMBLER RIDGE.
 © Abby Cooper

WOMEN-LED ADVENTURES TAKE THE LEAD

In *The Great Wilderness*, women are reshaping what it means to explore the outdoors and creating spaces where women can discover strength, confidence, and community in some of the remotest regions in the province. In the Robson Valley, Robson Backcountry Adventures is led by Joy and Alison, both certified hiking guides with seasoned expertise in alpine terrain and wildlife. Their trips range from beginner-friendly day hikes to challenging week-long expeditions. In Tumbler Ridge, Untamed Tours—founded and led by Dee Rocher, a certified hiking guide and outdoor educator—offers mentorship, skills training, and small-group adventures on trails far from the tourist track. And in the Northern Rockies, Peak Wyld Co. equips women with survival skills and the confidence to embrace the wild safely and boldly.

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The Great Wilderness

BRITISH COLUMBIA

HARRISON RIVER VALLEY



Gathering with the eagles

in the Harrison River Valley

*Words by Lauren Kramer
Photo courtesy Tourism Harrison*

It's dawn on the Harrison River, and I'm out on a forest trail listening to the piercing chorus of bald eagles perched in the tall cottonwood trees around me.

The majestic raptors soar above the treetops, filling the air with their eerie, high-pitched song. They've come in the thousands from Alaska because in mid-November the Chehalis flats on the river are writhing with spawning salmon.

As light breaks across the densely forested mountains, they perch in pairs, watching and waiting for the perfect moment to swoop in for an easy breakfast. Look over the water at the whitecaps created by thrashing fish in their last throes of life, and at the birds waiting to consume them, and you get to witness a primeval cycle of wildlife that inspires stillness, awe and respect.

I'm on the cusp of one of British Columbia's wildest regions, steps from the foothills of the mountains, flanked by forests and steep vertical rockfaces. But my home base for this weekend of eagle viewing is anything but wild: a woodland cabin at Sandpiper Resort in Harrison Mills.

The 160-acre property, formerly the home of the Pretty family, has been an inn since 1995, but its woodland cabins were added in 2022. Each one is a micro-home with a kitchenette, a living room with vaulted ceiling and gas fireplace and a large bedroom where a king bed overlooks a glass shower and an oval tub. Refined but understated, the cabins deliver seclusion with fine linens and soft robes.

Their most unique feature is the ofuro, a deep, outdoor Japanese bathtub filled with steaming water. Located on the private, secluded patio of the cabin, the ofuro is steps from the forest, the river, a tumbling creek and the soaring eagles. I sprinkle the water with lavender bath salts and sink into the delicious warmth of the ofuro before bedtime and first thing in the morning, wondering if there could possibly be a more serene way to start and end the day.

Sandpiper Resort has an eagle viewing platform that overlooks the Chehalis Flats, but to get a closer look, I book a boat ride with Harrison Eco Tours, departing from the dock outside Harrison Hot Springs Resort. With Frank Kozel at the steering wheel, the jet boat whizzes along Harrison Lake's flat water, past harbour seals that have swum 50 miles from the ocean to pursue the salmon run and their next meal. Before long we enter the river and begin to see trees speckled with white eagle heads and gravel sandbars filled with the large birds.

Salmon carcasses litter the banks of the lake and around us, while large salmon flip their bodies into the air before splashing back in the water. Their somersaults are all the more amazing considering that the fish are in the final days and weeks of their lives.

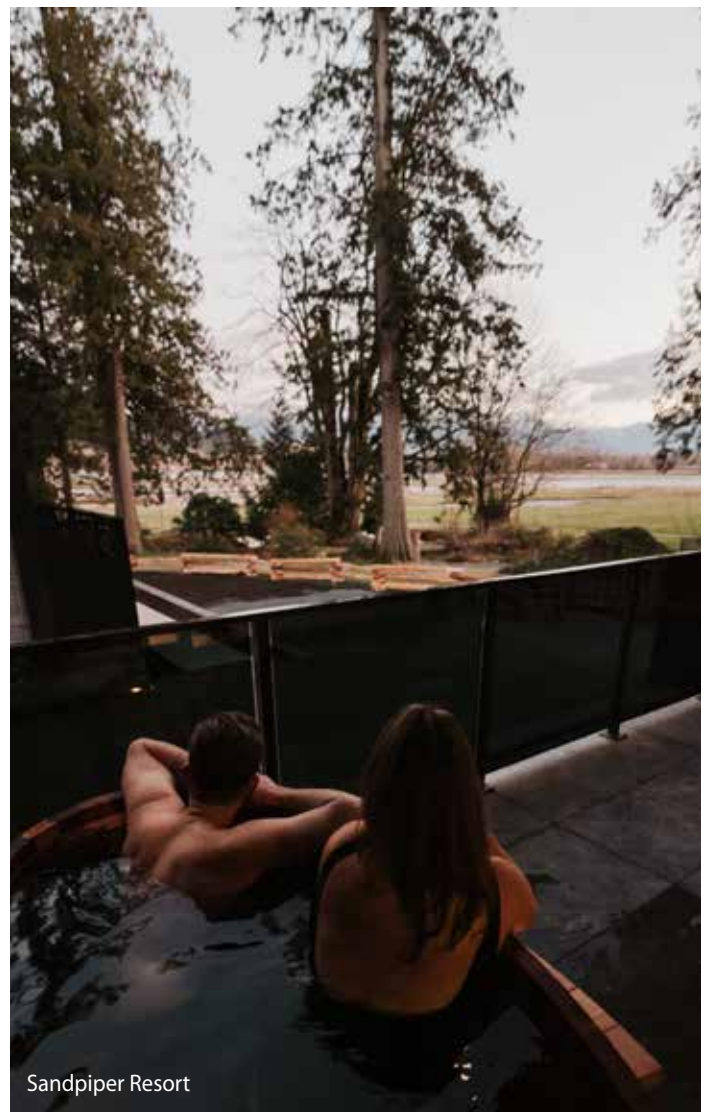
On our way back, Kozel maneuvers the boat close to a rock wall where First Nations have carved a petroglyph and painted pictographs.

"They could be hundreds or even thousands of years old, but no one has carbon dated them, so we don't know how old they really are," he says.

Back in the town of Harrison Hot Springs, the cold winter months have chased families from the beach and the driving rain keeps outdoor recreation to a minimum. We walk through town to the public hot springs mineral pool, change into swimsuits and warm up in the 29C water.

Built in the 70s, the indoor pool offers a vintage but comfortable soaking experience for locals and visitors who aren't staying at the hot springs resort, where the mineral pools are exclusively for guests.

Later, with tingling, puckered skin, we drive through Agassiz, stopping at farm stands to purchase beets, squash, garlic and other vegetables from the late Fall harvest. The valley is home to two superb creameries that should be on every foodie's list. At Farmhouse Cheese we savour the smooth, light texture of goat gouda, while at Creekside Creamery we sample La Belle Vallee, a Gruyere-style cheese with a rich, nutty flavour, and garlic raclette, which awarded one of the top three in Canada's Royal Cheese Competition last year.





Harrison Eco Tours

Before leaving we head to the milk dispenser, where visitors can dispense litres of full-cream milk. It tastes a hundred times better than anything we're used to from the grocery store.

At our last stop, Kilby Historic Site, we visit the general store and hotel of the community that lived at Harrison Mills from the 1920s until the 70s. The store is a time capsule that delivers a vivid glimpse of living history and a sense of the lives and shopping habits of the people that lived there during those 50 years.

The Kilby family sold everything from hardware to hats, groceries to drugs, and many of those original items remain on its shelves. Open the cheese case and you can still inhale the aroma of cheddar. In the cupboards, packages still contain baking powder and spices, while jars of pickled vegetables and jam are labeled with the year 1934. In the hotel rooms, chamber pots remain beneath the beds to avoid guests having to walk to the outhouse in the middle of the night.

With renewed gratitude for indoor plumbing, we return to Sandpiper Resort in time for a downpour that leaves the 100-year-old trees on the property dripping with moisture and the mountains hidden behind heavy mist.

Retreating to the ofuro, we run a new tub of steaming water and clamber inside, the patter of rain like soft music around us. There's no question that a weekend in the verdant Harrison Valley, surrounded by the cry of eagles and the replenishing virtues of hot water, is the perfect tonic to winter.

IF YOU GO:

Sandpiper Resort's ofuro tubs are confined to its woodland series of cabins, though all of its accommodations, including the rooms in the 1924 lodge, are beautifully and comfortably furnished.

The resort's River's Edge Restaurant offers casual dining comfort food and is open daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. For more information, visit sandpiperresort.ca; or call (877) 796-1001.

Harrison Eco Tours offers sightseeing and fishing trips on Harrison Lake and Harrison River all year round, weather permitting. The 90-minute eagle viewing tour costs \$129 for adults, \$106 for seniors and half price for kids 16 and under.

For more information, visit harrisoncotours.com.

The Circle Farm Tour is a guide to exploring the farm stores, cheese makers and artisans of the valley. Get information at the tourism office as you enter town and spend some time browsing its Sasquatch Museum, which contains an interesting history of Sasquatch sightings, footprints, legend and lore. For more information, visit tourismharrisonhotsprings.com.

DON'T MISS: Kilby Historic Site in Harrison Mills, but plan your visit carefully because its open days and times vary, especially in the winter months. The site has farm animals and a cute café selling great pie. More information is available at kilby.ca; or call (604) 796-9576. 📍



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What we do

The Garth Homer Foundation provides funding in support of its vision for a society where people with diverse abilities discover freedom of choice and unleash their full potential.

The Foundation's purpose is primarily, and to the greatest extent possible, to fund the Garth Homer Society to support adults with developmental disabilities to make **a life, a home, and a place in the world**. This mission for the greater Victoria region began in 1968 to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to participate, feel valued, make informed choices and to access services tailored to their goals. We believe in the model – that our community is enriched when everyone can contribute!

In partnership with iA Financial/Richardson Wealth, CanadaHelps and Benevity, we create Endowments, Matching Grants, Legacies, Tributes/ Gifts In Memorium and Corporate Giving opportunities to accelerate transformation for our region; through the work of the Garth Homer Society.

How we help

In March 2023, the Foundation announced a transformative \$34 million legacy gift from Kathleen Sheret, a longtime supporter and friend of community leader Garth Homer. This donation is one of the largest ever given to support people with cognitive disabilities in Canada and is used to build community-based supports for generations to come.

Upon receiving this generous gift and scaling up its responsible investing activity, the Foundation established its popular matching program to ensure all gifts have twice the impact. The Foundation now grants \$2M, growing to \$3M per year over the next few years, to the Society. You may have seen the colourful Garth Homer vans around town, met Garth Homer employees or volunteers throughout the communities, followed the progress of the Belonging Project for housing in Saanich, or seen Garth Homer artists' works in the Museum, 'paint-ins' at Market Square; or at any of the beautiful Gardens in our region – among many other things-to-do!



Ways to give

Your support can be directed to Garth Homer Society programs or for long term investment to help us build an expanded scope of services, a greater array of choices, and expanded access to technology, transportation, and facility resources.

Join the momentum

www.garthhomerfoundation.org/donate

Learn about more ways to give

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www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/the-garth-homer-foundation

Victoria Foundation

Gifts from Donor Advised Funds are gratefully received and matched

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Gifts from the beautiful coin fountains are matched by the Foundation

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www.causes.benevity.org/causes/search/--/
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Pleasure, agony & awe

B.C. author has incredible memories of tackling the West Coast Trail 25+ times

by Sam Duerksen

For some, one time on the famous 75-kilometre West Coast Trail is more than enough for a lifetime of memories.

For Victoria, B.C. hiker Wayne Aitken, it's an epic journey he's traversed more than 25 times.

As co-author of Amazon best seller, *Blisters and Bliss: The Trekker's Guide to the West Coast Trail*, Aitken has documented his awe for the trail, plus sage advice for tackling it, since 1989.

Whether recalling the "most incredible" sandy beaches, the "huge boulders and logs" at Owen Point that he had to scramble over, or the time a bear followed him down a ladder, each experience has been an unforgettable feat of triumph, bringing him back time again.

"It's 75k of really beautiful, ever-changing backcountry wilderness," he says.

Located in Pacific Rim National Park

Reserve on Vancouver Island, the trail's rugged beauty and the challenge it presents have captivated people for over a century, making it one of the world's top trails. Those walking its steps follow a path built in 1907 to help rescue shipwreck survivors, plus early trade and travel trails used by First Nations.

But those drawn in by the trail's call must note: it crosses demanding terrain including deep mud, river crossings and steep climbs, weaving through coastal scenery, old-growth forests, suspension bridges and more than 100 ladder systems. Considering that around 100 medical evacuations take place a year, and it takes about a week to complete, it's important to be prepared.

Trail

"As with any world-class trek — (it) can be a time of intense pleasure... or ex-




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hausting agony. The difference is usually in the amount of care taken in preparing for the trip," Blisters and Bliss reads.

There are three main trailheads to start from: Gordon River (near Port Renfrew), Pachena Bay (near Bamfield) and Nitinaht Village (via water taxi). But no matter where one starts, the visceral wilderness and the sense of accomplishment at the end contribute to the journey's beauty. Wayne says people usually tackle it with one of two attitudes: "I'm going to beat the trail, or I'm going to be with the trail."

So what motivated Aitken to do it so many times?

Partly the need to keep the book updated, with around 70,000 copies now sold, but second, because "it's a great trail," he says.

"The elation at the end is always pretty consistent ... there's a tremendous sense of personal achievement."

The book boasts beautiful descriptions of merging with nature, playful recollections of the bragging rights that come with completing it ("Muddied hikers arriving at Walbran from the South love to tell tales of horror to the clean-skinned beach walkers from the North"), and stories that seem straight out of a sitcom, brought to life with Aitken's penchant for playful wit.

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Hike

One of Aitken's favourites is a hilarious memory with Dave Foster, his friend and co-author, who passed in 2018.

"It was an extremely foggy day, half-way across the trail, and all of a sudden, this guy comes through the mist and he's carrying an umbrella and a suitcase."

Apparently, the British man was seeking Bamfield, to start his job as a cook. The man had asked how to get there, and someone had given him the misguided advice to take one of the Island's most challenging trails. Whether he made it to work on time, Aitken couldn't say.

But it was Aitken's last time on the trail, in 2016, that was one of his most special. He has since suffered a "severe" bike accident in 2018, and now, at 79, he has a titanium hip and seven stents in his heart that have forced him to finally hang up his boots.

That last hike, with his daughter, son-in-law and two grandsons, who now help write new book editions, fills his heart.

"I suppose if I had to name one, it was the last trip. A lot of nostalgia. Three generations of us having a great time. And



"Overnight, heavy mist had settled on everything. Andy lay on the sand under a tarp. The exposed corners of his sleeping bag were darkened with moisture. His wool nightcap had sparkling droplets of water clinging to the fibers; and yet he slept peacefully." - Blisters and Bliss

yeah, that one was really special."

While bittersweet, Aitken has a lifetime of memories to look back on and a legacy that aids new generations in experiencing the awe that happens in the quiet mist of the forest, with a feet full

of blisters, and an unforgettable sense of accomplishment.

To learn more about the West Coast Trail, check out Wayne's website, blisters-bliss.com – he's full of invaluable advice and incredible stories. 📖

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