Cowichan: “The Warm Land”

The Cowichan region of Vancouver Island encompasses 373,000 hectares (921,703 acres) of verdant farmland, deep ocean bays, whitewater rivers, sun-bathed lakes and low rolling mountains. Cowichan extends along the east coast of Vancouver Island to south of Mill Bay and north of Ladysmith, and includes Nitinat Lake and the old-growth wilderness of Carmanah Walbran Provincial Park on the west coast. Local lakes and rivers offer year-round sport from winter kayaking to spring angling for Chinook salmon to summer wakeboarding. Gulf Island boaters enjoy full-service amenities and lively cafes and pubs at the many sheltered marinas in the region. Visitors can almost hear the past echo of train whistles as they cross over historic railway trestles on local portions of the Trans Canada Trail. A series of low-rise mountains – known as the Cowichan “mounts” – are prime recreational playgrounds for hikers, mountain bikers and hang gliders, as well a for those who come to explore the area’s ecological wildflower reserves, brilliant in the spring with blue camas and shooting stars.

One of the top culinary destinations in Canada, Cowichan is home to medal-winning wineries, organic farms and innovative artisan food-producers who, over the last two decades, have created a thriving central Island agri-tourism industry based on the mantras of fresh, local, seasonal and sustainable. Along with a dozen top wineries, a cidery, a distillery and a brew pub, everything from asparagus to kiwis, pasture-raised meat to French lavender is cultivated here. Visitors can also take part in guided foraging for many varieties of wild mushrooms, including coveted porcinis and chanterelles. Well-maintained country roads meander throughout the region revealing First Nations and pioneer history in turn-of-the-century graveyards, rustic stone churches and heritage farmhouses. Cowichan’s pretty towns and villages – including Chemainus, Ladysmith, Duncan, Cobble Hill and Cowichan Bay – offer everything from art galleries, outdoor murals and antique malls to country fairs, fishing piers and farmers’ markets.

Nicknames: The Warm Land, from the First Nations Coast Salish, who named the area Quw’utsun’ or Cowichan, meaning “land warmed by the sun.”

Population: 80,100 (source: www.tourismcowichan.com). Largest communities: Ladysmith (over 8,000) Duncan (5,000), Chemainus (3,900).

Weather: Canada’s only maritime Mediterranean climatic zone, Cowichan boasts the warmest mean year-round temperatures in Canada and the country’s longest growing season. Summer temperatures average 23°C (73°F), while winter months average 6°C (42°F). Cowichan logs 1,845 average annual hours of sunshine, making this a prime Vancouver Island wine region.
**Economic Drivers:** Historically, logging and forestry operations were Cowichan’s economic mainstays; however, in recent years, the local economy has diversified with the growth of the marine, tourism, agricultural and manufacturing sectors.

**Hometown Celebrities:** Pamela Anderson, actor, born in Ladysmith; brothers Geoff Courtnall and Russ Courtnall, National Hockey League (NHL) players, raised in Duncan. Parts of the 1994 movie *Little Women* (based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott) were filmed in the Cowichan village of Cobble Hill.

**Claims to Fame:**
- Eco-friendly **Cowichan Bay**, North America’s first **Cittaslow** (Slow City) community.
- More than 80 carved Cowichan First Nations totems in Duncan, the “**City of Totems**.”
- The world famous outdoor gallery of **murals** showcasing the history of seaside **Chemainus**.
- Turn-of-the-century architecture in **Ladysmith**, named one of Canada’s 10 prettiest towns.
- Vancouver Island’s largest **farmers’ market**, open year-round, in downtown Duncan.
- The second largest **wine region** in BC, with vineyards dating back to 1860.
- **Cowichan River**, a Canadian Heritage River, with a 20-km (12 mi) footpath running its length.
- Restoration of the 44 m (145 ft) high **Kinsol Trestle**, the tallest standing railway bridge in Canada.
- **South Cowichan Lawn Tennis Club**, the world’s oldest grass tennis courts after Wimbledon.
- Vancouver Island’s second largest lake, 34-km (21-mi) long **Cowichan Lake**.
- The **world’s largest hockey stick** and puck at the Cowichan Arena.

**Best Hiking/Biking Trails:** Cowichan Valley Trail (an extension of the Trans Canada Trail), Cobble Hill Mountain Recreation Area, the Kinsol Trestle, Spectacle Lake Park, the Cowichan River Footpath, Mount Tzouhalem, Mount Prevost and the West Coast Trail.

**Major Attractions:**
- Self-guided **gastro-tours** of Cowichan wineries, farms, culinary retreats and artisan food shops.
- First Nations arts, cuisine and interpretive tours at the **Quw’utsun’ Cultural & Conference Centre**.
- Historic steam locomotive rides around the 100-acre **BC Forest Discovery Centre**.
- Birds of prey and the popular “halk walk” at **Pacific Northwest Raptors**.
- Year-round professional theatre performed at the **Chemainus Theatre Festival**.
- **Whippetree Junction**, 14 restored shops and heritage buildings, 7 km (4 mi) south of Duncan.
- Gulf Island boating from the sheltered marinatas **Maple Bay**, **Genoa Bay** and **Cowichan Bay**.
- Historic **trolley** rides and **summer harbour tours** aboard the **Maritimer** in Ladysmith.
- Scuba diving in the artificial reef of a **sunken Boeing 737** between Chemainus and Thetis Island.
- **Floatplane sightseeing charters** and **whale-watching eco-tours** from Cowichan Bay.
- Canoeing and kayaking in **Cowichan River Provincial Park**, west of Duncan.
- Mountain biking, hang gliding and paragliding from the top of **Mount Prevost**.
- **Windsurfing** and kiteboarding at Nitinat Lake, one of North America’s best windsurfing sites.
- The old-growth forest sanctuary of **Carmanah Walbran Provincial Park** on the west coast.
Arts & Culture:
The free year-round *Visions Art Studio Tour* leads visitors on a self-guided tour of the studios, galleries and showrooms of Cowichan’s finest artists and artisans; maps are available throughout the region. First Nations culture is brought to life through ancient hands-on crafts like felt-making, weaving, knitting and carving at the Quw’utsun’ Cultural & Conference Centre, where visitors can also purchase authentic hand-made Cowichan sweaters. The *Cedar Yellow Point Artisan Association’s* annual Christmas Tour showcases more than two dozen rural artists and artisans. The *Cowichan International Aboriginal Festival of Film & Art* spotlights indigenous cultures and independent filmmakers around the world. Live theatre, opera, classical concerts and children’s shows are performed throughout the year at Chemainus Theatre Festival, *Cowichan Theatre*, Duncan Garage Showroom and Ladysmith’s Little Theatre. Cowichan history is on display at several fascinating museums in the region, including the *Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives* in a 1912 E&N Railway station in Duncan, the *Cowichan Bay Maritime Centre*, the *Kaatza Station Museum* in Lake Cowichan and the *Shawnigan Lake Museum*.

Festivals & Events:
- **Annual Wooden Boat Celebration** at Maple Bay Marina
- **Lavenderfest**, farm tours, artisans, crafts and music in Cobble Hill
- **Ladysmith Days**, an annual parade, concerts and fireworks
- **Sunfest**, Cowichan Valley outdoor musical concerts
- **Cowichan Valley Grape Escape**, an annual bike tour to benefit the MS Society
- **Cowichan Wine & Culinary Festival**, self-guided winery tours and tastings
- **The Great Lake Walk and UltraMarathon**, around Cowichan Lake
- **Salmon and Mushroom Festival**, in a west coast garden
- **Someres Return of the Swans Festival**, winters in Duncan
- **Ladysmith Festival of Lights** and annual light-up ceremony

Transportation Links:
- Cowichan’s main communities are about 40 minutes equidistance from Vancouver Island’s two largest cities of Victoria and Nanaimo. For more on driving times and distances, visit “Getting Here” at [www.tourismcowichan.com](http://www.tourismcowichan.com).
- **Harbour Air** provides daily floatplane service from its terminal at Maple Bay Marina to downtown Vancouver and Nanaimo. **SaltSpring Air** operates daily seaplane flights from downtown Vancouver and the Vancouver International Airport to Maple Bay and Salt Spring Island.
- **Victoria International Airport** (YYJ) and **Nanaimo Regional Airport** (YCD) are both less than an hour from Cowichan communities, while **Comox Valley Airport** (YQQ) is about a 1.5 hour drive.
- Two **BC Ferries** terminals are located in Nanaimo providing access to the Duke Point-Twassassen route and the Departure Bay-Horseshoe Bay route. The ferry at **Mill Bay** connects Cowichan to Brentwood Bay and the Saanich Peninsula, outside Victoria.
- Gulf Island ferry routes include the **Crofton to Salt Spring Island** run and the **Cheminus ferry** to Thetis Island and Kuper Island.
- For those arriving by private boat, marinas are located in Chemainus, Cherry Point, Cowichan Bay, Crofton, Genoa Bay, Ladysmith, Maple Bay, Mill Bay and Thetis Island.
- Vancouver Island Coach Lines and Greyhound/Island Coach Lines operate **bus service** to and from Cowichan to other major Vancouver Island destinations.
- **Via Rail** operates daily service from Victoria to Courtenay on the E&N rail line, aboard the *Malahat* dayliner, with convenient stops in many Cowichan communities.

Images courtesy Tourism Vancouver Island/Boomer Jerritt
Cowichan Communities
Top Destinations in *The Warm Land*

**Chemainus:** More than 250,000 visitors a year flock to this picturesque seaside community to follow the yellow footprints on a self-guided tour of more than 40 outdoor murals and 13 sculptures depicting the local history of the First Nations and early pioneers. The number of murals has been growing since 1982 and today visitors can tour the world’s largest outdoor art gallery on foot, in a horse-drawn carriage or trolley, or aboard a simulated steam train. The town’s quaint core is lined with art galleries, antique malls, gift shops and cappuccino bars — along with old-fashioned ice cream parlours. The Chemainus Theatre Festival offers year-round professional musical theatre and comedy, along with a gallery showcase for BC artists and artisans. A passenger-only ferry leaves from here to Thetis Island and Kuper Island. The world’s only artificial aircraft reef was created in local waters when a Boeing 737 was sunk in Stuart Channel in 2006, attracting scuba divers from around the world. Waterwheel Park is a popular place to picnic and offers a playground where children can climb in a tall ship and paddle a canoe. There are several original mill houses along Chemainus Road, as well as historic character homes in the Old Town. [www.chemainus.com](http://www.chemainus.com); [www.muraltown.com](http://www.muraltown.com); [www.tourismchemainus.com](http://www.tourismchemainus.com)

**Cobble Hill:** The slow pace and old-fashioned country life in this tiny agricultural village has attracted an influx in recent years of skilled winemakers, chefs, organic farmers, and artists and artisans. Several well-known wineries are located in Cobble Hill, including Glenterra Vineyards, Venturi-Schulze Vineyards and Cherry Point Vineyards, known for its fine blackberry dessert wines and summer concerts in the vineyard. Cobble Hill is also home to Merridale Ciderworks, producers of traditional ciders and distillers of a Calvados-style apple brandy. Visitors can spend a night in a yurt here, have a pedicure in the vinegar room and dine on fresh local cuisine on the bistro deck. Horseback riding is a popular pastime along the Koksilah River to the Kinsol Trestle. There is scenic hiking and mountain biking on the network of trails criss-crossing Cobble Hill Mountain, offering lofty views at the top across the Cowichan Valley to the Gulf Islands. The Cobble Hill Fall Fair is a showcase for local farmers, food-producers and artisans each August. Cobble Hill is also home of the Arbutus Ridge Golf Club, awarded four stars for “Best Places to Play” by *Golf Digest* 2009. [www.tourismcowichan.com](http://www.tourismcowichan.com)
Cowichan Bay:
When Europeans sailed into Cowichan Bay in the 1850s, they discovered waters teeming with steelhead and salmon, sheltered deep bay harbours for their ships, rich forests for timber and a warm micro-climate ripe for farming. The seaside village of Cowichan Bay became internationally famous in 2009 when it was designated as North America’s first Cittaslow town. Cittaslow, meaning Slow City, originated in Italy, but is now a worldwide movement rating eligible towns on everything from friendliness to environmental policies. Cowichan Bay is a hub of boutique cheese, seafood and ice cream shops, cafes and artists’ showrooms, including the well-known Arthur Vickers Shipyard Gallery. Visitors can dine with a view of the fish boats, floating homes and buildings on stilts on “Cow Bay’s” historic pier and Fisherman’s Wharf. Local maritime history is celebrated at Cowichan Bay Maritime Centre where wooden boat and model tall ships are on display, and visitors can meet a Coast Salish carver, the artist-in-residence. Ocean kayaking, whale-watching and floatplane sightseeing charters can all be arranged here. Close by is the South Cowichan Lawn Tennis Club, built in 1887, a reminder of a British pioneer past. Also in the area are the hiking, mountain biking and nature trails of Hecate Park, Mount Tzouhalem and Kingscote Heritage Trail. Birdwatching is big at the Cowichan Bay Estuary, home to an estimated 220 species of migrant shorebirds and waterfowl.

www.cowichanbay.com; www.slowcowichan.com

Duncan: The commercial centre of the Cowichan region, Duncan is a city of contrasts. Along the highway, the new Cowichan Commons, BC’s first Walmart supercentre, has become a prime central Island retail destination. Off the Island Highway, are the trendy boutiques, art and antique galleries, fashionable restaurants and local brew pub in historic downtown Duncan, known as the City of Totems. Up to 80 carved totem poles erected around Duncan depict the proud legends of the Cowichan First Nations. At the beautiful Quw’utsun’ Cultural and Conference Centre, visitors can experience First Nations’ culture, crafts, ceremonies and cuisine firsthand, and visit a gallery showcasing up to 100 Coast Salish artists. A popular stop on the E&N railway line from Victoria, the Duncan train station, built in 1887, is a National Historic Site. Major area attractions include the BC Forest Discovery Centre, the Somenos Marsh Bird Sanctuary, and the birds of prey demonstrations at Pacific Northwest Raptors. The world’s largest hockey stick and puck are on display at Island Savings Centre, a recreational multiplex. Northwest of Duncan, Chemainus River Provincial Park provides a river corridor for protected Roosevelt elk, and is where anglers head for abundant spring and summer runs of steelhead. The clean Cowichan River, a designated Canadian Heritage River, flows from Cowichan Lake through Duncan, offering excellent “source to sea” whitewater kayaking year round. For culinarians, some of the Island’s best wineries and farms are near Duncan, including Alderlea Vineyards, Blue Grouse Vineyards, Zanatta Winery and Vineyard, as well as Fairburn Farm and Deerholme Farm, both famous for their cooking classes. www.duncan.ca; www.duncancc.bc.ca; www.downtownduncan.ca; www.hellobc.com/en-CA/RegionsCities/Duncan.htm
Ladysmith: Historically preserved Ladysmith has won a lot of beauty contests over the years, including first place in its category in the national “Communities in Bloom” contest in 2003. Before that, it was named one of the 10 prettiest towns in Canada by Harrowsmith Country Life Magazine. The town’s turn-of-the-century Edwardian architecture can be toured free, aboard the San Francisco-style Ladysmith trolley. A year-round schedule of events focuses on the vibrant local arts scene, as well as Ladysmith’s maritime history. The Christmas light-up ceremony and parade, the last Thursday in November, kicks off the annual Festival of Lights, a spectacular 250,000-light display that in 2009 attracted an estimated 20,000 spectators and a visit from home-town celebrity Pamela Anderson. The self-guided Ladysmith Heritage Artifact Route takes visitors to see old shipping, mining and logging artifacts, including a 1900s steam donkey and a 1923 logging locomotive. Transfer Beach is the popular swimming beach, a launch point for Gulf Island kayakers and the place to watch summer fireworks on Ladysmith Days. Ladysmith extends to the Yellow Point and Cedar countryside, whose rural attractions include Hazelwood Herb Farm, McNab’s Corn Maze, Yellow Point Cranberries, the Cedar Farmers’ Market at the Crow & Gate Pub, and the Cedar Yellow Point Artisan Association’s annual self-guided tours. www.tourismladysmith.ca

Lake Cowichan: Cowichan Lake or “Kaatza” (the Big Lake) is the second largest lake on Vancouver Island and a major recreational hub in the Cowichan region. Located where the lake meets the Cowichan River, the town of Lake Cowichan is the largest of several small lakeside communities in the area that include Honeymoon Bay, Mesachie Lake and Youbou. The town is a gateway to some of the best hiking, camping and fishing on the Island and a terminus for the Trans Canada Trail, which follows the Cowichan River into Duncan. En route, hikers can see the restored 66-Mile and Holt Creek train trestles. Lakeview Park Campsite is ideal for picnics, swimming and boating. Visitors can rent everything here from kayaks and wakeboards to houseboats. For a sense of walking on water, the floating boardwalk from the campsite leads to the Cowichan Lake Education Centre, an outdoor learning and vacation centre in a 42-acre forest of Douglas fir. The local Kaatza Station Museum’s permanent pioneer displays include a store, post office, mine shaft and 1925 schoolhouse, as well as historic logging and rail exhibits, including rolling stock from the 1920s. www.town.lakecowichan.bc.ca

Mill Bay: The panoramic views of the Strait of Georgia from this coastal South Cowichan village rival anything on Vancouver Island. The cozy waterfront community of Mill Bay is the first stop north over the 25-km (16 mi) portion of the Island Highway known as “The Malahat.” It’s also the site of the ferry to and from Brentwood Bay (home to world famous Butchart Gardens), offering drivers and cyclists from the Saanich Peninsula and Victoria a quick and scenic way to access Cowichan’s attractions, without having to drive The Malahat route. BC Ferries calls it “Vancouver Island’s most beautiful shortcut.” Bamberton Provincial Park in Mill Bay offers excellent saltwater fishing and a 225-metre (738-foot) long sandy beach ideal for families and beachcombers. Mill Bay Nature Park is a great place for birdwatching and to explore intertidal life along the shore. The private Brentwood College School, host of the Brentwood International Regatta, has been located in Mill Bay since 1961. www.tourismcowichan.com
**Youbou:** Youbou is the second largest community on Cowichan Lake. A former mill town, this pretty village on the lake’s north shore – about 25 minutes west of the larger town of Lake Cowichan – charms visitors with its natural beauty and historic buildings. The local church and community hall were both built in 1937. Boating and fishing on Cowichan Lake are major draws, as are hiking, sightseeing and camping along its shores. Boat launches and camping facilities can be found at Pine Point and Maple Grove recreation sites, west of Youbou. On the second Saturday in August, lakeside Arbutus Park plays host to the Youbou Regatta that starts with a pancake breakfast and carries on throughout the day with a parade (some call the world’s shortest), canoe races, a boat flotilla, live music and BBQ concession, winding up with a sunset cruise and dance in the Youbou Hall. The annual 56-km (35 mi) Great Lake Walk and Marathon in September starts in Youbou and continues to Honeymoon Bay and Mesachie Lake, ending in the town of Lake Cowichan. [www.greatlakewalk.com](http://www.greatlakewalk.com); [www.tourismcowichan.com](http://www.tourismcowichan.com)

For more information on Cowichan communities, visit [www.cvrd.bc.ca](http://www.cvrd.bc.ca) and [www.tourismcowichan.com](http://www.tourismcowichan.com).

Images courtesy Tourism Vancouver Island/Boomer Jerritt, Tourism BC/Andrea Johnson
Cowichan Tribes enrich the arts, culture and economy of the Cowichan region

Probably best known for their signature hand-knitted Cowichan sweaters, the highly organized Cowichan Tribes were also instrumental in boosting the central Vancouver Island economy by about $30 million when they hosted the North American Indigenous Games in 2008. The event attracted 7,000 athletes, 3,000 volunteers and included 2,000 cultural performances. The largest single First Nations Band in BC, the 4,000-member Cowichan Tribes, a Coast Salish people, live in seven traditional villages on nine reserves covering 2,400 hectares (5,900 acres). An entrepreneurial force in the region, the Cowichan Tribes employ about 700 Band members at various enterprises, making it one of the largest employers in Cowichan. Its best-known operation is the renowned Quw’utsun’ Cultural and Conference Centre on the banks of the Cowichan River – a designated Canadian Heritage River – in downtown Duncan. Visitors here learn about the Cowican Tribes “traditional but progressive” history and culture through art, cuisine, interpretive tours and an emotional multi-media presentation titled Great Deeds.

Quw’utsun’ Cultural and Conference Centre embraces community through art

First Nations artist Joanne Circle moved to Cowichan from St. Louis, Missouri because she fell in love with the Koksilah River; she now makes her home along its banks. “It’s fed by many creeks,” she says, describing its many attractions as hiking, fir trees, swimming holes and cool water. Now as an enthusiastic local she, together with members of the Cowichan Tribes, is spearheading a community art project at the Quw’utsun’ Cultural and Conference Centre called The Gathering. The project, open to the community, has attracted everyone from 8 to 80-year olds to learn the ancient craft of felt-making. Circle teaches participants how to take twisting cords of brightly coloured wool fibres (some look like Rastafarian curls) and hand-comb them into layered shapes to be moistenend into felt squares. The individual squares from the project will then be joined into one extraordinary felt mosaic. The Gathering mosaic will be unveiled at the Cowichan International Aboriginal Festival of Film & Art, April 15-19, 2010 in Duncan, BC. www.quwutsun.ca; www.aff.cowichan.net
Explore Canada’s version of Provence on a Cowichan region gastro-tour

Cowichan vintners, farmers, fishermen and artisan food-producers have enthusiastically embraced the ideas behind the 100-Mile Diet, promoting locavore concepts that what is grown, caught, raised or produced closest to home is best for the body, soul and the environment. Field-to-table cooking here includes everything from organic lamb to emus, kiwis to asparagus, and hazelnuts to herbs. Local vintners produce medal-winning reds and whites, as well as premium balsamic vinegars and oak-aged blackberry wines. The region boasts a cidery, a new apple brandy distillery and a brew pub. Island foodie and radio host, Kathy McAree of CFAX 1070’s “In Good Taste” (Saturdays from 1-2 pm), leads guided group or private “Cowichan Valley Cuisine and Wine Day Tours” from Victoria through her company Travel with Taste. Visitors can also take their own self-guided gastro-tours of Cowichan by picking up a 2010 Official Cowichan Travel Planner guide at Visitor Centres in Chemainus, Lake Cowichan, Duncan, Mill Bay, Ladysmith, Victoria and Nanaimo. The Southern Vancouver Island Growers 2009/10 Farm Fresh guide to buying direct from the farm is available at participating farm stands. www.travelwithtaste.com; www.wineislands.ca; www.islandfarmfresh.com; www.tourismcowichan.com.

Beat the tour buses to the world’s largest outdoor gallery in seaside Chemainus

At 8:30 am all is quiet on the quaint streets of Chemainus. The neon glow of an “Open” sign leads to the smell of hot coffee in a cozy cafe. It’s just the beginning of a relaxing winter day touring Chemainus, its 13 sculptures and 40-plus outdoor murals painted on town halls and buildings, each one detailing a different aspect of local First Nations, logging, mining and maritime history. Visitors can tour the murals by following the yellow footsteps on the streets or can arrange with Chemainus Tours to see the sights in a horse-drawn trolley, carriage or simulated steam train. Forward-thinking town organizers, faced with a declining forest industry, kicked off the mural project in 1982, earning Chemainus the title of the “little town that did.” Today, this tiny village is also known as a top Vancouver Island theatre destination. The Chemainus Theatre Festival offers year-round professional theatre, including award-winning musicals, comedy and drama. Other bonuses on a Chemainus getaway: gorgeous gift shops and art galleries, historic mill houses, the Old Town, heritage B&Bs and old-fashioned ice cream parlours. www.chemainus.com; www.muraltown.com; www.tourismchemainus.com; www.chemainustours.com; www.chemainustheatrefestival.ca.

The two sides of shopping in Duncan – from small boutiques to a retail supercentre

Some locals call it Duncan’s new “man mall.” And there’s no doubt the new Cowichan Commons is retail nirvana for do-it-yourselfers of both sexes. Called Walmart’s first BC supercentre, the 17-hectare (42-acre), 46,450 sq m (500,000 sq ft) Cowichan Commons will have cost developers somewhere between $80 and $90 million to complete. Anchor tenant Walmart, alone, takes up 15,790 sq m (170,000 sq ft), features a full grocery section and employs about 400 people. Other major tenants are Home Depot, Rona, Canadian Tire and Future Shop. The commercial centre of the Cowichan region, Duncan, although relatively small, offers a surprising amount of choice. Along the highway, are the supercentre and malls. Off the Island Highway, visitors will discover the small trendy boutiques, antique galleries, shops and
funky restaurants of historic downtown Duncan. They’ll find European designer footwear at Cardino’s Shoes, local micro-ales at the Craig Street Brew Pub, elegant Cowichan cuisine at Bistro 161 and nightly cabaret-style entertainment at the Duncan Showroom Garage. Plus, Market in the Square, the Island’s largest farmers’ market, is open year-round in downtown Duncan. www.downtownduncan.ca; www.duncan.ca; www.duncancbc.ca;

**Winter is about whitewater kayaking on the Cowichan River waterway**

Ocean kayakers may hang up their wetsuits for the winter, but the river kayaking season in Cowichan is still in prime time. Local Cowichan tourism promoter Don Barrie, and his partner Rose Sirois, operate the Warm Rapids Inn and Kayak Centre, offering lessons and guided all-season adventures on the Cowichan River. Both are CanoeKayak Canada certified instructor-trainers and experienced guides who love to kayak in the ocean, river and surf. But, for them, winter is all about the Cowichan River’s whitewater. “Experienced river paddlers use ferrying techniques to make their way onto standing waves that can be surfed—which is a lot of fun,” Barrie explains. From 34-km (21 mi) long Cowichan Lake, the Cowichan River is a two-day, 40 km (25 mi) source-to-sea paddling experience. For those who love the adrenalin sport of whitewater kayaking, Barrie recommends the swift upper reaches of the waterway. He notes the slow-moving down river stretches are ideal for canoeing. Overall, he adds, “Once you sink your teeth into river kayaking, not only will it improve your sea kayaking skills, but you’ll also love venturing out in the rain.” www.warmrapidsinn.com

**The Visions Art Studio Tour in Cowichan is free, self-guided and year-round**

One of the most enjoyable ways to tour the pastoral country back roads of Cowichan is to take a self-guided tour of the home studio galleries of the region’s many potters, painters, sculptors, weavers, jewellery makers and fabric designers. Outside Duncan, east of the Island Highway, visitors will drive past First Nations villages and graveyards, historic Anglican churches and old farmhouses, following the Visions Art Studio Tour map to Khenipsen Road, where a cluster of fine artists work and live. At the Log House Gallery, overlooking Cowichan Bay, visitors can see the romantic watercolours of well-known painter Jennifer Lawson. At Sacred Mountain Studio, Nan Goodship makes hand-painted custom ceramics for tiles, sinks, tables, floors and counters, while her partner, painter Peter Spohn showcases his bold landscapes of the Cowichan Valley, the Gulf Islands and Mexico. In Crofton, glass artist Peggy Brackett designs dichroic (two-coloured) glass jewellery, while glass artist Jo Ludwig creates unique glass vessels, vases and fruit bowls. Check the website for a full list of artists or pick up a copy of the Visions Art Studio Tour brochure at various Cowichan locations. www.visionsarttour.ca; www.jenniferlawsonart.com; www.sacredmountainstudio.ca; www.kilnartglass.com

Images courtesy of Tourism Vancouver Island/Boomer Jerritt
Cittaslow translates to a lovely life in Cowichan Bay

By Kathy Eccles

Vancouver Island’s Cowichan Bay has made a name for itself around the world with its July 2009 designation as the first Cittaslow town in North America. Behind the prestigious title are the stories of a committed group of local chefs, bakers, cheesemakers, proprietors and food activists, who are turning the Cowichan region into one of Canada’s hottest agritourism destinations.

Posted on the walls at Hilary’s Artisan Cheese and True Grain Bakery – cozy side-by-side storefronts in Cowichan Bay – a colourful hand-drawn map of local wild and cultivated foods was the impetus that inspired a small working group of foodies to put their community on the world’s Cittaslow map.

At the helm was local chef Mara Jernigan of Fairburn Farm Culinary Retreat and Guesthouse, who has spent the last 10 years promoting the goals of the slow food movement in Canada, along with Cowichan culinary events like the Vancouver Island Feast of Fields, a fundraiser for the Farm Folk/City Folk Society. Food writer Mia Stainsby of The Vancouver Sun calls Jernigan the “Alice Waters of the Cowichan Valley.”

Other members of the group included Hilary Abbott of Hilary’s Artisan Cheese, Bruce Stewart of True Grain Bakery, Vanessa Elton of Affinity Guesthouse, (located nearby on the Cowichan River Estuary), and the Cowichan Valley Regional District, which provided both staff support and funding.

Cittaslow (meaning Slow City) is an accreditation that originated in Italy, but has now spread worldwide to an ever-growing 120 cities in 18 countries. It is open to cities with a population of less than 50,000. Cittaslow is part of the international slow food – and overall slow lifestyle – movement. Towns undergo a stringent 52-point inspection under six areas of excellence, from friendliness to infrastructure to environmental policy.
Scoring an impressive 93 percent – among the highest of all towns that have applied – Cowichan Bay fits the Cittaslow bill perfectly with its tiny population of just under 3,000. There’s nary a fast food outlet or big-box store in sight. Instead, visitors are treated to a vibrant working waterfront, boutique-size agricultural operations, farmgate wineries, friendly proprietors, scenic surrounding green space and the historic First Nations lands of the well-organized Cowichan Tribes.

“It became an intriguing idea among a few of us that this would be a designation that Cowichan Bay could apply for. That was the springboard,” explained Abott, who added that more people became involved from there. Food journalist and University of Victoria food culture instructor Don Genova is another epicurean booster for the Cowichan region, who got behind the Cittaslow application.

He’s the new Convivium leader for Slow Food Vancouver Island and Gulf Islands. While he and his wife still travel to Vancouver for work reasons, they makes their home in Cowichan because of the casual, unrrushed lifestyle. “It’s the friendliness of the people, the dedication to quality and the overall atmosphere of enjoying good food and learning what to do with all the raw ingredients we have here,” he explained from his home in Cobble Hill. “People care about what they’re selling,” he stressed.

True Grain Breads exemplifies that care. Stewart mills heirloom Red Fife Wheat in the bakery’s on-site millhouse. A dedicated locovore, he planted 30 acres of wheat nearby and, although the yield was small, uses it to bake organic, handcrafted 4.92-km (3-mi) loaves on Saturdays. The bakery itself is something of a gathering spot and, on a recent visit here, a group had come together to plan the 2nd annual Cowichan Bay Spot Prawn Festival coming up in May 2010. Taking part in the planning were local fisherman Gregg Beste and his wife Anne of the Better Fishing Company. They’re set to open a seafood shop in Cowichan Bay that will feature fresh crab and prawns coming straight off their boat and into their display case.

Since encouragement of local food and artisan products was one of the areas for Cittaslow assessment, it’s easy to see why Cowichan Bay scored a high 93 percent. Jernigan offers cooking classes, culinary retreats and Cowichan farm tours at her 53-acre Fairburn Farm, while continuing to beat the drum of slow food agritourism in Cowichan. Her partners at Fairburn Farm, Darrel and Anthea Archer, operate the Cowichan Water Buffalo Dairy, the only water buffalo dairy in Canada.
While Hilary’s Cheese Shop & Deli carries many specialty cheeses and foods from around the world, it’s Abbott’s own artisan cheeses that are the big draws on local dining tables and restaurants, from creamy chèvre to pungent Cowichan Blues and washed rind cheeses made with Cherry Point Vineyard’s aged blackberry Solera dessert wines.

Cowichan Bay scored particularly well in Cittaslow’s environmental assessment as well. Abbott says the town is always looking to lessen its footprint. Right now, he advises, there’s more emphasis on recyling. That’s good news for another community-minded venture powered by human innovation. Cowichan Recyclists provides year-round recycling pick-up for local businesses – on bicycles.

For more, visit:

Cittaslow Cowichan, www.slowcowichan.com
Hilary’s Artisan Cheese, www.hilarycheese.com
True Grain Bread, www.truegrain.ca
Fairburn Farm Culinary Retreat and Guesthouse, www.fairburnfarm.bc.ca
Affinity Guesthouse, www.affinityguesthouse.ca
Cowichan Bay, www.cowichanbay.com
Cowichan Valley Regional District, www.cvrd.bc.ca
Slow Food Canada, www.slowfood.ca
Cowichan Recyclists, www.cowichanrecyclists.com

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Approximately 860 words

Images courtesy Tourism BC/Andrea Johnson; Tourism BC/Tom Ryan
Cowichan’s Kinsol Trestle restoration to mend Trans Canada Trail link

By Kathy Eccles

The devastating Okanagan Mountain Park forest fires of 2003 destroyed 12 wooden trestles that were part of the Kettle Valley Railway, a designated National Historic Site of Canada, outside Kelowna, BC. Although an astonishing loss of history, recovery was swift. The trestles were reconstructed and the railway trail re-opened for hikers and cyclists by March 2008. Less well known are the seven original standing E&N Railway train trestles that are restored and open for access along the 120-km (75 mi) Cowichan Valley Trail on Vancouver Island, a recent extension of the Trans Canada Trail. An eighth wooden trestle – the largest and most spectacular – is the subject of a well-organized campaign to raise $6.1 million for its restoration.

The Kinsol Trestle at 44 m (145 ft) high, spanning 188 m (614 ft) across the Koksilah River below, is the longest trestle in Canada, some say in the British Commonwealth. It’s certainly among the world’s tallest. Completed in 1920 by the Canadian National Railway, the Kinsol Trestle has been abandoned since the last train rode over its tracks in 1979. The trestle, in a 30-year state of rickety disrepair, is closed, breaking a link in both the Cowichan Valley Trail and the Trans Canada Trail. Hikers and cyclists now have to take a 10-km (6 mi) detour around the impassable river crossing.

While its timbers have rotted and fire damage can be spotted along the upper deck, the Kinsol Trestle remains a standing marvel of engineering mastery and beauty. Higher than a 14-storey building, it curves elegantly over the Koksilah River, a scenic postcard subject even in its derelict state.

If Kinsol Capital Campaign organizers have their say, the trestle will soon be restored to its former glory – predictions are by the summer of 2011.

“The Kinsol Trestle is the final jewel in the Crown that is the Vancouver Island portion of the Trans Canada Trail. It will complete a trail loop that runs from Swartz Bay on the tip of the Saanich Peninsula, through the greater Victoria area, across the Malahat, through the Cowichan Valley and finishing up in Nanaimo. Various connecting trails will eventually bring much of the Island into the
network,” said Jack Peake, Chair of the Cowichan Foundation’s Kinsol Capital Campaign, and the former mayor of Lake Cowichan.

The group is raising the $6.1 million needed to re-open the trestle to the public. Federal and provincial governments have committed about one-third each of the total, with the final third to come from municipalities and through donations to the Kinsol Capital Campaign. There’s a lot of enthusiasm among the Cowichan community for the train trestle’s potential to become a major Vancouver Island tourism attraction.

Recently, Western Forest Products and Local 1 – 1937 United Steelworkers IWA Council made a gift-in-kind, valued at about $200,000, to provide lumber and labour for the project.

Campaign fundraiser Diane Myrden says she came back from Christmas holidays and was thrilled to find $8,700 in cheques from local donors waiting on her desk. “It was really fabulous. People in the community gave to a cause that will benefit us recreationally and economically through tourism. It’s pretty exciting.” She confirms the campaign goal is within sight; about 10 percent more is needed to reach the finish line.

Engineering and design studies are complete and the next step is to go out for construction tenders, with the Cowichan Valley Regional District planning to begin restoration of the trestle in spring 2010. The rehabilitation work will include reinforcing structural trestle bents and replacing timbers, while at the same time, ensuring the historic aspects of the trestle are preserved. A new walkway atop the structure will allow safe passage for hikers, cyclists and equestrians.

Once rehabilitated, the photogenic Kinsol Trestle is poised to become a new scenic gateway on the Trans Canada Trail and another cornerstone of the Cowichan Valley Trail extension, along with the 66-Mile and Holt Creek train trestles.

According to Peake, “Completion of the Trans Canada Trail will be a fantastic achievement for this country and we’re thrilled the Kinsol Trestle will be a notable part of that trail network. The Vancouver Island portion of the trail will be 200 kilometres of some of the most dramatic scenery in the world – and the Kinsol Trestle is one of the major attractions along the route.”

For more on the Kinsol Capital Campaign, visit www.kinsol.ca.

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Approximately 740 words
Images courtesy of Tourism Cowichan
Tour Victoria to Cowichan on the scenic Pacific Marine Circle Route

By Kathy Eccles

An ideal driving adventure means never having to say “let’s double back.” The best way to tour South Vancouver Island – and the Cowichan region’s lakes, rivers and agri-tourism destinations – is to take the Pacific Marine Circle Route from Victoria. It’s possible to tackle the distance in a day, but when there are so many fresh, new attractions up ahead and en route, a longer, leisurely pace is likely to be more enjoyable on this 255 km (158 mi) scenic drive.

Begin by heading north on Highway 1, then west along Highway 14 to the community of Sooke on the Island’s southwestern tip. You can cycle or hike the Galloping Goose Trail along an old railway line or check out Sooke Potholes Provincial Park, where rock pools and potholes were carved into the Sooke River sandstone by the last ice age 15,000 years ago.

Next stop is Port Renfrew, population about 200, which sits at the edge of the world famous Pacific Rim National Park that extends north to Tofino. The town is a terminus on the West Coast Trail and home of rugged, windswept Botanical Beach where it’s not uncommon to see orcas or humpback whales cruising by. Unspoiled wilderness areas of old-growth Sitka spruce, western red cedar and Douglas fir are shared here with Roosevelt elk, plentiful black-tailed deer and mammals of the toothier kind, like Vancouver Island wolves, cougars and black bears. Big waves and uncrowded surf spots can be found close by in Jordan River, as well as at China Beach and Sombrio Beach in Juan de Fuca Provincial Park.

From Port Renfrew, the Pacific Marine Circle Route extends east to the small towns on the southern shore of 34-km (21-mi) long Lake Cowichan, Vancouver Island’s second largest lake. It sits below 1,541 m (5,056 ft) Mount Whymper, Canada’s highest mountain south of the 49th parallel. The route passes first through the tiny community of Mesachie Lake, known for its streets lined with fruit trees given to residents by a local lumber company in 1944. Next destination is the town of Lake Cowichan with gorgeous sandy beaches and excellent fishing, camping and hiking on the Trans Canada Trail. Stop for a picnic at Lake View Park Campsite then walk along the floating boardwalk to the Cowichan Lake Education Centre. The town’s Kaatza
Station Museum houses permanent pioneer exhibits like a 1925 schoolhouse and 1920s rolling stock from the early days of the railway.

Coming up next is Duncan, the largest city on the route, and a south Island retail destination. BC’s first Walmart supercentre recently opened here at the massive new 17-hectare (42-acre) Cowichan Commons, co-anchored by Home Depot, Rona, Canadian Tire and Future Shop. Duncan, nicknamed the City of Totems, is also a rich hub of First Nations culture and art. You can take a self-guided walking tour of more than 80 colourful totems poles erected around the city depicting the legends of the local Cowichan Tribes. At the Quw’utsun’ Cultural and Conference Centre, walk around totems and traditional carved canoes on the landscaped grounds next to the Cowichan River, a designated Canadian Heritage River. Inside, enjoy interpretive tours and a multi-media presentation, dine on authentic Coast Salish cuisine and shop the gift gallery for original hand-made Cowichan sweaters.

Duncan’s downtown core is a historic gem, with a surprising number of (for a small town of 5,000) high-end boutiques, antique malls and bistro. It’s also home to the Craig Street Brew Pub, Cowichan’s only brew pub, and Market in the Square, the largest year-round farmers’ market on the Island. Close by is the 100-acre BC Forest Discovery Centre, a “living museum” with interactive logging exhibits, train tours and antique logging equipment. It’s situated next to the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Refuge and bird sanctuary along the Island Highway.

From here, the Pacific Marine Circle Route veers off the highway and heads southwest along Trunk Road to Tzouhalem Road, which turns into Cowichan Bay Road, (keep your eyes open for the old stone Butter Church) leading to the seaside village of Cowichan Bay. This waterfront village is steeped in First Nations and maritime history. Stop in to see the wooden boat displays and model tall ships at the Cowichan Bay Maritime Centre, and to meet the Coast Salish artist-in-residence. An artisan cheese deli, organic bakery, well-stocked wine store and fresh seafood shop are just some of the reasons to pack your recyclable shopping bags on a visit to Cowichan Bay, recently made famous as North America’s first Cittaslow (Slow City) town. Stroll the local piers and wharves with their colourful floating homes, fish boats and Gulf Islands-destined power yachts. Before getting back in the car, stop for an old-fashioned ice cream cone made from scratch, right down to the chocolate chips and hand-picked wild berries.
Next stop is due south, back over the Island Highway to Cobble Hill, where some of the oldest vineyards on Vancouver Island were planted as far back as 1860. Today, this charming farming village is home to several excellent wineries, heritage farms and Cowichan’s only cidery. At Merridale Ciderworks, you can sample traditional cider and a Calvados-style apple brandy brewed in the new distillery, stay overnight in a yurt or have a pedicure in a vinegar house. Bistros at Merridale and Cherry Point Vineyards serve excellent Cowichan field-to-table cuisine within view of rolling orchards and vineyards. Another reason to stop in this creative community is to visit the studios of local potters, painters, sculptors and totem pole carvers.

The last stop on the Pacific Marine Circle Route is waterfront Mill Bay with spectacular views of the Strait of Georgia, quaint village shops, and excellent swimming and beachcombing at Bamberton Provincial Park. Mill Bay offers a choice of two routes back to Victoria. You can catch the 25-minute Mill Bay to Brentwood Bay ferry, a BC Ferries route billed as “Vancouver Island’s most beautiful shortcut.” Or continue driving south on the Pacific Marine Circle Route over the 25-km (16 mi) Malahat portion of the Island Highway, through Goldstream Provincial Park, and into Victoria. This choice means a chance to stop at one of The Malahat’s roadside viewpoints for panoramic views of the Saanich Peninsula, the Gulf Islands and, on a clear day, Washington’s snow-capped Mount Baker.

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(approximately 1,030 words)

(50-word sidebar)

More information on Pacific Marine Circle Route highlights:

Map of the PMCR, www.th.gov.bc.ca/circle_routes/pacific_marine.htm
Community of Sooke, www.sooke.org
Community of Port Renfrew, www.portrenfrewcommunity.com
Lake Mesachie, www.cowichanlake.ca/area_mesachie.php
Town of Lake Cowichan, www.town.lakecowichan.bc.ca
Downtown Duncan, www.downtownduncan.ca
Cowichan Bay, www.cowichanbay.com
Cobble Hill and Mill Bay, www.cvrd.bc.ca

Images courtesy of Tourism Vancouver Island/ Boomer Jerritt, Tourism BC/Tom Ryan