

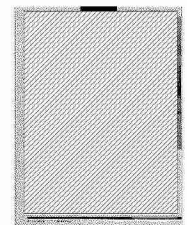


True Northwest

The Winter Games are going to make British Columbia a superstar.

Go now so you can say you knew it when. BY ROBERT EARLE HOWELLS

IT'LL BE A FEW MONTHS BEFORE the Olympics arrive in Vancouver, but in one contest Canada already has the U.S. beat. As an outdoors outpost, British Columbia outscores the American West across the board. The Pacific-hugging province is as big as California, Oregon, and Washington combined. But with only four million residents (Cali alone has 36 million), BC's rugged mountain miles are far less developed. Still, for all its immensity, the province has a knack for condensing its wonders into accessible packages. Fly into Vancouver and within two hours you can be hiking Whistler backcountry or paddling the coast of the Great Bear Rainforest. And these days, as the host city prims and preps for the Winter Games, consider tacking on a few days' stay: Catch Canada's best speed skaters running drills at the freshly renovated Richmond Olympic Oval, or go all out Canuck and cheer on the home country's hockey team as it practices in the Burnaby 8 Rinks. After a week in BC, you might be tempted to switch allegiance.

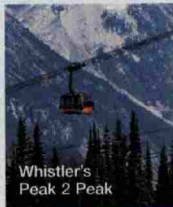


THE BIG TRIP

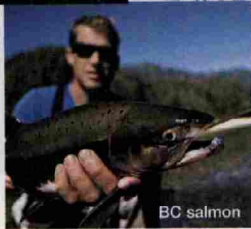
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4. Trek to Canada's Highest Falls

Strathcona Provincial Park is like a mini Switzerland in the middle of Vancouver Island. Its 965,000 protected acres are dominated by jagged mountain peaks and dotted with glaciers, lakes, and alpine valleys. Due to the island's isolation, Strathcona is also home to only-see-'em-here species like Roosevelt elk, black-tailed deer, and Vancouver Island marmots and wolves. To feel the spray of thundering 1,500-foot Della Falls, the country's highest, take a boat to the west end of Great Central Lake and pitch camp near the start of the Della Falls Trail. From there, it's a tough 13-mile hike to Love Lake for a vertigo-inducing, top-down peek at the cascade (env.gov.bc.ca).



Whistler's Peak 2 Peak



BC salmon

1. Kayak Cousteau's Wild Waters

Jacques Cousteau had good reason to call the calm waters of Pacific Rim National Park the most wildlife-laden he'd ever seen. Bald eagles are as common as robins overhead, herds of one-ton sea lions sun themselves on rocky outcroppings, orcas and Pacific gray whales migrate by, and otters cavort offshore. The best way to spot all this wildlife is on a multiday paddling trip among the park's Broken Group Islands. From Vancouver, take the car ferry to Nanaimo, then hop on the Pacific Rim Highway to Ucluelet, the jumping-off point for the archipelago. If you choose to DIY, give yourself four days to explore and come armed with charts and a tent. Seven islands have campsites (\$10; pc.gc.ca). Or sign on for a cushier four-day foray with Vancouver Island Kayak (\$1,000; vancouverislandkayak.com).

BUNK IN BEAR COUNTRY Grizzlies and black bears converge on Great Bear Lodge to feed in its rivers, which hold such a bounty of salmon that the water looks black. And this time of year is your best chance to spot a cub too (three nights, \$2,348, all-inclusive; greatbeartours.com).

2. Medal in Multisport Appreciation

No place in North America packs as many outdoor adventures into such a magnificent arena as the Euro-style village of Whistler. The town is being groomed to host February's alpine and Nordic ski events, but late summer is prime time to preview its new world-class goods. Take the finished Peak 2 Peak Gondola, which links Whistler and Blackcomb via a stomach-dropping 1,427-foot-high unsupported tram, to fresh hiking trails and mountaintop BBQ at the Roundhouse Lodge. Or hop on the chairlift to Whistler Mountain Bike Park to freeride 4,900 vertical feet of drops and jumps (bike and lift, \$150; whistlerbike.com). Then top off your sports circuit on Whistler's new via ferrata: A short glacier walk leads to bolted-in steel rungs up thousand-foot Whistler Buttress; it's the non-technical equivalent of an eight-pitch ascent (\$129; whistlerguides.com).

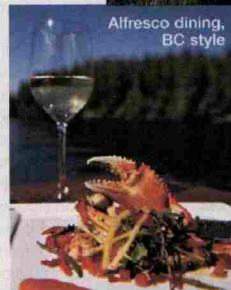
High in the tree-tops of the Great Bear Rainforest, Rockwater Secret Cove Resort has luxe tenthouse suites with expansive views of the Strait of Georgia (two nights, \$649, including a massage and kayak rental; rockwatersecretcovesort.com).

3. Road-Trip the Route to Rule Them All

In BC's far north, where the Rockies end and the Yukon begins, an SUV jockey feels like a Hudson's Bay Company trapper making the rounds. The rugged topography is pure Old West frontier, with tiny pioneer settlements sprinkled across a vast tundra, yet you're never more than an hour from lodging. The paved, 1,635-mile Great Northern Circle Route starts in Prince George, an hour by air (or eight by car) from Vancouver. Head north into the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area, a mountainous mega-wilderness seven times the size of Yellowstone. Lynx, caribou, bison, and grizzlies are often seen right by the road. Then you'll trace the Yukon border before following the blacktop south past volcanic Mount Edziza back to Prince George.



Great Bear Lodge local



Alfresco dining, BC style

PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRIAN FINESTONE; JAD DAVENPORT; TOM RIVEST/GREAT BEAR NATURE TOURS; JAD DAVENPORT; RICH WHEATER; MAPS BY JOYCE PENDOLA