

Variations on Vancouver

Outdoor enthusiasts and city dwellers find worthy pursuits in close proximity

By Jeff Frawley | Freelance Reporter

A spring adventure north of the United States means a chance to hit the mountain slopes for some University students. The drive north from Vancouver, British Columbia, to the ski lifts of Whistler resort provides countless breathtaking views of the snow-covered peaks that dominate the landscape of British Columbia.

But those who never leave the mountains may miss out on an entire region of outdoor pursuits and city exploration.

"No way — skiing isn't the only fun thing to do in Canada," said junior Scott Read, who drove to Vancouver with five other University students during spring break.

For every black diamond run, there exists a secluded shoreline in the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve waiting to be explored by sea kayak, a unique pub in downtown Vancouver or a whale-watching tour. British Columbia offers plenty of cheaper alternatives to pricey lift tickets and resort lodges for vacationing students.

Junior Kyle Busacker and two friends recently drove to his parents' cabin on remote Pender Island in the Gulf Islands off the coast of Vancouver.

The five major Gulf Islands jut out of the ocean like green mountains and are encircled by dozens of smaller islands. Although the islands receive less than 30 inches of rain per year, according to the Gulf Islands Guide's online travel manual, dense forests and expansive farmland blanket the landscape.

With a permanent residency of 2,000 people, Pender Island's population triples in the summer months, according to the island's tourism bureau.

"There is only one pub on Pender," Busacker said. "That's where everyone goes on weekend nights. Everyone knows each other."

But in mid-March, the island offered exactly what Busacker and his traveling partners wanted after finals

week: peace and quiet.

Accessible by two daily ferries from the town of Tsawwassen on mainland British Columbia, Pender Island is a remote paradise that offers plenty of recreation.

"We heard that the Gulf Islands were just as nice as the San Juan Islands but with less people," Busacker's father Brian Busacker said. "We fell in love with Pender Island ... because we have access to the ocean, sailing, fishing and crabbing, and there are more days of sun than in Vancouver."

Junior Francis Shonk, who accompanied Busacker, described watching a bald eagle hunt and kill a Canadian goose 100 yards away while playing golf in the island's lush farm country.

"The islands around Vancouver have so much wildlife," Shonk said. "There are seals, tons of deer, even whale watching. We saw at least 50 bald eagles on the trip, too."

Busacker said there are plenty of places to rent kayaks and scuba gear, as well as numerous cottages and provincial park campgrounds for visitors, on the Gulf Islands. Whale watching tours cost roughly \$80, according to tourism operator Adventure BC's Web site. Busacker said whales can be seen for free off the shores of the Gulf Islands.

Visitors should expect an hour-long ferry ride that costs between \$25 and \$35 per car, Busacker said. Otherwise, a trip to the island is extremely cheap, he added.

The dynamic downtown of Vancouver offers a variety of beautiful parks and a vivacious nightlife.

The city is home to the 1,000-acre Stanley Park, the largest urban park in Canada, according to Tourism Vancouver's "Official Visitor's Guide." A maze of walking paths and gardens weave through the park, which is also home to the Vancouver Aquarium.

"Stanley Park was the highlight of Vancouver," Read said. "There were trails leading everywhere. You could



Courtesy Jeff Frawley

Pender Island and surrounding islands have numerous campgrounds as well as rentals for kayaks and scuba gear.

spend three days there alone."

The Gastown area of Vancouver is known for its bars, unique coffee shops and stores. Read said there are many hostels in Gastown.

The Cambie House Hostel costs about \$15 per night and has its own restaurant and bar.

"(The hostel) gives you locks and lockers for your stuff," he said. "The front desk doesn't allow anyone not staying there to enter the rooms. Plus, the bed was more comfortable than my one at home."

Read estimated he spent \$230 during four nights in Vancouver but said the total could have been much more.

"During the day, there is a lot to just walk around and see downtown," he said. "But at night, drinking at the bars is pretty expensive. It's fun and easy to blow money. The trick is to limit yourself."

Read added that hockey was everywhere. He said one restaurant and bar had huge glass windows in place of walls that overlooked two

indoor hockey rinks. Tickets to watch the Vancouver Canucks, the city's professional hockey team, cost around \$30.

But perhaps what makes urban Vancouver so distinctive is its surrounding beauty — mountains, the Pacific Ocean and even a rainforest.

"Walking around a major city and seeing mountains everywhere made me feel like I was in a totally different place from the United States," Read said.

If travelers can't resist the allure of snow-covered summits, Whistler Resort is only a 2.5-hour drive away, and the cliff-side road that winds toward the resort overlooks majestic rock formations that emerge from the Pacific Ocean.

"Especially with a car, you can go to so many different places within a few hours," Read said. "There are the outdoors, the cities and the places to ski, all in the same area."

Jeff Frawley is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

Vancouver, B.C.: Pender Island

Eugene to Pender Island: About 420 miles; seven hours driving and a two-hour ferry ride

Eugene to Vancouver: About 425 driving miles; seven hours driving. Total expenses for a five-night stay: \$375, including gas, food, hostel, ferry ride, bar-hopping and one outdoor gear rental.

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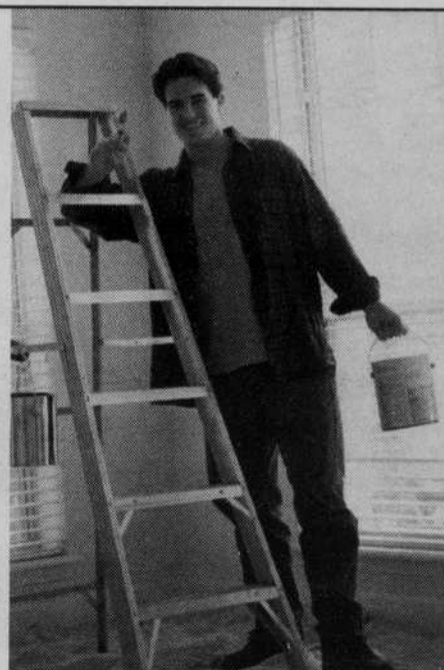
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