

Make waves at Oceanside

TRIPS WITH KIDS

Anna Rodrigues

Take three — days that is — to vacation on Vancouver Island's eastern shore, located two hours northeast of Victoria.

This region known as Oceanside has been nicknamed the Canadian Riviera by those in the know. With sandy beaches, rainforests and eccentric delights, it is a great place for a family holiday that won't be soon forgotten.

Here are three ways to spend your days:

Look up. Way up!

Upon entering the town of Coombs, visitors will come across this sign: Tourist Attraction — Goats on the Roof... the sign says goats! And that is exactly what it means.

Visit the Old Country Market and you can eat a generous meal while watching a family of goats nibble on the grass that is firmly planted on the roof of the building.

Kristian Graaten, founder of the Old Country Market, started the tradition in 1973 when a family of goats found themselves without a home after the annual Coombs Fall Fair wrapped up. His business already had grass on its roof, emulating homes in Norway so introducing the homeless creatures to the thatched roof made plain sense, at least to some anyway.

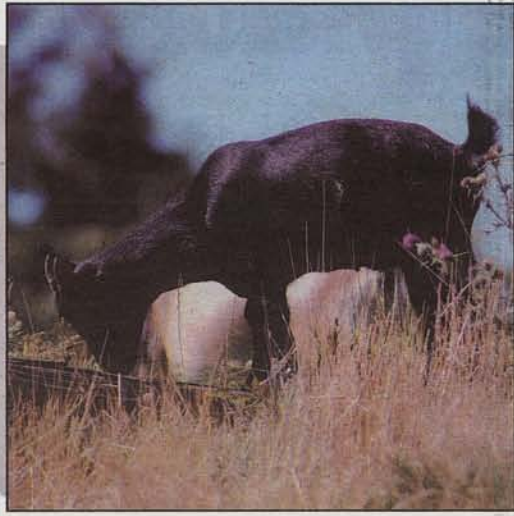
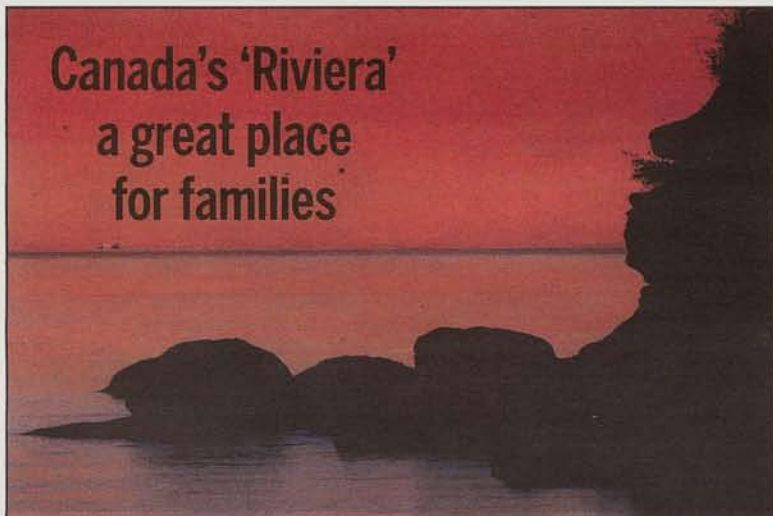
It turned out to be a stroke of genius and the goats are now the town's greatest tourist attraction. If visitors tire of watching the animals' antics, there is still a lot to see in the market and great food to try. The prices are reasonable, especially at the Gelato bar. Huge cones of delicious ice cream, available in an astounding 69 flavours, can be had for as little as \$3 each.

Sand and sunsets

Beachcombing becomes an extreme sport on the shores of Oceanside, with its 19 km of sandy beaches, ripe with a bounty of sea treasures.

Along with beautiful pieces of driftwood, collectors will find pearly white shells, colourful starfish and hermit crabs running for cover.

If you're tired of wandering the sands, there is still more to



PHOTOS BY PHIL RABY

Stunning sunsets are the norm around the Oceanside area of Vancouver Island, above left. A goat grazes on the grass roof of the Old Country Market, above. Four-year-old Madison, left, examines a shell she found while beachcombing at Parksville Beach.



momentarily plucked out of the darkness by the light of your headlamp.

Getting There

WestJet has daily non-stop flights to Victoria from Toronto. Contact 1-800-538-5696 or westjet.com. Oceanside is a two-hour drive from Victoria.

Accommodations

Pacific Shores Resort & Spa is located in the heart of Oceanside. A lakefront two bedroom condo (can sleep up to seven people) with a full kitchen, laundry and patio goes from \$190 (off peak) to \$315 (peak) per night.

Amenities include a pool, gym, playground, outdoor hot tubs and a fine dining restaurant. Tours of the gardens and aquariums are free to guests. The marine curator also has a weekly program for children. Contact 1-866-986-2222 or pacific-shores.com.

More information

Contact Tourism British Columbia at 1-800-Hello BC or hellobc.com. For details on Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park, see hornelake.com.

do at Oceanside's beaches.

Parksville Beach has a huge playground for the little ones, a BMX/skateboard park for teenagers and tennis courts for the adults. Qualicum Beach has great beachside seafood restaurants and events, such as "Tent Theatre," happening all year long.

And don't plan on leaving the beach too early, you wouldn't want to miss the spectacular sunsets served up on that side of the country. Grab a blanket, find a spot on

the beach and take in the sky bursting into a palette of colour to the sound of waves.

Going underground

Vancouver Island is known as spelunking central in Canada, home to the best and most accessible cave systems in the country. Part of that reputation comes from being the home to Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park, which was voted the Best Natural Outdoor Site in British Columbia by Attractions Canada.

Two caves are open for self-exploration but touring the main cave can only be done with an experienced guide.

These caves are in their natural state, meaning there are no exterior lights, the floors are uneven and there is a moderate amount of climbing that needs to be done.

The guides don't allow children under the age of 5 or those with limited mobility to enter. And claustrophobics definitely need not apply as there are tight spots to be

negotiated and lots of darkness, of course.

A miner's helmet and headlamp can be rented at the park office and the knowledgeable staff can provide all sorts of advice. The caves are cold, wet and muddy so dress warmly and be prepared to get dirty.

If caving isn't sounding like too much fun, just wait until you go underground.

Once inside a unique new world will unfold before you as funky rock patterns, crystal formations and fossils are