

KAMLOOPS
THIS WEEK

Spa delights and stalagmites

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Special to KTW

Sep 28 2007

Like a string of pearls, the sandy beaches on Vancouver Island's eastern shore lie nestled one after the other, perfect and pristine, and whose luster can only be realized by being set upon them.

The warm autumn days of the Parksville-Qualicum Beach area tease locals of an everlasting summer, often lasting well into October.

Kilometre-wide sandy beaches, crystalline caves and the ancient, lichen-covered cedars of Cathedral Grove are all within an hour's drive. Add spas, marinas and year-round golf to nature's splendour and you have a jewel of a destination.

Perched over the sheltered waters of Vancouver Island's Inside Passage and protected by Mt. Arrowsmith, Parksville, Qualicum Beach and the charming beachfront communities — referred to as the Oceanside region — has redefined the meaning of the three Rs.

One visit to the region, which also includes smaller communities such as Lighthouse Country, Nanoose Bay, French Creek and Arrowsmith Coombs Country, and you will feel relaxed, refreshed and renewed.

The region has 33 resorts, hotels and motels, nearly 30 bed and breakfasts and 32 vacation rental homes from which to choose. And the shoulder season from October to April offers attractive accommodation rates.

On the shore or by the sea, fall produces the kind of spectacular and majestic crimson sunsets worth writing home about.

While enjoying the colours of the countryside, visiting artisan bakeries, cheese makers or purveyors of exquisite culinary treasures, you'll find numerous restaurants to satisfy those tummy rumblings — from casual to gourmet, from Asian to Irish.

For revitalizing the body, nothing beats a few hours at a spa.

At Tigh-Na-Mara's Grotto Spa, you may wish to revel in the invigorating and unique 2,500-square-foot Grotto Mineral Bath, with its two-storey cascading waterfall.

Nineteen kilometres of sandy beaches to stroll, the country's mildest climate and the island's lowest annual rainfall make the Canadian Riviera a natural for beachcombing, bird-watching and boating.

The protected waters of eastern Vancouver Island have been rated the No. 1 spot in the world "for value and healthiest marine environment" by Scuba Diving magazine.

It's rare when Mother Earth invites us deep into her home.

The Horne Lake Caves, at 1,219 metres long and containing more than 1,000 spelunking destinations, are believed to be the longest-measured natural caves in B.C.

The largest grotto, Riverbend, is 387 metres long and features a seven-storey waterfall.

These caves are ranked among the most significant and spectacular in the world and are a terrific family destination.

You'll be sure to marvel over the variety of rock formations such as cave pearls, brain coral and bacon strips. Other formations have been affectionately named after their appearance — Howling Wolf and Smiling Buddha.

The park is open year-round with opportunities for family-guided tours or even more advanced night-time caving.

Even on the topside, Mother Earth doesn't fail to impress.

Renowned Cathedral Grove in MacMillan Park provides access to the forest giants.

Douglas firs more than 1,000 years old and ancient Western Red Cedars are easily studied from a network of trails in this park.

Oceanside is a treasure chest of unforgettable scenery and romantic memories: cosy and tastefully rustic accommodations complemented by a radiant landscape adorned and hued by nature.

The area's earthly pleasures don't go south for the winter, but offer a warm autumn escape.

IF YOU GO: Oceanside Tourism Association, 1-888-799-3222 or 250-248-6300;
www.visitparksvillequalicumbeach.com

Tourism British Columbia, 1-800-435-5622; www.hellobc.com.