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Bikes and Birdies on Vancouver Island

BY ANDREW PENNER

After wheeling through the fast corners and cool rock drops on a trail called “Sofa King,” we stopped at a junction and debated where to go next. A sweet-looking blue trail – called “Fun” – careened off a little knoll into the moss-smothered forest. “The idea is to do these trails back to back,” says my riding partner, Chris, with a smirk. “You tend to get a very nice result.”

Of course, creative verbiage aside, the end result of any Vancouver Island getaway tends to be, well, enjoyment. And use whatever adjectives you want. But, as I recently found out, when you pair your mountain biking with a little golf, well, it’s ear-to-ear grinning (with a little grunting thrown in for good measure) all day long.

And, make no mistake, if you’re going to dabble in both disciplines, Vancouver Island is about as good a place as any. Long considered a mountain biking Mecca, “the Island” has also been one of Canada’s most sought after “birdie” destinations. Areas such as Victoria (home to the two eye-popping Nicklaus designs at Bear Mountain), the Cowichan Valley, and the Courtney/Campbell River region (home to a couple of spectacular “in nature” layouts), are three golf hotspots that immediately come to mind.

Of course, the palpable West Coast culture (or is that “left” coast culture?) on Vancouver Island (think laid back, good coffee, good craft beer, vibrant arts scene, surfing, hippies, herbs, etc.) tends to make whatever you do just an easy-going, catching-waves kinda thing, dude.

But I get it, Spicoli. At first glance, combining golf and mountain biking may not seem like a match made in heaven. After all, they’re vastly different. One is physically intense, a mud-and-sweat-filled foray with risks. The other is relaxing (allegedly) with far less physical exertion required. If you ask me, they’re both awesome. And I’d say that a perfect day of recreating can be had by going for a morning blast through the berms, then a short midday break, followed by a relaxing afternoon round of golf on a beautiful course.

For four days on Vancouver Island, I did just that. Based in the Victoria area at Bear Mountain, I didn’t need to go far for either. A couple of excellent intermediate flow

trails, jump lines, and a feature-filled jump park are situated right at the base of the newly-renovated, five-star Westin Bear Mountain Golf Resort & Spa.

In terms of the golf, there isn’t a better 36-hole golf facility on Vancouver Island than Bear Mountain. The original Mountain course here, which was co-designed by Jack Nicklaus and his son, Steve, is a riveting rip along the mountain (sounds like a good mountain bike ride!) that incorporates huge elevation changes, rugged rock outcroppings, deep ravines, big forced carries, and a sweet island green hole that’s reminiscent of the 17th at TPC Sawgrass. In other words, you will need your “A” game.

The second course at Bear Mountain, the beautiful Valley Course, has a kinder persona and it is, for me, a clear-cut favourite on the island. Numerous holes plunge down cedar and arbutus-lined corridors, cross rocky creeks, and end with bunker-framed greens that undulate like the mountains that frame them.

Also, for additional riding, Victoria’s crown jewel for mountain biking, Hartland Mountain, which is home to awesome old-school trails that dip and dive over exposed rock, is just 20 minutes away. (And, yes, in my next life I’d be happy to just ride “Sofa King” and “Fun” over and over again.)

Another awesome place to ride in the area – and proof of how explosive the growth of mountain biking has been in this region – is the hot-off-the-press Jordie Lunn Bike Park, which is just down the hill from Bear Mountain in Langford. Numerous flow trails, jump lines, pump tracks, progressive drops, wooden features, and techy descents are found at this park. It is, hands down, the best bike park I’ve ever come across.

For more golf in Victoria, the sneaky-good Olympic View Golf Club should definitely be on your itinerary. It also features undulant fairways that careen through magnificent arbutus and mossy rock outcroppings. Highland Pacific, which is also within 15 minutes of Bear Mountain, is another course that’s worthy of an 18-hole adventure. Not surprisingly, plenty of elevation change, exposed rock, and a wilderness-like feel are characteristics at Highland Pacific as well.

Just 45 minutes from Victoria, the beautiful Cowichan Valley presents more biking and birdie opportunities. And, if you want to extend your stay for a few more days, it’s the obvious choice.

On my recent trip, after playing extensively in Victoria, I drove the scenic Malahat Highway to the Cowichan Golf Club for some peaceful parkland golf in the morning followed by a roller coaster ride at the popular Mount Tzouhalem trail network near the town of Duncan.

Originally designed by the prolific Pacific Northwest architect, A.V. Macan, in 1947, Cowichan Golf Club is an underrated tree-lined layout with plenty of character and old-school charm. Small greens, numerous doglegs, and plenty of towering trees invite the near-forgotten art of shaping shots. A visit to this club is definitely a memorable trip back in time.

In the afternoon I met up with Grant Lestock-Kay, the owner of Cowichan Cycles, for an awesome, two-hour ride at one of the island's best networks, Mount Tzouhalem. After a scenic 40-minute climb, Lestock-Kay, an accomplished rider and downhill racer, led the way along a steep-and-ragged descent on Rocky Mountain Ridge followed by a crazy-fast plummet down the bumpy Double D flow trail.

"This is probably the most popular downhill trail on the entire island," he said as we stopped to catch our breath halfway down.

"I'm not surprised," I said, grinning from ear to ear. "This is about as much fun as I've ever had on a bike."

On my return to Bear Mountain – four rides and four rounds into my trip – it was firmly embedded in my mind that, yes, like wine and cheese, beer and nachos, pairing mountain biking with golf makes for a decadent little feast.

Especially on Vancouver Island.

...when you pair your mountain biking with a little golf, well, it's ear-to-ear grinning (with a little grunting thrown in for good measure)



The par-5 opening hole on the Valley Course at Bear Mountain Resort.



Grant Lestock-Kay riding berms at Mount Tzouhalem in Duncan, B.C.



The par-5 ninth at Cowichan Golf Club.