



Sidney B.C. offers its share of stories

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More from Jane Mundy

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Blue Dog Kayaking offers an adventurous way to see Sidney. Blue Dog Kayaking

I've driven back and forth to Victoria from the Swartz Bay ferry terminal countless times and never stopped at Sidney— until a friend moved there. What a pleasant surprise to discover that this charming seaside town deserves much more than a glance from your car window.

This community of about 12,000 has long been a magnet for retirees, but that's changing. "More young people and young families are moving here. I meet newcomers in the dog park and they're mainly from Vancouver," said Brenda Craig, who moved to "Sidney-by-the-Sea" mainly for its affordability. But after living here for two years she finds there's more to offer than the price of real estate.

"There's live music Friday nights and a jazz band plays Saturdays," said Craig. And weather permitting, there's music in the park Sundays. "But for the most part it's quiet here, and that's what we want. Everything I need is within walking distance. I can walk to the movie theatre, a good restaurant along the downtown waterfront and the pub. I feel safe here."

It took me several hours strolling along the town's main street, Beacon Avenue, and side streets to the oceanfront walkway and marina. Sidney, aka Booktown, is a bibliophile's heaven with six independently owned bookstores. Tanner's is the only shop that stocks just new books. Beacon Books, spread over 3,600 square feet, is Canada's answer to Portland's Powell's Books. There's the Haunted Bookshop with some rare collections and for history buffs, check out The Military & History Bookshop and Galleon Books and Antiques.

Canada's first self-proclaimed destination book town has modelled itself on a version of Hay-on-Wye in Wales that has about 40 bookstores. Each spring the ancient village of 1,500 residents hosts one of the world's largest literary festivals, and Sidney's next Literary Festival takes place this September.

Sandwiched between bookstores are numerous thrift stores that locals downsizing keep well stocked with collectibles. I rummaged around Animals for Life Charity Store that (sadly) also sells pet accessories. Along with a dog leash I also found a Depression glass vase. And Beacon Hill Community Services has three shops including The Annex, in a white cottage on Third Street.

Of course there's more to do than poke around shops. Kids love the hands-on aquarium at the Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea, located at the Sidney Pier Building on the waterfront. Actually, adults love it too—the intertidal exhibits are excellent. And this seaside town is in the middle of resident orca feeding grounds, so chances are you won't be disappointed with whale watching.

A short walk-on ferry takes you to Sidney Spit and the north end of Sidney Island. Here you can stroll tidal flats and salt marshes, teeming with birds and marine life. On the northwest side of the island was a large First Nations settlement and places of cultural and spiritual significance. And campsites allow overnight stays (reservations required).

If you want to explore further, Blue Dog Kayaking offers a "Gulf Islands Day Paddle".

If you're a novice and want to get serious about kayaking, owner Dave Nichols suggests taking a basic skills course. "Over one day you'll learn basic paddling strokes, injury prevention and safety," said Nichols. "Or do a shoreline paddle with an experienced and certified guide—either a morning wildlife watching tour or sunset paddle. We seldom get wind in the evening so it's an ideal time for novice paddlers." For more experienced paddlers, the "Weekend Explorer" starts Friday afternoon, camps two nights and comes back Sunday night.

My camping days are behind me so I checked into the Brentwood Bay Resort and Spa. (Heading south to Victoria, take the Saanichton exit and follow the ferry signs to Mill Bay.) This sleek lodge with its soaring floor-to-ceiling windows is nestled into the forested shoreline. Each suite has an ocean views and gas fireplace and the pool is heated year-round.

The Sidney Pier Hotel also has ocean views and it's pet-friendly. The lobby and atrium, known by residents as Sidney's living room, is a gathering place for the community, including canines, with that "home away from home" atmosphere. Actually, the whole town has that vibe.

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- Mark Loria - Executive Director at Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea
Please note that the Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre name is no longer used and incorrectly named in this article. The Centre was renamed as Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea almost a year ago - see salishseacentre.org for more information.
Like Reply - Apr 18, 2017 11:17am
- Jane Mundy - Freelance Writer at Self-Employed
Thanks Mark and apologies, but the Centre was online as this name.
Like Reply - Apr 19, 2017 11:02am
- Graham Bell - Oak Bay, British Columbia
It's hard to understand Mark's criticism when, as you say, the name is not only used on their website but his post even shows him as the executive director of the same named organization.
Like Reply - Apr 20, 2017 6:00am
- Graham Bell - Oak Bay, British Columbia
Looks like everyone has made some changes and this whole discussion is moot.
Like Reply - Apr 20, 2017 9:09am

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