



Cowichan Bay Marina is a great launching point for the Gulf Islands and eastern shores of Vancouver Island. PHOTOS: JANE MUNDY

SLOW DOWN FOR COWICHAN

Unwind with fabulous food, wine and easy adventure in this lovely region of Vancouver Island

JANE MUNDY

If you need to unwind, calm down and enjoy local food and wine and a few soft adventures, head over to Cowichan. Or maybe you're thinking about a short romantic getaway that's nearby and won't break the bank: Here's a plan.

Because we caught the last ferry from Tsawwassen to Swartz Bay — too tired to drive another hour to Cowichan — we stayed the night at Moon Water Lodge on the Malahat. With the gas fireplace flickering and the soaker tub for two sprinkled with aromatic bath salts, we watched the sun rise and a stunning view of the Saanich Peninsula from our picture window.

Then the highway traffic buzz started — one reason to get an early start. Another reason was a birdwatching paddle with Coastal Bliss Adventures at Cowichan Bay.

We nestled into the double kayak and Georgia Newsome guided us around Cowichan Estuary, pointing out kingfishers and killdeer on the sandy bank and osprey nests on pylons (Georgia said kayakers sometimes see orcas in the bay.)

This seaside town is also known as North America's first "Cittaslow" (literally "slow-city," a slow-food destination that improves quality of life by slowing down the pace) and True Grain Bread is slow food central. Their breads are all made with B.C. grain and milled at True Grain Mill. After trying a perfect cinnamon bun and apple strudel, and inspired by this old-world European bakery, I bought two kilos each of B.C. whole grain Khorasan and Red Fife flour, remembering how a baker said, "all-purpose flour has no purpose."

Also fronting the marina and brightly coloured float homes is Wild Coast Perfumery, where owner and perfumer Laurie Arbuthnot concocts "scent memories" of B.C. locations. Her blending lab features bottles of natural plant essences and distillations from local flora she forages, such as red cedar, Douglas fir and lichen (referred to as oak moss by those with trained noses.)

After a spritz of "Whistler" for him and "Saltspring" for me, we carried our purchases next door to the Shipyard Gallery, showcasing renowned artist Arthur Vickers.

The gallery is also a gathering place, where you chat and maybe discuss art from comfy armchairs. Vickers believes that his ancestors and their teachings have guided him to create his art, including his gold works and wood carvings, all of which are from fallen trees.

"When a hurricane hits, you can find trees that have been buried for hundreds of years," he says. Ask Vickers to take you downstairs to his workshop where he lifts and lids of a 1,500-year-old bent box and invites you to smell. Then compare the heady aroma to the 700-year-



Falconry 101 gets you up close to these birds of prey at The Raptors.

old "youngster" cedar box. "When a Japanese group smelled the boxes they got down on their hands and knees in reverence to the ancestors."

The Cowichan Valley is home to several award-winning wineries. Following the wine route signs along winding country roads flanked by forest and clearings with rows of vines to Unsworth Vineyards, we really slowed down at their elegant yet unpretentious restaurant, housed in a restored early 1900s farmhouse.

Jenny, our server, suggested we begin with Charme De L'Île, a lovely bubbly. We lounged on the patio, overlooking 12 acres of vineyards, and watched chickens rummaging between the vines.

Onward to Pinot Noir with local wild mushrooms and the most amazing two-day ferment pizza crust with tomatoes roasted in their Forno oven and cheese from cows down the road.

After we purchased a few bottles of Pinot Gris, Cowichan River Lodge beckoned. Perched on one of the best trout rivers in North America, this is the epitome of rest and relaxation. We strolled the grounds, hearing only songbirds and the running river (fly-fishing lessons and gear can be arranged).

After a hearty breakfast we headed to Duncan, 35 kilometres away. If you're here on a Saturday, stock up at the Farmers' Market — Vancouver Island producers and artisans are growing just about every seasonal fruit and vegetable imaginable. If not, lunch under a huge grapevine at the Ainslee — good food and service with a decent local wine selection.

Next up: The Raptors, for a flying demonstration starring a bald eagle, turkey vulture and peregrine falcon showing off. (As of June, The Raptors is open for pre-booked admission only.)

"Our only, Spitfire, was born and raised here and also works as a bouncer at the Vancouver airport,"



Kayaking the Cowichan Estuary, noting the kingfishers and killdeer as we go.



The stops along the route, a journey of some remarkable sights and experiences.

bird trainer Calista says, laughing. "All our birds at the flying demos were raised and hatched by humans, and we also house a lot of rescue raptors."

We reserved a "Closest Encounter" that includes a walk through the woods with raptors (they fly free-range) who fly down to alight on your gloved hand.

We had a fabulous dinner at Bridgemans Bistro. This gorgeous building with floor to ceiling glass guarantees views of Mill Bay from every seat.

Over cocktails and a huge bowl of freshest clams and mussels with chorizo — a nice touch by their Chilean chef — we watched paddle boarders glide into the sunset with dogs on-board, and sailboats slip into the marina. The steak and halibut were perfectly cooked and I overheard many 'oohs' and 'ahs' from nearby tables.

Then I noticed a man on his knees, proposing: she said yes, to a round of cheers. We made a toast to Cowichan and slow living. What an enchanting evening. Visit tourismcowichan.com for more information.

The writer was a guest of Tourism Cowichan which neither read nor approved this article before publication.



A bald eagle puts on a flying demo at The Raptors.