

The Vancouver Sun (Vancouver, BC)		Order/Commande
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ON THE ROAD TO SPRING

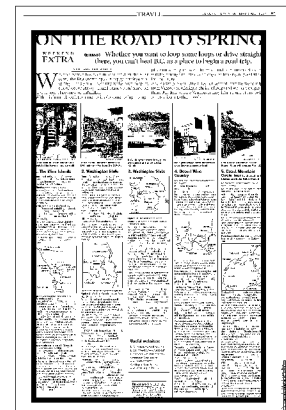
GETAWAYS | Whether you want to loop some loops or drive straight there, you can't beat B.C. as a place to begin a road trip.

BY PAUL AND LORIE BENNETT

Whether winter has been mild or wild on the west coast, the first snowdrops are happy harbingers of spring. The sight of these tiny white buds popping out of wet or snowy ground primes wanderlust, an urge to seek places new or unfamiliar.

With this in mind, we let our memories do some roving through pleasant spring trips of the past, and our fingers do some walking through the aisles of Google to investigate possibilities for the future.

And so we present itineraries for several long-weekend trips from Vancouver, offering a choice of loops to loop on a couple of them. Readers outside Vancouver may join a route at any point or refashion it to their needs.





MARINE HARTLINE/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

A colourful mural in Chemainus depicts the town's first sawmill.

1. The Wine Islands

Route: Saltspring Island, Vancouver Island then north to Chemainus, Cedar and Nanaimo or south through the Cowichan Valley to Victoria.

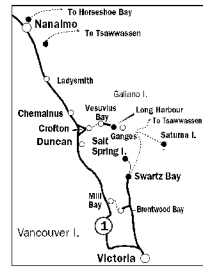
Wineries: www.wineislands.ca

Saltspring Island's 10,000 residents share the rolling landscape with several thousand sheep and too many deer. The ferry from Vancouver berths at Long Harbour, a five-minute drive from Ganges, the main town.

Hastings House Hotel's British-style manor house and outbuildings overlook peaceful Ganges Harbour. From here, both land and water offer opportunities for exploration. It reopens March 14. www.hastingshouse.com

The island's famous Village Market will be open every Saturday from March 22 through late October. Here you'll find a "homespun guarantee." Vendors must make it, bake it, or grow it themselves. www.satspringmarket.com

A short drive up Saltspring, the Vesuvius ferry sails to Crofton on Vancouver Island.



Option A: From here, drive north to Chemainus and Nanaimo or south through the Cowichan Valley to Victoria. Chemainus, known for its murals, shops, restaurants and first-rate Chemainus Theatre, is 10 minutes north on Hwy 14 from Crofton. www.chemainus.com. Just north of Ladysmith, turn right on to bucolic Cedar Road and follow signs to the Crow and Gate Pub for a pint and traditional fare in surroundings that are ever so British. www.crowandgate.com.

Option B: South from Crofton, the Cowichan Valley's emphasis on agri-tourism invites visitors to savour local cheeses, meat, produce and fine wines. Saturday mornings, try the Farmers' Marketplace in Duncan's Fairgrounds. www.cowichan.ca

Our favourite stops include Merrilade Estate Cider and its bistro, La Pommerate, www.merrilade.com, and Fairburn Farm, the culinary retreat and guest house where the winemaking water buffalo live. www.fairburnfarm.bc.ca

On Cowichan Bay's colourful waterfront, Hilary's Cheese Company shares retail space with True Grain Bakery. The Masthead Restaurant, set in the 145-year-old Columbia Hotel building, offers fine dining. www.themastheadrestaurant.com.

From here, it's south over scenic Malahat Drive to Victoria and a dogging north through the Seawich Peninsula to Swartz Bay—or cross Saanich Inlet on the Mill Bay Ferry, billed as the "world's most beautiful shortcut."



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

The historic Fairhaven district of Bellingham dates from the 1880s.

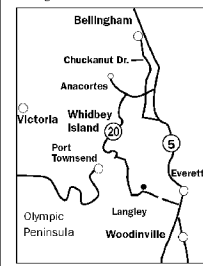
2. Washington State

Route: Bellingham, the Skagit Valley Bellingham's revived waterfront features trendy restaurants, shops and marinas. The Bellwether Hotel overlooks the activity—you'll know it by the attached three-story light-house suite. www.hotelbellwether.com

In the 1880s, Bellingham's Fairhaven area was touted to be the next Chicago. Superb red brick mansions survive in this historic district that's bustling once again. Stone sidewalk markers and brass plaques recall the past. www.bellingham.org

Scenic Chuckanut Drive (Hwy 11) winds south from Fairhaven along high forested cliffs with sea glimpses to the San Juan Islands. www.chuckanutdrive.com

Down from the cliffs and west along Hwy 20, pastoral farmlands spread through the Skagit Valley, where the 25th annual Tulip Festival will be held in April. Hundreds of hectares will be in bloom, an awesome springtime sight. www.tulipfest-trol.org



From here, there are again two options:

Option A: Whidbey, Woodinville and Wine Hwy 20 crosses Deception Pass on to Whidbey Island and meanders south past grazing cattle and quaint barns. Beside the wine-tasting room at Greenbank Farm lies Whidbey Pies Café, renowned for its ganaberry pie. www.whidbeyeyecanadainlands.com

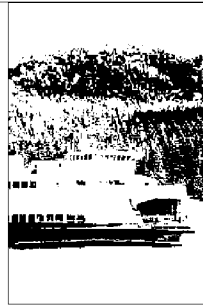
The Inn at Langley on Whidbey Island offers water views from all rooms and a funky town to explore. On weekend evenings, Chef Matt Costello hosts a six-course dinner in his open kitchen. www.innatlangley.com

In 1923, Seattle lumber baron Frederick Stinson built a country home near Woodinville, northeast of Seattle. His manor house survives at Château Ste. Michelle, one of nearly 30 wineries in the area.

Willows Lodge, built of old-growth fir reclaimed from a favoured Oregon oregon dock and state of pool tables from B.C. taverns, sprawls comfortably nearby. www.willowslodge.com

On the property are two outstanding restaurants. The Barking Frog is an elegantly casual bistro featuring country fresh Northwest cuisine paired with wines primarily from Washington's vineyards. The Herbfarm's food, wine, elegant setting, and impeccable service are orchestrated to create a nine-course gastronomic theatre. As a forerunner, diners tour the 19,000-bottle wine cellar and learn about the evening's offerings. www.theherfarm.com

The I5 freeway heads straight back to Vancouver, unless you stop at one of the casinos or duty-free shops along the way.



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

A Washington state ferry plies the waters in the San Juan Islands.

3. Washington State



Option B: The scenic San Juan Islands. **Route:** Anacortes, San Juan Islands, Washington state ferries will resume service between Anacortes, Wash., and Sidney, B.C., March 30, offering a leisurely sail through the scenic San Juan Islands. We've never stopped to explore, so can only offer a few internet sites and let you discover the journey for yourselves.

Unless you know how to unravel complex schedules, be sure to click on Washington State Ferries website's (see above) New Schedule Tool once you've selected a route. Or ask Island Time Travel's concierge to plot your route, reserve accommodation and activities (for a fee). www.islandtime-travel.net

San Juan Archipelago is split between Canada's Gulf Islands and the United States' San Juan Islands. There are over 450 islands in the archipelago at high tide, but fewer than 75 are inhabited.

The three main San Juan Islands are Lopez (76 sq km, population 2,400), Orcas (147 sq km, population 4,900) and San Juan (143 sq km, population 7,500). Each offers accommodation, restaurants and a wide range of activities.

Sidney is a bustling waterfront community with a large marina and the glitzy new Sidney Pier Hotel. It's close to Butchart Gardens and the popular sights of downtown Victoria. B.C. Ferries travels between Swartz Bay and Tsawwassen, south of Vancouver.

Useful websites:

B.C. Tourism: www.hellobc.com

B.C. Highways: www.drivebc.com

B.C. Ferries: www.bcferries.com

Washington State Tourism: www.tourism.wa.gov

Washington State Ferries: www.wsdot.wa.gov/ferrries



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

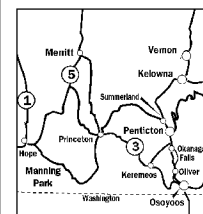
The Spirit Ridge hotel and resort is on Osoyoos reserve land.

4. Desert Wine

Route: Hope, Princeton and Keremeos to Osoyoos.

Return on the same route or via Peniticon and Merritt:

Hope, 150 km east of Vancouver, is a former Hudson's Bay fort and gold rush town whose story can be found at the Hope Museum. Boasting to be Canada's chainsaw carving capital, it sports two dozen large wooden wildlife sculptures downtown. The Home Restaurant on the Old Hope-Princeton Way is our favourite for its, yup, down-home cooking and friendly atmosphere.



Heading east, Manning Provincial Park's diverse ecology offers year-round recreational opportunities and a full-service resort. www.manningpark.com

Princeton and Keremeos are agricultural communities in the Similkameen Valley with quaint downtowns worth exploring. Keremeos has one of the few operating grist mills in North America, a water-diven flour mill built in 1877.

The historic Mascot Mine in Hedley opens for its spectacular tours in May, but meantime if you look up, way up, you might spot some of its buildings clinging to the mountainside. www.mascotmine.com

Osoyoos, surrounded by golf courses, orchards and vineyards, is growing as a retirement community. It's billed as Desert Wine Country, with one of the only deserts in Canada, the lowest rainfall, the highest temperatures, and the warmest lakes.

We choose to stay at the Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort, operated by Bellstar Properties on reserve land leased from the enterprising Osoyoos First Nation. NK'Mip Cellars, in a spectacular building overlooking the lake and vineyards, offers tastings, food and wine sales. The regional menu inspires exploration of NK'Mip's signature Chardonnay and Merlot wines. www.spiritridge.ca

The adjoining nine-hole Sonora Dunes Golf Course boasts challenging terrain. Hazards include ball-gulping gopher holes and rattler-infested roughs. www.sonoradunes.com

The NK'Mip Desert Cultural Centre's concrete rammed-earth walls echo the layers of the land. Here history meets science. Discover fascinating facts about the desert and share in the rich living culture of the Okanagan people. www.nkmpdesert.com

The Toasted Oak Wine Bar, Grill and extensively-stocked VQA wine store in Oliver, 21 km north of Osoyoos, is worth a stop if you're heading home through Peniticon, or a short side-trip if you're not. www.winecountrycanada.com



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Hell's Gate Airtram over the Fraser River will reopen April 11.

5. Coast Mountain

Circle Tour (with a detour to Clinton and Echo Valley Ranch)

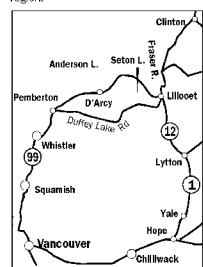
Route: Hope, Fraser Canyon, Cache Creek, Clinton.

Return via Lillooet, Pemberton, Whistler and the Sea-to-Sky Highway

At Hope, Hwy 1 swings north into the spectacular Fraser Canyon where the town of Yale, founded as a Hudson's Bay fort in 1848, was the bustling steamship navigation capital during the Gold Rush. Its Church of St. John the Divine, the oldest church in B.C., was built in 1863 to serve fortune seekers heading to Barkerville.

Hell's Gate Airtram and fishway, where you can see how the salmon get upstream to spawn, will reopen April 11. During railway construction in 1913, this became an impassable barrier and entire runs couldn't spawn. www.hellsgateairtram.com

From Cache Creek, turn north on Hwy 97 into the rolling scenery of the Cariboo region.



Cariboo Lodges in the centre of Clinton is a fine base from which to explore the area's attractions, including Chasmi Provincial Park, a chain of fish-filled lakes, and several dude ranches.

About 45 minutes northwest of Clinton, Echo Valley Ranch and Spa is a combination of working property, dude ranch and, surprisingly, a Thai village. Guests can enjoy a trail ride, then be pampered with a traditional massage by a delightful Thai lass wielding bags of warm herbs. It reopens April 1.

The family-style kitchen produces hearty, healthy meals featuring ranch-grown produce, including turkey. Guests around the dining table when we stayed were from Texas, Scotland and Calgary. www.evanch.ca

We head to Whistler via scenic Duffey Lake Road, dodging motorcyclists who love the curves. At historic Pemberton Hotel we feast on the kind of Canadian breakfast the traveller can survive on all day. Its relaxed attitude on a Sunday morning evokes the 1960s. Its booths are probably from that era, too.

Whistler is a great attraction in all seasons. The spring skiing is superb and may run as late as June. Pre-Olympic events coincide with the annual festival of music, sports, art and culture April 11-20. Among new buildings, the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, which will hold a Class A museum, an 80-seat theatre, and a gift gallery, is to open in June. www.slcc.ca

All too soon, it's time to face the traffic and construction on the Sea-to-Sky Highway, undergoing a major upgrade for the 2010 Winter Olympics, pull into the home caport, and dream of future getaways.