

next stop

DESTINATION:

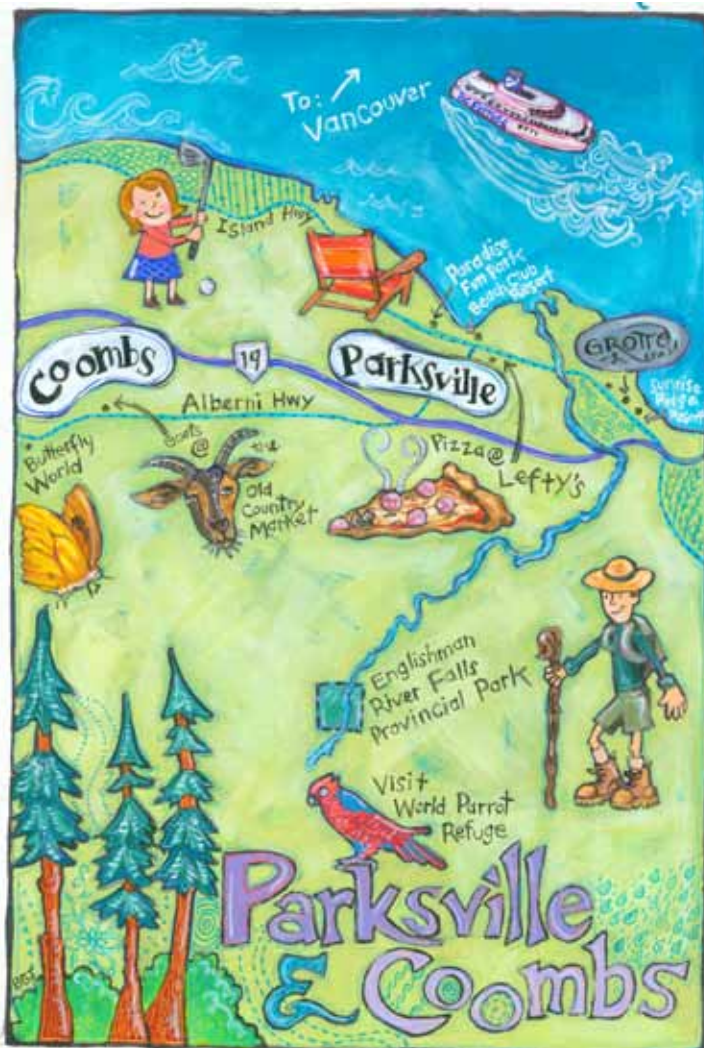
PARKSVILLE & COOMBS

Explore the beauty and charm of these neighboring Vancouver Island towns

by Leslie Forsberg

a deluge of warm water pouring over a two-story-high rock rim pummels my shoulders, an aquatic massage. Followed by long soaks in soothing mineral water and a cool pool plunge at Vancouver Island's Grotto Spa at Tigh-Na-Mara Resort, I've left behind the workday world and am ready to enjoy all that the Parksville area offers getaway travelers. Vacationers flock to this recreation capital north of Nanaimo to enjoy summertime warmth, a legion of family attractions from mini-golf to wildlife parks, and the ever-captivating mountain and ocean scenery. Deluxe lodgings and spas broaden the appeal to adult travelers.

The water in the shallow bay here recedes many hundreds of feet with each tidal change, revealing a half-mile-wide beach, the focal point of any summertime visit. When kids tire of building sand castles and swimming, miniature golf is immensely popular; Paradise Fun Park, my teenage daughter's favorite (where she always gets to razz me



about lost balls), features ponds and waterfalls amid whimsical settings, and Riptide Lagoon Adventure Golf offers a "mountain" course and a "lagoon" course.

Six miles west of Parksville, the tiny community of Coombs, with its trademark goats grazing on the turf roof of the Old Country Market (a traditional ice-cream stop) is a venerable tourist magnet. Yet we visit Coombs for a much different reason. The squawks and screeches of parrots give a jungle-like feel before we even walk in the door of the World Parrot Refuge, a massive, light-filled aviary housing more than 700 rescued parrots. The birds, in a confetti-like array of colors, socialize, feed and fly freely in the 23,000-square-foot heated indoor space. It's heart-breaking to know that all of these birds were once aban-

doned, yet seeing the care they get makes the visit worthwhile.

Yet more colorful, free-flying denizens can be found at the nearby Butterfly World and Gardens, where brilliant clouds of butterflies flit through lush foliage amid ponds and waterfalls.

My favorite waterfall is nearby, at Englishman River Falls Provincial Park, a sylvan setting with magnificent cedar and hemlock trees. Here, the river takes an astounding 90-degree turn as it plummets into a slot canyon only 15 feet wide. Below the lower falls, a deep, clear pool forms an idyllic swimming hole beneath a waterfall—this one natural, and every bit as appealing as at the Grotto Spa.



The Grotto Spa at Tigh-Na-Mara Resort.



Regional cuisine at The Landing West Coast Grill in Parksville.

SLEEP:

Sunrise Ridge Resort (www.sunriseridge.ca) has large suites with beautiful furnishings and gorgeous kitchens, perfect for families.

Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort (www.tighnamara.com) is a luxury accommodation with everything from traditional log cabins to ocean-view suites.

The new Beach Club Resort (www.beachclubbc.com) has 140 spacious, elegant suites overlooking Georgia Strait.

EAT:

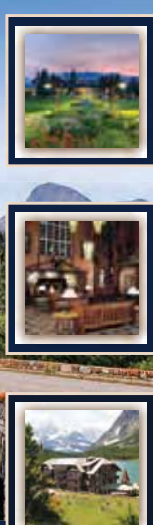

Lefty's Fresh Food Restaurant (www.leftys.tv), a local hangout, features upscale burgers and imaginative pizzas.

The Landing West Coast Grill (www.landinggrill.com) offers regional cuisine with a Mediterranean twist. A heated outdoor patio and gorgeous ocean views create a natural ambience.

GETTING THERE:

BC Ferries (www.bcferries.com) provides service to Nanaimo, 22 miles southeast of Parksville. 

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BREATHTAKING





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