

# Hidden Gems of Vancouver Island

~ Written by Kim of Vancouver Island View ~

## #1 Hole in the Wall - Port Alberni

Just off the highway before you enter the town of Port Alberni, there is a historic landmark one should see. Prior to the 1967 amalgamation of Port Alberni, this area served as a shortcut for the water supply to town. The hole was blasted through a massive wall of volcanic shale and served as the town's water reservoir. Today there isn't much left to indicate that this landmark served any purpose, but it does leave us with a truly unique structure to marvel at.

If you continue along Roger Creek, you will also come to an area of full of man-made stone creations, otherwise known as Inuksuk. And for those of you who just can't get enough of waterfalls, if you follow the trail back up the hill (the way you came), instead of turning right to go back to your vehicle, turn left and follow the trail until you hear more rushing water (about another 15 minute walk). There you will find a roped trail that leads you down to another shoreline where you will be able to view the stunning waterfall pictured below.

### Getting There:

The entrance to the trail for the Hole in the Wall is unmarked, but it is across the highway from Coombs Country Candy. If there is room you can park in the small pullout on the main highway, and the trail head will be immediately to your right. Otherwise, you can park in the gravel parking lot beside Coombs Country Candy and walk across the highway to the start of the trail (please be careful when crossing the highway!!). Once you get down the first short incline (from the highway) there is a small sign that indicates "Hole in the Wall". Continue to follow the signs to find your way.

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** The Hole in the Wall trail is **not** stroller or wheel-chair friendly. It has a fairly steep terrain with many small creek beds you must maneuver around.

**Dog Friendly?:** We didn't notice any signs about keeping your dog on a leash, so I will leave that discretion up to you.

**Length of Trail:** It takes approximately 15 minutes to get to the Hole in the Wall. The trail continues on for those who wish to go further (as mentioned above), and I encourage you to do so!



## #2 - Wacky Woods - Fanny Bay

This four acres of woodland in the heart of Fanny Bay is a sight to behold. Scattered throughout this privately owned land are hundreds of pieces of art created by the renowned Vancouver Island artists George Sawchuk (now deceased). The forest is open to anyone who wishes to enter this magical, unique world of Sawchuk's somewhat political observations of life represented through art. This treasure-trove is a place you can spend hours wandering around. Your brain will become tired from trying to interpret the message being conveyed at each stop, but your curiosity will be at its peak as you meander throughout this very unique outdoor gallery.

### Getting There:

There is no official address for the Wacky Woods. It does, however, have two access points. Both can be found using the reference point of the Fanny Bay Community Centre (7793 Island Hwy S, Fanny Bay).

Access point #1: When you see the Fanny Bay Community Centre, turn onto Ships Point Road. From there, turn left onto Little Way, and then left again on Bates Drive. Follow Bates drive until the very end. There will be an unmarked trailhead on your right hand side. This access point gives you the closest entry into the Wacky Woods. A few steps into the trail and you will officially be in the heart of the magic.

Access point #2: Head north on Highway 19A (past the Fanny Bay Community Hall) and look for Jacob Road. Just past Jacob road you will see a yellow gate across a trail on the east side of the highway. This trail leads along the Fanny Bay waterfront. Keep following the trail to your right to access the Wacky Woods. If you can't find parking near the yellow gate, then you will have to park on the other side of the highway and walk across.

Personally I would go for the first access point. It has easier parking, there is no need to cross a busy highway, and there is less of a walk to get to the woods.

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** The trails around the woods are flat and easy to walk, but there are a few areas which are a bit overgrown, and require you to push the brush and/or tree branches aside to continue on. But yes, I would say this area is stroller and wheelchair accessible (from the first access point anyway).

**Dog Friendly?:** It is private land, so please be mindful of your pet. I would advise a leash, and make sure to clean up after it.

**Length of Trail:** It is not a long walk as far as area is concerned, but as mentioned above, you could quite possibly spend hours discovering, examining, and exploring the woods.



### #3 - Top Bridge (Parksville)

Top Bridge is one of my favorite areas to explore (probably mostly due to the fact it is so easily accessible from my house). This magnificent suspension bridge spans the beautiful Englishman River, and connects many fantastic walking and biking trails. Sit and enjoy the view, swim in the many pools, fish for salmon in the river, or hike, walk or bike the many trails surrounding this beautiful structure.

#### **Getting There:**

Top Bridge Regional Trail has several access points. If you are just interested in viewing the suspension bridge, the quickest access point is at the end of Chattell Road. Head just past the truck scales on Highway 19A, and continue past the four-way stop which puts you onto Kaye Road. Turn right onto Chattell Road and continue to the end. You will see the suspension bridge from the large parking area.

If you are up for a bit more of a walk there are four other entry points. You can catch the trail at Rath Trevor Beach Provincial Park, anywhere along Resort Way, at Industrial Way and Tuan Rd (one block inland from Hwy 19A), or from the end of Allsbrook Rd (off Bellevue Rd, off Hwy 4A).

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** If you were to park at the first access point (at the end of Chattell Road) then yes, the Top Bridge Suspension Bridge is definitely wheelchair and stroller accessible. However, due to the stairs and steep incline, many of the trails surrounding the bridge are not.

**Dog Friendly?:** Top Bridge is a regional park, so dogs must stay on leash at all times.

**Length of Trail:** As mentioned above, parking at the end of Chattell road puts you right at the bridge. If you were to walk in from any of the other access points you would be looking at a 5 km walk each way.



## #4 - Shack Island - North Nanaimo

A unique place to beach comb is Shack Island. This remote little island is accessible by boat from Nanaimo, or by foot from [Pipers Lagoon](#) when the tide is out. Shack Island is owned by the municipality, but the cabins on the island are all privately owned.

The "shacks" were built in the 30's and 40's by local fishermen as holiday cabins, and have been passed down through families over the years. Although they look like they are uninhabited, they are still used today as summer cabins, and lovingly maintained by the families who own them. So if you do venture here, please be respectful of the properties.

### Getting There:

Pipers Lagoon can be reached by two entry points. The one closest to Shack Island is at the end of Lagoon Drive (off Hammond Bay Road). For a longer walk through Pipers Lagoon, park in the parking lot at the end of Place road (your first right off of Lagoon Drive). Remember, though, Shack Island is only accessible when the tide is out, so don't forget to check the [tide schedule](#) before trying to venture there.

**Wheelchair / Stroller Friendly?:** Unfortunately no. The beach around Shack Island is very rocky, and due to the fact it is covered in water the majority of the time, it is also very mucky.

**Dog Friendly?:** When at Pipers Lagoon, dogs must remain on a leash at all times. Shack Island has resident Canadian geese, so it is advised to keep dogs on a leash while scouring the island as well.

**Length of Trail:** The trail from the start of Pipers Lagoon (off Place Road) to the strip of land between it and Shack Island takes approximately 15 minutes to walk. If the tide is out expect another 5 - 10 minute walk to Shack Island.



## #5 - Extension Ridge (AKA: The Abyss) - South Nanaimo

Extension Ridge is known locally as 'The Abyss' because of a 16" earthquake fissure found there. Although not much is known about this large crack in the earth, there is speculation that it could be a result of a collapsed mine tunnel that was triggered by an earthquake. To date there is no information about how deep the crack is.

Although there has been significant logging done near the first part of the trail, there are still many beautiful spots to see. If you continue on past The Abyss, you will walk through an abundance of Arbutus trees. Keep your eye out for other small fissures, as well as the many wooden bridges, platforms, and playgrounds of sorts used by the mountain bikers who frequent the area.

### Getting There:

The trail head can be found on Harewood Mines Road. There is a small parking area under the power lines, and a large sign to let you know you have arrived at Extension Ridge. Head up the trail (under the power lines) for approximately 100 meters, and climb the stairs. Keeping right, continue to follow the trail for approximately 15 minutes to reach the earthquake fissure. You will pass a clear-cut on your left hand side. There are also a few rocks to scale along the trail (not difficult, unless wet and slippery).

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** The Extension Ridge trail is fairly steep, and as mentioned there are a few rocks to scale before you reach The Abyss, so this particular trail is **not** stroller or wheelchair friendly.

**Dog Friendly?:** The Extension Ridge trail is part of the Trans Canada Trail, as well as a Regional District of Nanaimo trail, so it is recommended that dogs stay on a leash.

**Length of Trail:** It only takes approximately 15 minutes to get to The Abyss, but the trail continues on for those that wish to go further.



## #6 - Petroglyph Park - South Nanaimo

**Petroglyph Provincial Park** in south Nanaimo has the most concentrated collection of rock art on Vancouver Island created by previous generations. A clearly marked trail will lead you through the park to view the petroglyphs. There are information boards that offer details about the history of the area, and help to decipher the petroglyphs. If you bring a large piece of paper with you, visitors can also make their own petroglyph rubbings as a souvenir using the replicas near the beginning of the trail. The real petroglyphs are scattered around the small park, and are often hard to see. The highest concentration is near the end of the short paved trail, but again, you really have to search for them. Many are moss covered, as seen in the below picture.

### **Getting There:**

Petroglyph Provincial Park is found off Highway #1 in South Nanaimo. Access to the park is via a pull-off from Hwy 1. Watch for signs. There is a large parking area at the trailhead.

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** Yes! There is a well-maintained trail in the park, some of which is paved, and it is a very short walk.

**Dog Friendly?:** There are no signs saying you can't bring your dog, but please stay on the marked trails to protect the petroglyphs. And as always, please pick up after your dog. You might want to note, however, that there are no garbage cans available at this park.

**Length of Trail:** The entire trail is less than a 5 minute walk. You spend more time looking and searching than you do walking.



## #7 - The Arboretum - South Nanaimo (near the Duke Point ferry terminal)

The **H.R. MacMillan Grant Ainscough Arboretum** is an unofficial park owned by the Regional District of Nanaimo. This 2.6-hectare site used to attract university tour groups from across the province, who wanted to study the behaviour and growth of exotic trees. What's left is 150 species of trees that are now maintained and monitored by the Regional District, as well as volunteers. Each unique species of tree has an interpretive sign giving details of its origin. This relatively unknown gem is a beautiful spot for a picnic. There is a very nice picnic bench overlooking the valley for you to use, or bring a blanket and stretch out under the shade of the trees.

### Getting There:

From Highway 1 in South Nanaimo, take the Duke Point highway. Follow the signs to Jack Point & Biggs Park, by turning right off the Duke Point Highway at Maughan Road. Turn right onto Phoenix Way, and immediately turn right again. You will see a yellow gate and the sign (shown above). If the gate is open when you arrive there is a small parking lot to your right. If not, park somewhere near the gate (I was the only vehicle around when I went, so it is not a busy spot).

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** The entire area is grassy (there are no designated paths), so I would suggest something with good wheels. If the gate is closed, however (as it was the day I went to take the pictures), then a wheel chair and/or stroller may not fit through the walking entrance.

**Dog Friendly?:** The Arboretum is owned by the Regional District of Nanaimo, and they advise to always keep dogs on a leash. There was not another soul around the day I went, and it is not a very well-known spot, so I will leave that up to your discretion. Please note, though, that there are no garbage cans nor poop bags available. Regardless, if you are bringing a dog, please clean up after it so the rest of us can enjoy the beautiful surroundings!

**Length of Trail:** The picnic bench can be found to the right of the park, while the majority of the trees are to the left. There are no designated walking trails. It is just a beautiful grassy area full of unique trees.



## **#8 - Mining artifacts at Morden Colliery Historic Provincial Park (South Nanaimo / Cedar area)**

At only 4 hectares this small Provincial Park offers a unique glimpse into the world of mining. In 1912 there was a working coal mine at this very spot. What remains today, behind the safety of a fence, is the only coal tippie left on Vancouver Island. The large mining artifacts are visible right from the parking lot. There is a short trail to the left of the large structures called the 'mining trail' that goes around the artifacts. The trail to the right leads down to the Nanaimo river.

**Getting There:** Just south of the Duke Point ferry turn off – access to the parking lot is at the end of Morden Road (off Hwy 1).

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** The mining artifacts can be seen from the parking area, so yes, this area is definitely stroller and/or wheelchair accessible. The trail that leads down to the Nanaimo River is as well.

**Dog Friendly?:** This is a Provincial Park, so dogs must be on leash at all times.

**Length of Trail:** As mentioned above, the structures are visible from the parking lot, but if you wanted to continue, the trail that leads down to the river is 1.2 km.



## #9 - Haslam Creek Suspension Bridge - South Nanaimo (near the Nanaimo Airport)

The Haslam Creek Suspension Bridge is part of the Trans Canada Trail, but lucky for us you don't need to walk the entire trail to experience this really cool feature! The trail leading to the bridge is a nice easy, beautiful walk. In fact, the only tricky part about finding the bridge is the drive getting there.

### Getting There:

As mentioned, this part can be tricky, so follow along closely. The first step is to head to the Nanaimo airport. Turn onto Timberlands Road. Keep following Timberlands Road past Rondalyn Resort, which will put you on a gravel logging road. You will come to a gate that says "Do Not Enter". Don't second guess yourself, and keep going past that sign! You will enter into what looks like a gravel pit with a bunch of equipment and vehicles. Take the second right (the first right will be set back a bit just after the fenced-in area). Follow along the fence line until you see a small trail marker for the Trans Canada Trail. (If you aren't following a fence line then you are on the wrong gravel road). There is no designated parking area, so just pull your vehicle off to the side of the gravel road.

**IMPORTANT INFO:** The gate that you must cross through (the one that says "Do Not Enter") closes at 6:00 PM. **Any vehicle that is in the area after 6:00 PM will be locked inside!!**

**Wheelchair / Stroller Accessible?:** The trail is very well maintained and flat, however there are a few large rocks and tree roots along the way. So my suggestion is to use something with big wheels.

**Dog Friendly?:** Yes, but again there are no garbage cans available for cleaning up after your dog.

**Length:** The trail that leads to the suspension bridge is approximately 1.2 km. Once you cross the bridge you can continue walking for many hours towards Spruston Road.

