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CENTRAL VANCOUVER ISLAND



FOR NEWCOMERS GETTING TO KNOW THE ISLAND

Life Outside

CENTRAL ISLAND · 2026 EDITION

*The outdoor life in Nanaimo and across the Central Island.
The water, the trails, the mountains, and every reason your weekends fill up.*

Travis Bach and Kiel Bach
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WELCOME



You can be in it by Saturday

We're Travis and Kiel Bach. People move here for the view, the ocean, the mountains, the soft winters, and then they find the better part: by their first Saturday they can be out in it. On a trail before coffee, on the water by noon, up a mountain or down a bike trail before dinner.

This guide is our tour of that side of life on the Central Island, mostly around Nanaimo, with the wider Island a short drive on. It isn't a checklist to finish. It's a sense of what's out your door, from the gentle (a lake loop with the dog, a round of golf, a beach at low tide) to the bold (a cold-water wreck dive, a summit, a fast descent). Pick your pace. There's room for all of it here.

WHAT'S INSIDE

The water, the trails, the rock, and the bike networks. Golf, courts, snow, and the everyday parks and beaches. Where to find your people, the year's rhythm, and how it all ties back to home.

YOUR ISLAND TEAM



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How it all sits

A quick orientation, because half the appeal here is how close it all is.

The ocean and the harbour. Nanaimo wraps a working, walkable harbour, with Saysutshun (Newcastle Island) and Protection Island a short paddle off downtown and the Strait of Georgia and Gulf Islands beyond. Most of the water starts within minutes of the city centre.

The lakes. Westwood, Long, Brannen, and a string of smaller lakes sit right in and around town, the calm-water counterpart to the open coast, good for a swim, a paddle, or an easy loop.

Mount Benson. The peak on the western skyline is the city's backyard mountain, with hiking and climbing on it and bike networks across its lower slopes.

The trail web. Regional parks, lake loops, and the Parkway and E&N trails knit the city together, so much of this you can reach on foot or by bike from home.

And then the rest. North to Parksville, Qualicum, and the Comox Valley, west to Port Alberni and the big lakes, south to the Cowichan. The back of this guide heads out there.



Dives, paddles, and open water

The coast is the headline act, and it starts right off downtown.

Wreck and cold-water diving. Off Snake Island, minutes from the harbour, sit two of Canada's best-known artificial reefs, the former navy ships Saskatchewan and Cape Breton, now thick with plumose anemones, lingcod, and rockfish, with the smaller Rivtow Lion and a sunken jet nearby. The Snake Island wall drops into the deep alongside them. This is world-class cold-water diving, run by local charters out of Nanaimo, for everyone from newly certified to technical divers.

Kayak and paddleboard. The classic outing is the paddle across to Saysutshun from Maffeo Sutton Park, a loop around the car-free island and its sandstone coves. Launch spots ring the harbour, guided trips run for first-timers, and the lakes give you flat water close to home.

Sailing and boating. Nanaimo is a natural home port, with a yacht club, marinas, and the protected waters of the strait and the Gulf Islands to explore.

Fishing. Salmon and bottom fish draw anglers from the shoreline and the wharf to a charter offshore. A licence is required, see the back page.

Swimming. Warm lake swims through summer and brisk ocean dips off the beaches. Check current conditions first, more on that on the back page.



Trails, summits, and falls

You're never far from a trailhead here.

The everyday loops. Westwood Lake is the local favourite, a gentle wooded loop around the water under Mount Benson, as good for a stroller or a dog as for a training run. Bowen Park, Morrell Nature Sanctuary, and the Linley Valley and Cottle Lake trails put forest and birdsong minutes from the centre.

The summits. Mount Benson is the one to earn, a steady climb to a panorama over the city, the strait, and the Gulf Islands. Sugarloaf is the short, sweet version, a quick walk to a big view.

The coast. Pipers Lagoon and Neck Point wrap rocky headlands, tide pools, and sea views into easy strolls, two of the prettiest short walks in town.

The falls. Ammonite Falls, in Benson Creek Falls Regional Park, is the local waterfall, an easy forest walk to a cascade named for the fossils in the rock. The bigger regional falls are out toward Parksville, more on those later.

Trail running. The same network doubles as a runner's playground, from flat lake laps to lung-busting climbs.



Crags, boulders, and a cave

Yes, you can climb here, and you can go underground too.

Mount Benson. The mountain on the skyline is the heart of local climbing, with many sport and trad routes on solid basalt across crags like Lower and Upper Benson, Longview, and Northwood. The Regional District of Nanaimo recognizes climbing in its parks plan, so access here is stable, a good place to start.

The Nanaimo River crags. Sunny Side and Dark Side, south of town along the river, are among the oldest and best rock on the Island, sunny conglomerate and shady sandstone. Parts sit on private land and access can change, so check the current situation with the local climbing community first, tread lightly, and stay off the sandstone for a day or two after rain.

The local scene. The Mid Island Climbers and the long-running Nanaimo Crags guidebook are the go-to for routes, conditions, and current access.

Horne Lake caves. North of town near Qualicum, Horne Lake Caves Provincial Park runs guided tours into a world of crystal formations and fossils, from a family walk-through to a five-hour rappel down an underground waterfall. No experience needed, open to anyone, the wait-you-can-do-that-here outing.



Mountain, road, and gravel

Nanaimo has been a mid-Island riding hub for decades.

Close to town. Doumont, where local mountain biking began, has something for every level, from flow to technical. The South Mount Benson network adds steeper, rugged lines, and Westwood Lake and the Abyss round it out, all looked after by the Nanaimo Mountain Bike Club.

The mecca nearby. An hour north, Cumberland holds one of the Island's largest trail networks, hundreds of kilometres starting right in the village, with a famously laid-back, post-ride culture.

Down in the Cowichan. Maple Mountain and Mount Tzouhalem, near Duncan, are the southern standouts, lookout-topped climbs and long flow descents.

Road and gravel. Quiet rural roads, the Parkway and E&N trails, and the old logging and rail grades give road and gravel riders room to roam from Qualicum to the Cowichan.



Year-round fairways

Mild winters mean the season barely stops.

In and around town. Nanaimo Golf Club's mature semi-private layout, the well-loved public Cottonwood, the compact Pryde Vista, and the range and short course at Beban Park cover everything from a serious round to a quick bucket of balls, with Winchelsea View just up the road in Lantzville.

Up the Island. Fairwinds in Nanoose Bay is the scenic favourite a short drive north, and the Parksville and Qualicum stretch adds Morningstar, Pheasant Glen, and Eaglecrest, an easy day-trip cluster of good courses.

Down south. Ladysmith and the Cowichan add still more, so a golfing weekend never runs short of new tees.



Pickleball, tennis, and more

The social, low-barrier end of the outdoors, and it's thriving.

Pickleball. The fastest-growing game in town, with the eight-court complex at Beban Park and indoor play at Oliver Woods, and an active, welcoming club happy to teach newcomers the ropes.

Tennis. Public courts are scattered through the parks, including Beban, for a casual hit or a club ladder.

Disc golf, lawn bowling, and the rest. Add disc golf, lawn bowling, and the everyday park games, the kind of outdoors that needs no training and no big drive, just a good way to spend an afternoon and meet a few neighbours.



A mountain an hour and a half away

One of the quiet perks of the mid-Island: ocean in the morning, snow by afternoon.

Mount Washington. About an hour and a half north, Mount Washington Alpine Resort is the Island's mountain, with downhill skiing and snowboarding, a beginner-friendly learning area, terrain parks, and some of the deepest snow in Canada.

Beyond the lifts. The Nordic centre at Raven Lodge runs dozens of kilometres of cross-country trails, plus snowshoeing, fat biking, and tubing, with the wilderness of Strathcona Park, BC's oldest, right next door.

Winter on the coast. Down at sea level the winters are green and mild, so the trails, the courses, and the water rarely fully close, you just layer up.



The everyday outdoors

Not every outing is an expedition. Most of the best ones aren't.

On the water's edge. Departure Bay and the beaches at Pipers Lagoon and Neck Point are the go-to shorelines, sand, tide pools, and sunsets, with the harbourfront walkway and Maffeo Sutton Park tying the city to the sea.

In the green. Bowen Park's forest and river, the Colliery Dam lakes, and Westwood Lake give you swimming, picnics, and shade in the heart of town.

With the dog and the kids. Off-leash areas, playgrounds, and gentle loops mean the easy days, the ones that quietly make a place home, are the ones you'll do most.



The fastest way to belong

The quickest way to feel like a local is to do the thing you love with people who love it too.

The clubs. The Island Mountain Ramblers have hiked and climbed the Island since 1958. The Nanaimo Mountain Bike Club builds and rides the local trails. The Paddling Centre and the Canoe and Kayak Club get you on the water, and the Pickleball Club will have you in a game your first week.

The drop-ins. Beyond the clubs there are run, ride, and paddle groups, and casual meet-ups for nearly everything, most of them glad to see a new face.

Why it matters. People put down roots through what they do on the weekend. Show up to a Tuesday paddle or a Sunday ride a few times and you've got a community, not just an address.



A year outside

There's no off-season here, only a change of gear.

Spring. The falls run hard, the trails dry out, dive visibility comes up, and the first warm days bring the courses and courts back to life.

Summer. The long stretch: lake swims, ocean paddles, evening hikes, golf till late, and the waterfront in full swing.

Autumn. Crisp, quiet trails, salmon in the rivers, the bike loam at its best, and fewer crowds at the coast.

Winter. Snow up at Mount Washington and green, mild days at sea level, so you trade the summit for a lake loop and keep moving year-round.



The wider Island, a short drive on

When you want to range further, the rest of the Central Island opens up.

North to Oceanside. Parksville and Qualicum's long sandy beaches, Rathtrevor's low-tide flats, and two of the Island's prettiest waterfalls at Englishman River and Little Qualicum, with Cathedral Grove's thousand-year Douglas firs on the road west.

The big country. Mount Arrowsmith for the high hikes, Cameron and Sproat lakes for swimming and paddling, and Horne Lake for the caves.

North to the Comox Valley. Cumberland's trail network and Mount Washington for snow and summer riding, with the wild edge of Strathcona Park beyond.

South to the Cowichan. Warm-valley wineries, the Cowichan River and lake, and the Maple Mountain and Mount Tzouhalem riding, all under an hour away.



A home that fits the life

When the outside is this much of the draw, the home is really about access to it.

Close to the trailhead. Some buyers want to walk out the door onto a trail, or be ten minutes from the lake or the boat launch. Where you land changes how often you actually go.

Room for the gear. Boats, bikes, boards, and skis need somewhere to live. Garage space, a workshop, a shed, or room for a trailer is worth weighing as much as the kitchen.

On the water, or near it. You don't have to be on the water to live on the water here. A spot near a launch or a beach access often gives you the life without the waterfront price.

That's our part. Matching the place to the life you're picturing is the job. Tell us how you want to spend your weekends and we'll keep an eye out for the home that makes it easy.

GET IN TOUCH



Let's get you outside

Tell us the kind of outdoor life you're after, a trail out the back gate, a slip for the boat, a quiet lake, a quick run to the ski hill, and we'll keep an eye out for the home that fits it. A call, an email, or grab a time that works for you.

WHAT CLIENTS SAY

We're proud of the people we've helped land on the Island. A few words from them, with plenty more on our Google profile.

"I couldn't recommend Travis more highly. Calm, helpful, and completely down-to-earth."

Beth H. · Nanaimo

"Working with Kiel and the Bach Real Estate Group was an absolute game-changer."

Alicia G. · Nanaimo

[Read more reviews on Google](#)

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PLEASE NOTE

This guide is a general overview to help you get a feel for the outdoor life here, not advice for your circumstances. Conditions, seasons, access, and the businesses, clubs, and parks we mention change, and some sites sit on private land or have access that shifts (climbing areas especially), so please confirm current access and conditions before you head out. Check official sources for what matters: BC Parks, the Regional District of Nanaimo, and the City of Nanaimo for parks and trails; the BCCDC and Fisheries and Oceans Canada for water-contact and shellfish safety; and PreparedBC for wildfire and hazard information. A licence is required for sport fishing, and get outside prepared (see AdventureSmart). We're REALTORS®, not guides, and these are favourites we love, not endorsements.

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