

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Somewhere beyond the mall

Skip the factory outlets in favour of a small town U.S.A. experience

By Andrew McCredie, Vancouver Sun June 4, 2011

When returning from a weekend road trip to this Pacific Northwest state, most B. C.ers have plenty to declare.

Upon crossing back into B.C. following a recent long weekend excursion to the city of Bellingham, our family of four's only declaration was what a great -and surprising - destination we had discovered. (Okay, we did have a few pairs of new shoes and a couple of bottles of wine to declare, too.)

Say "Bellingham" to most of us here in the province's southwest corner, and visions of factory outlets, cheap gas and the strong Canuck buck spring to mind.

After our two-night stay in the city behind the "mall," when I hear "Bellingham" now I'm more inclined to think about enjoying a Mallard Ice Cream cone while leisurely walking the brick-building lined streets of a town Norman Rockwell would find inspiration in.

Or I'll get an image of tango dancers doing a turn at the Saturday morning Farmer's Market, the smell of kettle corn mingling in the cool air with fresh brewed organic coffee.

A Vancouver Sun colleague, Don Cayo, recently wrote an opinion piece entitled "Vancouver coasts on its beauty, but misses out on creating vibrant city life," and after spending some time in Bellingham I couldn't agree more with his argument. In it, he quotes UBC urban planner Michael Goldberg: "We [in Vancouver] rely excessively on being beautiful and being next to nature. All our planning tends to focus outward toward the views, and there has been no attention to the street-level experience for people." Then this zinger: "You might as well be living in a hotel in Banff."

Goldberg goes on to cite cities such as Milan, Melbourne and Singapore as urban centres that have embraced the vibrant. He could have added Bellingham.

Today, Bellingham is a university town of 80,000 or so, making it the 12th largest city in Washington State, but back in 1858, during the Fraser River Gold Rush, it was comprised of three "towns" -Whatcom, Sehome and Fairhaven. That summer, there were more people living in the three towns, albeit in tents on the beaches, than in all the rest of Washington Territory put together. Part of that legacy still stands today in the form of a

small building at 1308 E Street, built that year and the oldest brick building in the entire state.

By 1900, Bellingham had come to incorporate the three towns, though today Fairhaven is still identified as a sort of town-within-a-town. If bike riding is your thing, rent one at Fairhaven Bike & Ski and hit the incomparable Interrurban Trail.

There's no doubt the University of Western Washington, with 14,000 students the third largest university in the state, plays a major role in giving Bellingham its unique streetlevel vibrancy, whether it be in the arts, in culture or in economic spinoff. With one out of every eight residents a student, there's a youthful vibe to the place that you can't help but pick up on.

There's also a fierce independent streak in the tenor of local business, with one-off restaurants, cafes and shops the norm instead of franchises and chains (for those, see the "Mall").

The aforementioned Mallard Ice Cream is a great example of a homegrown, and well-supported, local business, as is The Bagelry. If you're looking for a healthy and homemade breakfast, one of the three Avenue Bread cafes is the place to go. Hugely popular with locals, the cafes skip the trendy décor of the day in favour of honest food at honest prices.

The university is famous for its outdoor and indoor sculpture collection, and Bellingham in general is a very artsy place, most notably in the galleries scattered throughout town and the unique crafts available at the Wednesday and Saturday Farmer's Market.

There's also a decent museum presence in the town, including the Whatcom Museum, the Bellingham Railway Museum and the American Radio and Electricity Museum. That latter one was a real surprise, as my two children, who have been dragged through more museums and art galleries in their brief lives than a four-year art major, were enthralled by the interactive displays and incredible collection of radios from the past 100 years.

And best of all, during our entire visit to Bellingham, neither one asked that once proverbial question: "When are we going to the mall?"

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GETTING THERE

. Located just a 30-minute drive from three local Canada-U.S. border crossings -Peace Arch, Pacific Border ("the Truck Crossing") and Aldergrove -Bellingham makes for great, nofuss family or romantic getaways.

. Two daily Amtrak trains connect Vancouver and Bellingham, offering a two-hour trip time and a leisurely ride without the prospect of a lengthy border wait. Visit www.amtrakcascades.com

STAYING THERE

. For families, the Best Western Lakeway Inn just off I-5 in Bellingham is a great value, and features an indoor pool and excellent in-house restaurant.

. For couples, the boutique Hotel Bellweather is a cosy, waterfront gem.
www.hotelbellweather.com

EATING THERE

. Anthony's at Squaticum Harbor is the place to go for seafood, and its waterfront location offers sunsets that rival its halibut and salmon dishes.

. For more casual but just as good dining, check out New York Pizza in the heart of the city.

WEBSITES

. www.bellingham.org

. www.downtownbellingham.com

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