

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

---

## Gal pals need not go far for a shopping high

### Excellent brews, books and cheese - plus some fine-looking shoes - wait just over the border

By Jane Mundy, Special To The Sun March 15, 2011

'Don't forget to pack your passport and an empty bag - LOL.'

That's the email I sent my girlfriends, anticipating our road trip to Bellingham the next day.

Catching up with the girls over lunch and dinner, shopping at Trader Joe's and lolling about in a swanky hotel is my idea of fun. And we discover that there's more to shopping than the Bellis Fair mall and big-box stores.

At the Peace Arch border crossing, Morgan, Laura, Kate and I suppress our laughter -always a challenge whenever we get together -and temporarily turn on the mature woman image. Handing our passports to the border guard, he holds them to his forehead, eyes closed in concentration. "And what are you four girls doing in Bellingham? Hmm, let me guess. Could it be ... shopping?" We all burst into raucous laughter.

Thirty minutes later, we check into the Hotel Bellwether, recently voted the best luxury hotel in the Northwest. It wins our vote, too. Nestled in the cove of Bellingham Bay and Squalicum Harbor, our tastefully furnished suite has a stunning view of the San Juan Islands. (Note to self: Next time, reserve the lighthouse. With three storeys and a spiral staircase, the top floor has jaw-dropping views, from Mount Baker all the way to Whistler.)

We're chomping at the bit to spend, spend, spend, but not before chowing down on seafood at Anthony's, a five-minute walk away. Even though Anthony's is a chain -we're told that "Bellinghamsters" (this is really what they call themselves) are renowned for their scorn of all things corporate and support all things local -

the place is packed, and it's mid-week. As soon as we ogle the view and are warmly greeted by the staff, the chain image is forgotten.

We're in luck, since we've arrived during oyster festival. After studying the user-friendly (illustrated) sampler menu describing the local mollusks, I start with a dozen on the half-shell and order six more, this time panfried. For dessert, the oyster festival menu reads "oyster sorbet, \$5.95 ... [kidding]". More laughs all around.

Anthony's and just about all the non-chain restaurants in Bellingham participate in Eat Local Week, which starts April 1. That's when the mayor tosses a cabbage and opens the local farmers' market. Each week, a featured restaurant creates a menu focusing on locally grown products. With 48 kilometres of marine shoreline and 100,000 40,468 hectares of highly productive farmland, Bellingham is a haven for locally grown products and producers, including the Boundary Bay Brewing Company.

The pub is hopping in more ways than one and it's only 3 p.m. -but that's when happy hour begins in these parts.

And everyone seems to be in pre-St. Patrick's Day mode.

"We're the biggest brew pub in the country," explains proprietor Ed Bennett, "mainly because a lot of our business is 'beer to go'. Our regulars will have one or two pints here, then take home a half-gallon growler or a onegallon bladder."

Ed has us sample six seasonal brews. We start with a pale blond ale, move on to an India Pale Ale and finish with a heady Imperial Oatmeal Stout, described as a "meal in a glass". I'm not a big beer drinker, but I could definitely down a growler of the hoppy and refreshing IPA with their signature dish of yam 'alechiladas'.

The pub's walls are adorned with local art and beer awards, but Ed plays down the latter. "We support the community in every way we can, and that includes promoting local artists," he says. We check out the beer garden, where movies and live music are popular in summer. We have to move on, but not before Ed gives us a growler. We'll be back.

Although the Whatcom Museum cuts into valuable shopping time, it's not to be missed. Situated in the beautiful Lightcatcher building, the museum showcases the natural world, history and art through the region's collections. It's worth a visit just for the exhibition on the Arts and Crafts movement, and don't pass up the Family Interactive Gallery-it's fascinating, even if you don't have kids. The Wizard of Oz exhibit is very clever, complete with remnants of the Wicked Witch under the mini-house, next to the yellow brick road.

Must-stop shops in Bellingham are Digs, which offers cheeky gifts and deluxe bed linens, and Gary's, a high-quality clothing store with European labels just across the street, where I do some serious damage to my bank account. Up a few blocks to Railroad Avenue, we swoop into Sojourn. "Our clothes are stylized but casual with accessible prices," says owner Peggy Platter. "Nothing's over-the-top dressing; we feature clothing that relates to the Pacific Northwest." And right next door, Mi Shoes has the most adorable pumps.

We actually do shop 'til we drop, so we opt for dinner at our hotel. "One elderly gentleman has lunch here seven days a week," says chef Julius Kaiser. "He's 75 and considers himself the most sinful eater. He sits at the same table, drinks the same bottle of wine and usually orders the scallops or short ribs, then his wife picks him up."

I order the porcini-dusted scallops and braised ribs, and realize why he keeps coming back for more.

The next day begins with a hearty breakfast and live music (anyone is welcome to play for one hour in exchange for a meal) at The Old Town Café. Get to know the locals at the community table and wolf down a gargantuan American breakfast: two eggs on a biscuit topped with cheese sauce, home fries and black beans (\$6.75 US); for an extra 30 cents, you can get organic eggs. We also share the house-made coffee cake, then waddle back to the car and take a 20-minute drive over to the historic village of Fairhaven, where just about everything is within walking distance.

Recently renovated old buildings now house eclectic shops and restaurants. I'm told that the best deals to be had south of the border are gas, cheese, and books -so Village Books, here we come. Loaded down with a few hardcover bestsellers and some "gently used" paperbacks, we heave ourselves upstairs to the Book Fare Café for coffee and a peanut butter rosemary cookie before loading up on artisan cheeses at Quel Fromage.

The parking lot at Trader Joe's-a cross-border shopping institution that carries everything from nuts to shampoo-is filled with B.C. licence plates.

Our purchases are limited by how much room is left in the car, but I manage to buy more cheese, several packs of frozen seafood and a few bottles of vino.

We've figured out that you don't have to go as far as Seattle for a girl's getaway south of the border. Instead, go for quality and deals in downtown Bellingham and Fairhaven For more information, visit [www. bellingham.org](http://www.bellingham.org)

**BRINGING IT HOME**

Groceries of U.S. origin are duty free, although some snack items and nonedible groceries may be subject to tax. Ask for the U.S. grocery rates at Trader Joe's, because there are quantity restrictions.

## IF YOU GO

Stay: The Hotel Bellwether has a Tiptoe Through the Tulips package for the month of April. 1 Bellwether Way (360) 392-3100. [www.hotelbellwether.com](http://www.hotelbellwether.com)

Eat: Anthony's at Squalicum Harbor, 25 Bellwether Way. (360) 647-5588 <http://www.anthonys.com/restaurants/info/bellingham.html>

Boundary Bay Brewery & Bistro (for beer tasting). 1107 Railroad Ave. (360) 647-5593. [www.bbaybrewery.com](http://www.bbaybrewery.com)

Read more:

<http://www.vancouversun.com/life/pals+need+shopping+high/4440206/story.html#ixzz1Ghofn5hJ>