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Explore: Sooke, British Columbia

Southwest Vancouver Island was once the preserve of hippie surfers and hardy hikers who dared to bounce along the twisting, potholed highway between Sooke and Port Renfrew. But road-straightening, bridges and paving have created a new loop that's doable in a weekend-a trip that's dotted with jaw-dropping scenery, along with food and drink that give "home-brew" a whole new meaning.

by Suzanne Morphet



Day One

Drive an hour from the Swartz Bay ferry terminal to Sooke, where the west coast of the island begins. Check in to one of 28 unique rooms at the luxurious but unpretentious Sooke Harbour House. Work up an appetite by walking Whiffen Spit, then indulge in a four-course dinner at a table overlooking the ocean.

800-889-9688, sookeharbourhouse.com

Day Two

Tour the organic gardens at Sooke Harbour House, where every plant has at least one edible part-from the blueberry bushes to the citrus-sour begonias-then pick up your pre-ordered picnic lunch, (think fresh salmon sandwich with Salt Spring cheese), before checking out.

Head west 10 kilometres to Tugwell Creek Honey Farm and Meadery. The bees here harvest pollen from wild blackberry and fireweed blossoms. Brazen Blackberry honey wine-all warm, fruity notes and mellow sweetness-pairs well with meat or dark chocolate. Vintage Sac-an old family recipe-makes vanilla ice cream decadent. 250-642-1956, tugwellcreekfarm.com. Pull over at Jordan River to watch hardcore surfers at work. Continue to sandy China Beach, just four minutes down the road, for a picnic lunch amid the driftwood. Head further up the road, stopping at Sombrio Beach to walk the 100-foot suspension bridge. Practise your oohs and aahs.

End up in a quaint waterfront cabin at Port Renfrew Resorts, where beds boast feather duvets and decks have barbecues for grilling the fish you bought off the dock earlier that day. 250-647-5541, portrenfrewresorts.com

Day Three

Head to Botanical Beach at low tide, when a dazzling array of life is revealed within the tidal pools. Purple sea urchins, orange starfish and green sea anemones form part of the intertidal colour palette.

Cross the San Juan River bridge and experience an Alice-down-the-rabbit-hole moment when you slide down a rope into a hidden world at Avatar Grove, so-called by environmentalists who are lobbying to protect its big cedar and fir trees from logging. Like Alice, you'll have no road signs, so carefully follow the instructions on the alliance website. ancientforestalliance.org

Drive the newly paved logging road to Lake Cowichan, where you'll recover nicely from the hairpin turns with a drink, dinner and a sleep at Stone Soup Inn (Thursday to Saturday only) heralded by enRoute magazine last year as one of Canada's 10 best new restaurants. 250-749-3848, stonesoupinn.ca

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Day Four

Mark the end of your trip at the acclaimed Merridale Ciderworks. Sample award-winning ciders or sit down to brunch at the on-site bistro. Finish with a treatment in their spa that smells like apple pie. 800-998-9908, merridalecider.com w/

Drive Times

Planning your own excursion? Here are the key times and distances:

Round trip from Swartz Bay is 312 kilometres

Swartz Bay to Sooke Harbour House is 61 kilometres (a little over an hour)

Sooke to Port Renfrew is 73 kilometres (an hour and a half)

Port Renfrew to Stone Soup Inn is 69 kilometres (one hour 45 minutes)

Stone Soup Inn to Merridale Cidery is 38 kilometres (40 minutes)

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