

# VOGUE

## Why Vancouver Island, Canada is the Next Great Wellness Destination

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The Pacific Rim National Park on Vancouver Island. Photo: Getty Images

Sitting off the storm-battered western coast of British Columbia, Vancouver Island's rugged, wild landscapes have long marked it as a top destination for outdoor adventure and spectacular scenery. Cold-water surfers plunge into the frigid waters of the Pacific Ocean off half-moon-shaped sand beaches as hikers pad through lush old-growth rainforests along the Wild Pacific Trail. Winter brings skiing and storm-watching season, when awe-inspiring storms slam into the coast in great cataclysmic symphonies of waves, wind, and rain.

The Pacific Rim National Park on Vancouver Island. Photo: Getty Images

But sports and recreation are far from the only way to connect with Vancouver Island's landscape. Sourcing wild, natural materials from the oceans, forests, and mountains, Vancouver Island's terroir-grounded wellness scene brings together the home-grown best of the island—from ingredients to idyllic vistas—with health, fitness, and well-being philosophies and practices from around the world from Nordic saunas to yoga and forest bathing. Even spa traditionalists who prefer to stay indoors have options for outdoor exposure through locally-made skincare brands using wild-grown or foraged seaweed and kelp.



The ancient cedar spa sanctuary at Wickaninnish Inn. Courtesy of Wickaninnish Inn

From purely wellness-focused retreats to restorative treatments and escapes after a surf session at Cox Beach or trekking along woodland trails, Vancouver Island will have visitors feeling their best, inside and out.

## What to Do

Vancouver Island's cosmopolitan capital city of Victoria is home to several of the island's best spa and wellness experiences. Floating in the city's inner harbor, HAVN is a former WWII floating-barge-turned-self-care park. On deck, sleek and minimalist tan wood structures hide indoor saunas, with open-air platforms offering harbor-view hot tubs and cold plunges. Wellness-seekers can follow the proposed hydrotherapy circuit or go with their own flow, using relaxation cabins, lounge areas, and a lush garden patio as tranquil spaces to unwind.

Close to downtown, Ritual is Vancouver Island's first Scandinavian wellness center, inspired by traditional Finnish treatments and philosophies in a bright, modern package. The signature Nordic Circuit consists of alternating between hot and cold treatments at leisure, from the Finnish sauna to cold plunges, steam rooms, hot tubs, and salt lounges.

After the trendy contemporary spa scene of Victoria, dive into a wilder side of wellness by heading north to two of the island's top tourist areas: Tofino and Ucluelet, home to some of the island's finest resorts, hotels, and spas. It's at these spas where visitors can get a taste of Vancouver Island's take on thalassotherapy: the use of seawater and sea-based products for rejuvenation.

Kelp and seaweed packed with different vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants and sourced from a near-endless wild supply are the featured ingredients in treatments for everything from eczema and rosacea to anti-aging facials.

At Black Rock Oceanfront Resort in Ucluelet, the Drift Spa uses sea-sourced ingredients like skincare from Seaflora, Pacific sea salt, and ocean mud for its luxury remedies like facials, massages, and body treatments. The legendary Wickaninnish Inn in Tofino houses Ancient Cedars Spa, where soothing



treatment rooms look out directly onto the Pacific Ocean as wellness-seekers luxuriate in detoxifying algae wraps, mud treatments, and sea salt polishes.



An aerial view of Wickaninnish Inn. Photo: Wickaninnish Inn

But the ultimate form of thalassotherapy is the ocean itself. Hidden deep in the UNESCO Biosphere-certified Clayquot Sound and accessible only by boat, Tofino Resort & Marina's remote, wood-fired floating sauna brings together thalassotherapy and Nordic wellness. A glass wall allows sauna users to gaze at the peaceful waters and dense forests as they heat up in the cedar sauna before jumping into cleansing Pacific waters. Or they can get the blood pumping by running directly from the charming, rentable barrel and hut wood-fired saunas of Tuff City Saunas at Pacific Sands Resort and Mackenzie Beach Resort into the salty Pacific waves.

It isn't just the ocean that heals on Vancouver Island. Experience the therapeutic powers of the island's great outdoors from beaches to forests with outdoor meditation and open-air yoga sessions on tranquil beaches at Tofino Breath and Mediation. Another Asian practice that has found its way to the shores of the Pacific Northwest is the Japanese art of shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing. With its old-growth forests of cedar, hemlock, and spruce, the island is an ideal place for tapping into the slow, steady rhythms of ancient trees to calm the body and mind. Several different outfits around the island, including Salish Sea Nature Connections, offer guided forest-bathing experiences from Association of Nature and Forest Therapy-certified forest bathing guides. But anyone can try their hand at self-guided forest bathing experiences on trails in outdoor preserves like MacMillan Provincial Park and the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve.

## What to Buy

Fueled by the island's bountiful natural resources, a thriving local makers scene flourishes on Vancouver Island, allowing visitors to take some of the island—and its health and wellness benefits—home.

Made from wild seaweed that's sustainably hand-harvested, Seaflora's line of organic skincare products utilizes the rich nutrients and minerals of this abundant wild material to tackle all kinds of skincare issues. Created by Diane Bernard, affectionately known locally as the "Seaweed Lady," its diverse selection, offering everything from seaweed eye masks to moisturizers, gels, serums, and

cleansers, can be purchased at spas around the island, including Drift Spa at Black Rock and Ancient Cedars at the Wickanninish Inn.

For internal health and wellness, stock up on organic sea kelp products made from bull and giant kelp at the Indigenous-owned Naas Foods in Tofino. Eating seaweed on a regular basis comes with myriad health benefits like improved thyroid function and potentially lowered risk of heart diseases, and the shop's kelp seasonings and flakes bring a savory umami taste to dishes too.

## Where to Eat and Drink

In the wellness world, what you put into your body is just as important as external balms, salves, and practices. Seasonal, locavore dining is a way of life on Vancouver Island, with restaurants and locals alike using wild-grown, foraged, and caught ingredients from the land and sea for fresh, healthy, nutritious island-to-table dining.

At the small, intimate Pluvio in Ucluelet, savor an artistic, ever-changing menu that moves with the seasons, using everything from Humboldt squid to morel mushrooms. One of the pioneers of locally sourced dining on Vancouver Island, Tofino's Wolf in the Fog, serves up seasonal dishes like "seacuterie" spreads and smoked steelhead trout, paired with housemade craft cocktails like cedar-infused sours, for a fresh culinary perspective on Vancouver Island's wild provisions at each visit.

A trip to the eastern offshore Galiano Island is also worth it to dine at Pilgrimme, a cozy cabin in the woods where each dish is a loving homage to its island home.

## Where to Stay

The Fairmont Empress in Victoria is the grand dame of the island's hotels. Overlooking the city's inner harbor, this "Castle on the Coast," as it's known, offers an opulent stay full of high-end dining and indulgent spa experiences.

Up north are the island's finest adventure lodges. Huddled up against the rocky shoreline of Pacific Rim National Park, The Nami Project is a minimalist dream of sleek Scandinavian design, wellness, and privacy. Ocean-facing suites come with personal cedar saunas, while separate cabins have cedar hot tubs built into private outdoor decks for soaking while gazing at crashing waves and surfacing whales. One of the best hotels on the island for storm-watching (in fact, it was popularized here by founder Charles McDiarmid), the Relais & Chateaux Wickaninnish Inn at Chestermen Beach, Tofino is an elegant escape on the edge of the world, with world-class dining and a balanced approach to adventure and wellness with thrilling excursions like floatplane tours and kayaking followed by pampering massages at the spa.

But there is no better form of wellness than truly getting away from it all, which is the house specialty at Clayquot Wilderness Lodge. Set far from civilization up a long arm of the Clayquot Sound, this luxury off-grid lodge offers a restorative escape through full nature immersion. Accessible only by boat or seaplane, this remote resort invites guests to truly disconnect with stays in glamorous canvas tents, daily adventures like heli-fly-fishing, and wellness and mindfulness practices like revitalizing glacial plunges in the ice-cold Bedwell River.