

FAMILY TRAVEL

Enjoy coastal getaway in stunning Qualicum Beach

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

Boasting a low-key, laid-back vibe, Parksville Qualicum Beach is an oceanside paradise with endless stretches of soft sand beach and a host of inexpensive — and free — family-friendly activities that appeal to all ages. It's the perfect place to unplug from life and connect with your kids.

We spent two glorious spring days on the beach and revisiting our favourite area attractions.

BEACHCOMBING & WATER PLAY

Low tide is a wondrous sight in Parksville Qualicum Beach, with the ocean receding about one kilometre out, leaving warm shallow tidal pools ripe for exploring. Our daughter, Brooklyn, is a dedicated beachcomber, forever thrilled with the hunt. Her typical finds are uniquely shaped rocks and perfect seashells; however, the area's shallow pools revealed even more rare treasures, like starfish, crabs and sand dollars. During the summer months, the sand bakes in the sun at low tide, warming the ocean water to a balmy swimming temperature when the tide rolls in.

PARKSVILLE COMMUNITY PARK

Home to the five-week summer Beachfest Festival and sandcastle completion, Parksville Community Park is a must-visit for families. The Ventureland playground was newly resurfaced in 2019 and offers a wonderland of attractions, including a merry-go-round, swings, a slide tower, bridges, cable ride, teeter-totters, diggers, trucks, airplanes and Spray Park. There are also beach volleyball nets, a skate park, tennis courts and an expansive grass kite-flying lawn. We brought a picnic for our visit; alternatively, there are also food trucks on-site throughout the summer.

COOMBS COUNTRY MARKET
Nicknamed Goats on Roof for the hooved lawn mowers munching their lunch on the general store's grass-covered roof, Coombs Market is a beloved area hallmark that we always peruse while in the area. It's great for stocking up on picnic provisions and gourmet goods, including local cheeses, fresh baguettes, smoked salmon and house-made beef jerky — Brooklyn's favourite.

Salted caramel and rum and raisin cones from Billy Gruff Creamery typically complete our visit. Next time we're in town, I'm committing to booking lunch at Cuckoo Trattoria & Pizzeria.

LITTLE QUALICUM CHEESEWORKS

Nestled amid pastoral Morningstar Farms, Little Qualicum Cheese-works is one of our family's happy places. Admission is free, and a self-guided tour map is available on cheesework.ca. There are 15 unique attractions to discover, including posing for selfies on Farmall Club's old tractors, fawning over the Calf Barn babies and finding the farm's bunnies, sheep, goats and llamas.

The Farmgate Store is another win for all ages. Our family is partial to the creamy Island Brie and Old Smoky raw milk cheese, and Brooklyn enjoys the collection of farm-inspired toys and crafts.

SIDNEY-BY-THE-SEA

Before flying home, we spent a night in Sidney, near the Victo-



Brooklyn is a dedicated beachcomber and enjoyed hunting for seashells on the beach in Parksville Qualicum Beach. PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL

IF YOU GO

Family vacations are always better when you stay on the beach, and Parksville's Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Resort's oceanfront suites are fully equipped for extended stays. The property has a children's playground and great indoor pool and is steps from three kilometres of beachfront. In Sidney, we stayed in the heart of town at the Sidney Pier Hotel & Spa. Our waterfront one-bedroom suite felt brand new and was kitted out with high-end appliances and a large dining table for eating in.

Late spring and early fall are my favourite times to visit Vancouver Island. The crowds are much smaller, and prices are lower than in peak-season summer, yet the weather is typically warm and comfortable.



Tigh-Na-Mara's resort sits above three kilometres of sandy beach and the warmest ocean swimming Canada has to offer. PNG MERLIN ARCHIVE

ria International Airport. The charming oceanside town is a quiet haven, located about 40 minutes north of Victoria's inner harbour. Although our time was limited, we did visit the Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea, next door to the hotel, to discover the mysterious underwater world of the Pacific Ocean. Although small, the museum offers some interesting exhibits, including the floor-to-ceiling aquarium tanks with a giant octopus and 160 other marine species, a killer whale skeleton,

and hands-on tide pools.

We also loved Butchart Gardens, located about a 20-minute drive from Sidney. The grounds are

breathtaking, with ample space for kids to explore. I gave Brooklyn my phone to take macro shots of flowers, which kept her entertained while my husband and I

wandered through the gardens. She also liked riding on the carousel's hand-carved wooden animals and getting soft-serve ice cream from the coffee shop.



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