

Chemainus

The Art of Survival

EPITOMIZING THE PROVERB 'Necessity is the Mother of Invention', the story of modern Chemainus is remarkable. With dogged determination and inventiveness, this small community fought and beat unpromising odds to secure its future. The most extraordinary aspect of the victory is that it was won simply by placing faith in the seductiveness of art.

With an evidently gutsy population of around 4,300, Chemainus occupies a cozy nook on a picturesque bay on Vancouver Island's east coast: "It is truly a beautiful place to live," says Gillian Miller, Manager of Chemainus Chamber of Commerce and resident for five years.

Largely dependent on the forestry industry from which it evolved in the mid-19th century, Chemainus faced a potentially bleak future when

the industry and antediluvian local sawmill ran into troubles in the late 1970s.

Then, following the award of a timely redevelopment grant, the town decided to invest in the creation of murals depicting key episodes in local history. Not so unusual, perhaps, until you consider that the proposal suggested the murals be painted on available walls of town buildings. Commencing in 1982, it has proven to be a truly visionary scheme.

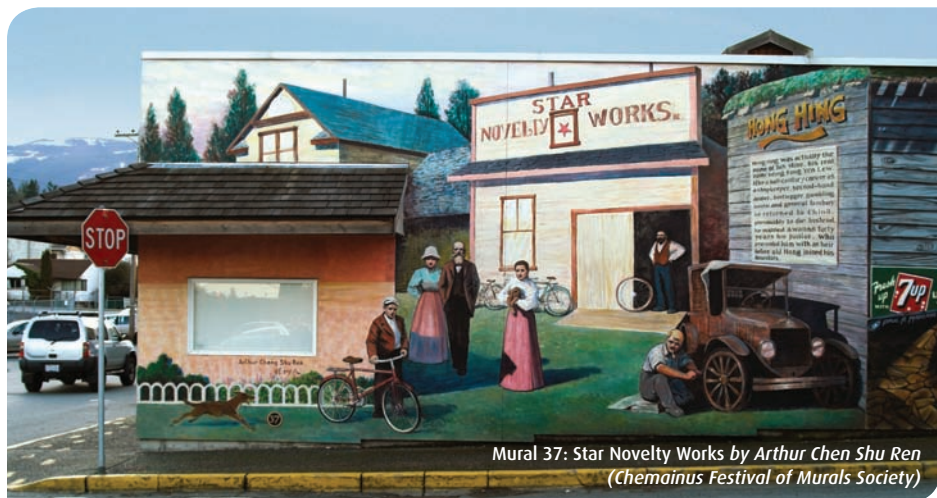
Situated 30 minutes south of Nanaimo, an hour north of Victoria, Chemainus consequently proudly boasts the epithet "The Little Town That Did"® in salute to its creative revitalization. Now globally recognized as one of the world's largest outdoor art galleries, this enchanting destination has seen a phoenix-like resurrection with upwards of 400,000 visitors a year. Understandably, the population of Chemainus is delighted at the hugely regenerative impact the artworks have had: "There is a lot of ownership pride," confirms Miller.

Following a trail marked by painted yellow footprints, tourists encounter the 38 breathtaking murals and 12 sculptures

throughout the town, each of which was produced by an internationally renowned artist. The importance of their creations is celebrated every last weekend of June with the aptly named "Festival of Murals". This year marks 25 years since the project was launched, so a particularly colourful event is expected that will include the usual outdoor music and dancing among a variety of activities. There is plenty at the festival to keep the children entertained, but it's also easy enough to keep them distracted year-round at the town's lovely, nautically themed Waterwheel Park.

Despite such a bright spotlight permanently trained on the artistic heart of Chemainus, this town is far from a one-trick pony. Repeat visitors will find an abundance of attractions catering to all tastes.

While the history of the town may surround visitors in the brushstrokes of the murals, no trip is complete without the parallel experience of the Chemainus Valley Museum. Housing a cornucopia of fascinating local artifacts, this engaging small-town folk museum rivals any in Canada.



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Mural 12: Native Heritage by Paul Ygartua at the corner of Mill St. and Chemainus Rd. (Chemainus Festival of Murals Society)

Shoppers are treated to a fine choice in gift and specialty stores, boutiques and art galleries, not to mention outdoor markets during the sunshine months. This is also a hotspot for antiques and elusive collectibles, stemming from the burgeoning art community.

Outdoor adventures abound. Golfers treasure the verdant Mount Brenton Golf Course. Divers head to Chemainus from around the world for the amazing Xihwu Reef. A painstakingly sited, fully explorable Boeing 737 airliner, it's the latest addition to British Columbia's extraordinary choice in artificial reefs. Should you prefer life on the

surface, however, Kin Beach, Clark Beach or Fuller Lake Park all offer beautiful settings for a relaxing and safe swim, beachcombing or sunbathing.

Aside from the murals, Chemainus is also famed for an excellent theatrical culture. Patrons flock from across the Cowichan Valley and far beyond to visit Chemainus Theatre, housed in a beautiful Italianate building with a domed rotunda over the lobby. Whether a classic play, musical or children's production, the consistently high quality has earned the company a world-class reputation. The typically diverse 2007 Chemainus Theatre Festival presents a

programme including works by Anton Chekhov, Agatha Christie and Cole Porter amongst the treats in store.

It's especially heartwarming to know that the problems leading directly to Chemainus' dramatic reinvention have been largely resolved. International forestry giants Weyerhaeuser stepped in to salvage the old sawmill, reopening it in 1985 following a redesign and substantial technological upgrades. Once again a major Chemainus employer, this seems just rewards for the indomitable community of "The Little Town That Did"®. —David Morrison

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