

Nanaimo

Relocation, relocation, relocation...

WHEN RESEARCHING WHERE to set up home in Western Canada, Joel and Mary Crocker's criteria was carved in stone. Seeking a balance of inexpensive living, solid real estate investment, proximity to major cities and access to outdoor pursuits, "Nanaimo came up as the winner," says Joel.

Vancouver Island's second largest city is an increasingly desired relocation choice, the population now in excess of 82,000. The Crockers became residents in June 2007, purchasing a bargain house overlooking Departure Bay. This stunning natural harbour and original Snunéymuxw First Nations settlement hosts the principal ferry terminal linking the island to the mainland. Offering a wonderful panorama of the Coast Mountains, it's also an enviable address.

The home of the world famous Nanaimo Bar fridge-cake has worked tirelessly to shake off a hard image lingering from its days as a coal-mining town. It's proving a successful strategy, and with substantial downtown regeneration underway, including the construction of a major convention centre, there is a tangible sense of optimism gripping this proud community. Designated a Cultural Capital of Canada for 2008, the 'new' Nanaimo is getting noticed by young people like the Crockers. "What made Nanaimo particularly attractive for us is that it's a small, affordable city; it's close to Vancouver

and Victoria and there's a really interesting 'scene' here," Joel explains.

Just twenty minutes by floatplane from Vancouver, Nanaimo is on Vancouver Island's southeast coast. Only 111 kilometres north of Victoria, its name originates from the Coast Salish word 'sney-ny-mo,' meaning "meeting place." While it may act as a hub opening up the island to visitors, "The Harbour City" has evolved into an essential vacation destination, with a remarkably diverse amount to see and experience.

The focus for history buffs is the iconic Bastion on Front Street, one of many important 19th century buildings worthy of a visit. Not only was it the first permanent structure to be erected in the original town in 1853, it remains the oldest wooden fort in North America.

As well as offering wonderful harbour views and great shopping and dining, the Old City Quarter neighbourhood also features a number of lovely heritage buildings. One of the more famous is a popular community watering hole, the Occidental Hotel (1886), affectionately known as "The Oxy."

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A breathtaking view of downtown Nanaimo, the ferry terminal and surrounding mountains (Terry Patterson, www.terrypattersonphotography.com)



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The Bastion (seen here on the right) defines the downtown harbour area (Terry Patterson, www.terrypattersonphotography.com)



From independent sites such as The & Loan Gallery to the hi-tech 804-seat Port Theatre, Nanaimo has plenty of choice venues presenting a wide range of live performances to satisfy the appetites of all age groups. The music and arts scene is strong, especially in the summertime with a packed schedule of free events. These include concerts from classical to rock in the seafront Maffeo-Sutton Park, one of numerous green spaces of which Nanaimo is justifiably proud. Two of these are the expansive Bowen Park and Beban Park, each providing opportunities to pursue a plethora of fun activities. The latter houses the Frank Crane Arena, home to the lauded Nanaimo Clippers Junior A ice hockey team, one of the city's great sporting successes.

Those inclined towards the outdoor life may find themselves overwhelmed by choice in and around Nanaimo. Golfers, take note of no less than twenty courses within an hour's drive, with the city's Nanaimo Golf Club presenting a challenging 18-hole round with extraordinary views to boot.

More exertive activities are also widely available. Bungee jumpers, for example, claim their own custom-built bridge arching 150 feet



A bathtub racer zipping across the ocean during the annual marine festival (Terry Patterson, www.terrypattersonphotography.com)

over the Nanaimo River. As a backdrop to the city, the awe-inspiring Mt. Benson is a veritable playground for hikers and mountain bikers with mile upon mile of beautiful trails to explore.

Fishing, boating, kayaking, windsurfing and diving are just a few of the aquatic activities on offer, but by far the highest profile ocean-based event is the annual Bathtub Race, attracting competitors and spectators from all over the world. Staged in July as the centrepiece of the Nanaimo Marine Festival, the race climaxes at Departure Bay's beach and features unique little vessels zipping over a punishing course.

Less frenetic is the pace of life at Nanaimo's beauty spots, lakes and beaches. The most beautiful of all local beaches is found at Piper's Lagoon. While the beach itself is pebbly, the rugged location is absolutely breathtaking. Spots such as this so dazzled Mary Crocker on her first Nanaimo reconnaissance that, upon departing, she was convinced that this was where she and Joel should be. "I was just so enthralled by the setting," she gushes.

So they made their move. Others will certainly follow. —David Morrison

Nanaimo's Harbourfront Promenade (Terry Patterson, www.terrypattersonphotography.com)



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