

This Vancouver Island destination is redefining what it means to be “close to nature”

As a gateway to Desolation Sound and the Coast Mountains, Campbell River is evolving into a base camp for travellers drawn to the space between ocean and alpine

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STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MADIGAN COTTERILL



The rotors of the C-FFXH helicopter slow and then cease. The progression from heavy vibration to almost complete silence feels almost jarring as we disembark into B.C.’s Coast Mountains. Today, there are no clouds or wind, just the sun reflecting off the snow so brightly I have to squint.



With 49North Helicopters, travellers can reach the heart of B.C.’s Coast Mountains in under an hour.

Just minutes earlier, our group (split between two aircrafts operated by [49North Helicopters](#)) was flying above the Discovery Islands, a dense archipelago of forested islands along British Columbia’s Inside Passage. At one point, we looked down to see a hawk soaring far below; later we spotted a gray whale surfacing. For 45 minutes, we ascend into the mountains, moving beyond the tree line and eventually into the peaks.

The other helicopter lands first. From the sky, we watch its skids sink into the powder. We’re next.

I hesitate before stepping out, unsure how deep the snow is. When I do, my boots immediately disappear into the white powder, filling with snow. I don’t care — *this is beautiful*, I think. Ninety minutes later, I’m in my bathing suit, revelling in the view while basking in a floating sauna.

That evening, we dine on oysters and share a plate of tiramisu.

This is Campbell River, a quintessentially Canadian destination where access to the ocean, mountains and forests is immediate, and wondrous experiences are seemingly endless.



“There’s just so much to offer in such a small area,” says Amanda Mailman, owner and managing director of [Naturally Pacific Resort](#). “You’re not travelling hours to get to various attractions. Everything is literally 40 minutes away.”

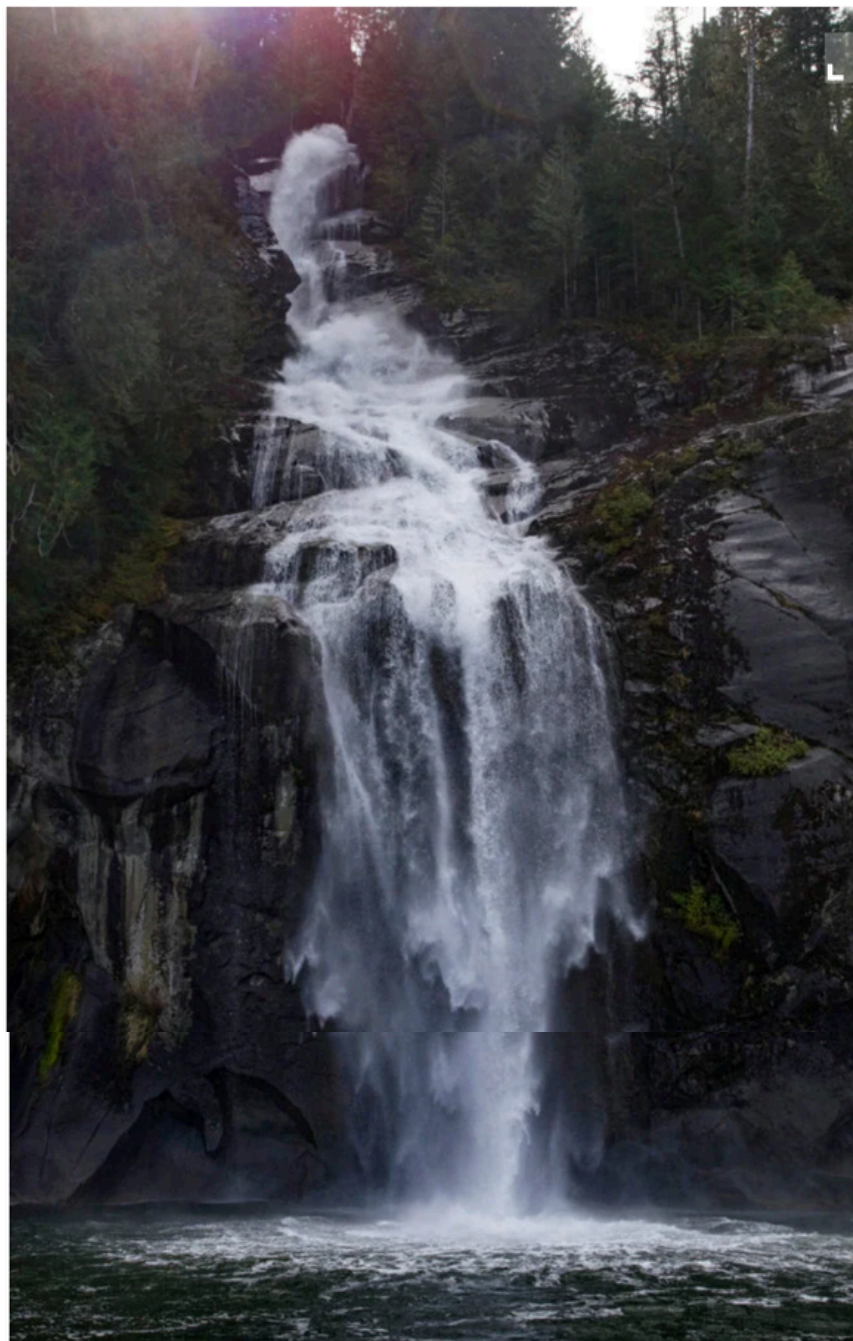
Mailman, who was born and raised in Campbell River and has experienced the region’s growth firsthand, describes her home community as a welcoming coastal town with a small-town mentality. “You can be at the top of a mountain in 40 minutes. Then you can snowshoe, ski or snowboard. Or you can take in all the coastal activities like grizzly bear watching, whale watching — even just watching the eagles.”

Opened in May 2024, Naturally Pacific Resort was introduced to Campbell River as an elevated escape. In keeping with that promise, the resort boasts signature amenities such as [Immersion Spa + Wellness](#), [Carve Kitchen + Meatery](#) and the 18-hole [Campbell River Golf Club](#). Involved in the details of the hotel’s design, Mailman was adamant that every aspect of Naturally Pacific Resort align with the region’s vibe: earth-toned accents, local photography displayed on the walls, a live plant wall and floor-to-ceiling glass windows to showcase the views. There’s even an entire dog-friendly floor, Naturally “Pawcific.”

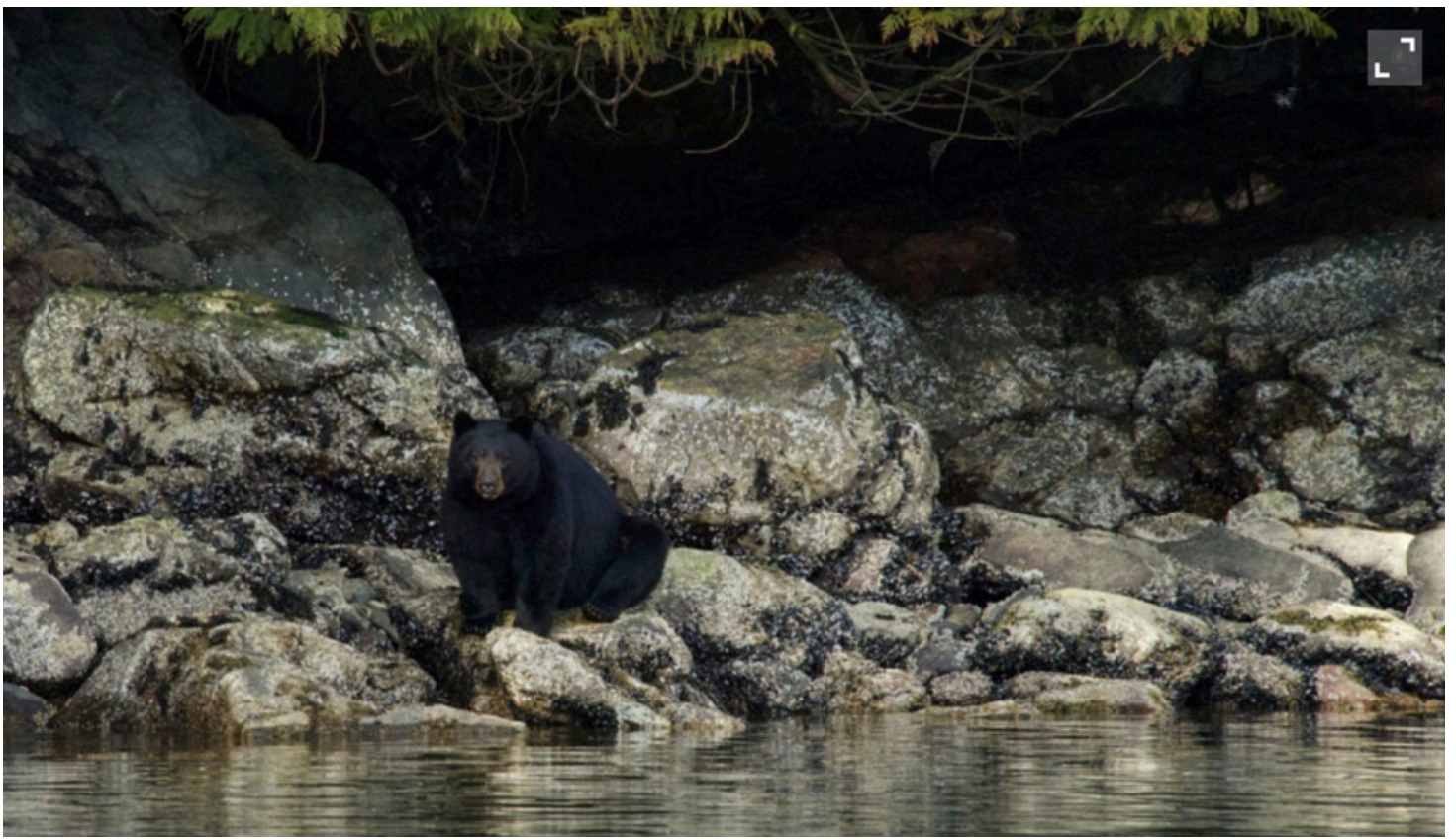
“Being able to bring those elements into the resort and show them to our guests is huge.” says Mailman. “Especially when you have international visitors coming — some who have never even seen a deer.”

The third-largest city on Vancouver Island, Campbell River has 37,500 residents and serves as a major regional hub due to its location half-way up the east coast of the island. This up-and-coming destination is only going to get more popular as it becomes easier to visit.

In May 2026, [WestJet](#) launched seasonal direct flights from Calgary to Campbell River, operating four times a week and increasing to daily service during peak summer months. In March 2026, [Harbour Air](#) announced it would expand its services this July to include daily flights from Vancouver to Campbell River, providing an efficient escape to the area. Regional carriers like Pacific Coastal Airlines will also continue to connect Campbell River with communities across B.C., including Vancouver, Kelowna and Victoria.



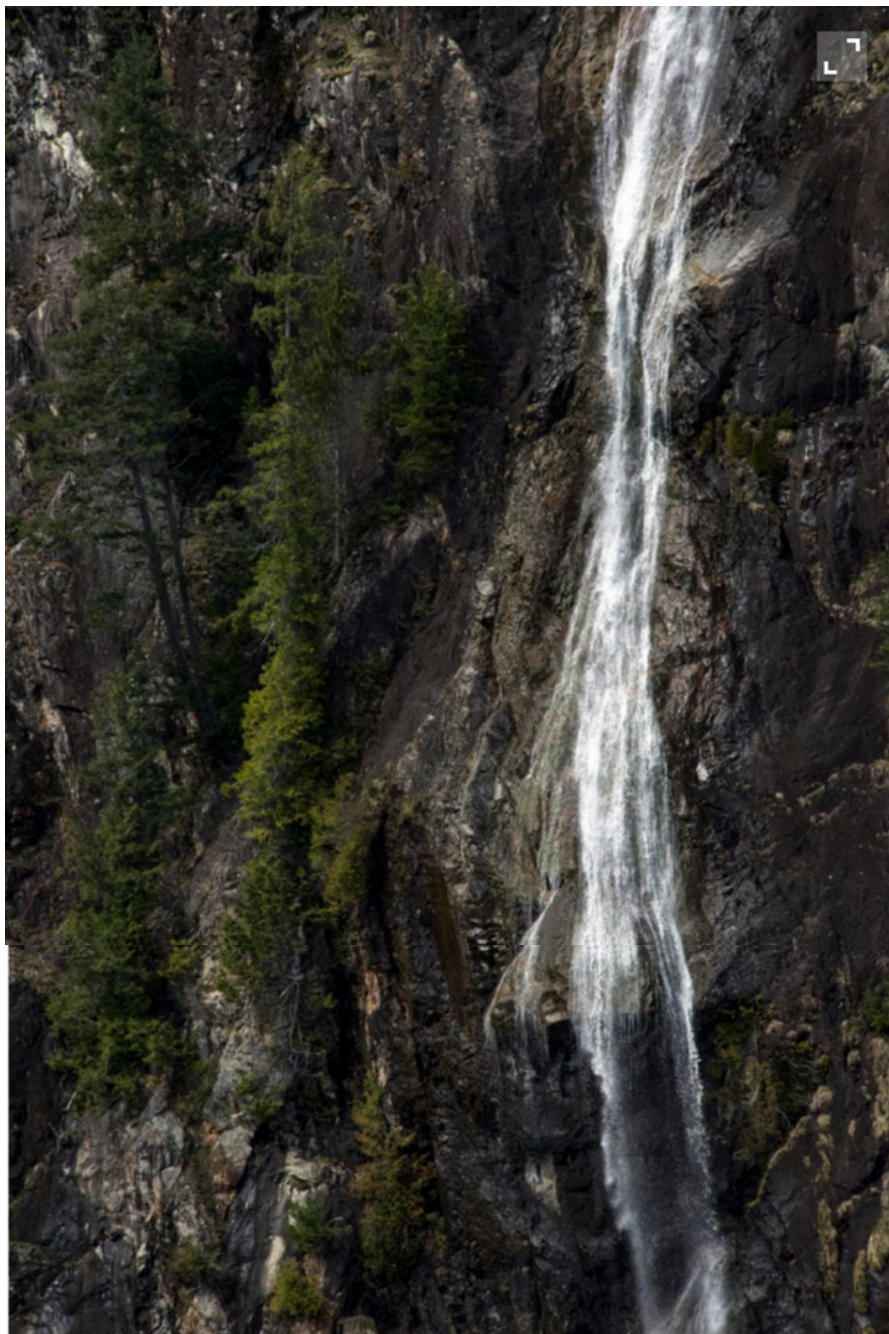
Racine Falls in Toba Inlet is a well-known stop along the coastline for photo opportunities.



Inside [Freya Nordic Baking & Kaffe](#), visitors breathe in the mouthwatering aroma of melted butter while choosing treats from a display of meticulously crafted pastries, breads and croissants.

“You can’t go wrong with a cinnamon bun,” says Kyle Booton, Freya’s head barista, as customers scan the menu items — kimchi and bacon danishes, banana caramel flan, cardamon knots, sausage rolls, blackberry cinnamon buns, the list goes on. “Every croissant is a little different,” he adds.

Known for its slow-fermented sourdough, this Scandinavia-inspired bakery opened in downtown Campbell River in July 2022. Owners Emese and Géza Tóth-Haraszto, who originally immigrated to Canada from Hungary, have since added a second location in Courtenay, B.C.



“My favourite thing is the community and landscapes,” says Booton. “You can drive 20 minutes in any direction and you’re in beautiful nature.”

Fuelled and caffeinated, we head out the door. Five minutes later, we’re at the Discovery Harbour Marina, gearing up for a whale-watching tour through the Discovery Islands.

For thousands of years, the Discovery Islands have been inhabited by Indigenous Peoples, including the Klahoose, Wei Wai Kum, We Wai Kai, Homalco, Kwiakah and Songhees Nations.

“They shaped the area that we’re in and we’re very fortunate to work and play in their lands,” says Zoe Hasenfratz, a guide and naturalist with Campbell River Whale Watching and Adventure Tours, as we embark on a six-hour tour.

Onboard *Wild 1*, a 30-foot vessel with a covered (and heated) interior, up to 12 passengers can move around the boat for unobstructed views. A second level provides additional vantage points.

Midway through our journey, Hasenfratz cuts the engine — she has spotted a black bear along the shoreline, eating barnacles and crustaceans from the rocks. A few hours later, we’re observing a pod of Bigg’s orcas move through the waters off Heriot Bay. They are splashing and spyhopping, a behaviour that sees the orcas using their powerful tail flukes to hold themselves up vertically to look around above the ocean’s surface.

On the way back to the harbour, Hasenfratz explains the guidelines her company follows to ensure tours don’t interfere with the animals — limiting viewing times,

maintaining distance and reducing speed near marine life. Boats stay at least 200 metres from orcas and 100 metres from other whales, and never position themselves between the animals and the shoreline. “We want them to go about their lives,” explains Hasenfratz. “They’re doing what they do for survival. It’s not a show that they put on for

us. What we're watching is life."

Beyond these protocols, Campbell River Whale Watching also supports Wilderness International, donating a portion of ticket sales to the organization's work protecting threatened temperate rainforests on the west coast of Canada.



In Campbell River, water shapes daily life. The ocean is something to watch, work on and eventually, step into.

After just 15 minutes in a wood-fired cedar sauna floating in the marina, I'm stepping into an ocean-fed cold plunge, feeling the refreshing shock of frigid water. Minutes earlier, the air inside the sauna was thick with heat and eucalyptus as Amanda Linnen, the owner of [Island Floating Sauna](#), gently fanned the room as part of an aufguss (a guided German wellness ritual designed to create a heightened sensory journey). Outside, boats drift by and BC Ferries move steadily through the channel, causing the sauna to rock gently in their wake.

Moored in the harbour, the floating sauna offers a different way to engage with the landscape. Between sessions, guests move from the wood-fired sauna to a cold plunge into filtered ocean water, the cycle repeating as the body adjusts.

A new addition to Campbell River, Island Floating Sauna is creating a space for travellers and locals to breathe, unwind and reconnect with nature and themselves. "There's just something magical and special here," says Linnen in describing Campbell River.

Back at Naturally Pacific Resort, travellers have a decision to make: continue an afternoon of relaxation at Immersion Spa + Wellness, head to the Velocity Driving Range for an immersive game of Angry Birds, dine at Carve Kitchen + Meatery, tour the resort's 22,500-square-foot Pacific Patch sustainable herb and vegetable garden — we choose the outdoor fire pits.

Cocooned in white bathrobes with drinks in hand, we take a moment to appreciate just how quickly Campbell River moves between comfort and wilderness, with mountains, ocean and forest never far beyond reach. 🍷



Campbell River's Island Floating Sauna is a new attraction, boasting great views of boats and ferries passing by.