



## DESTINATION ESQUIMALT

A historic look at the home of Canada's Maritime Forces Pacific, and a whole lot more

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eing a newcomer to Esquimalt, British Columbia, I'm just getting to know my way around. I recently visited Macaulay Point for its off-leash dog park and ocean views—and surprise!—I stumbled across some of my neighbourhood's rich history.

Here stood Fort Macaulay, where structures going back to 1895 still stand—a rare feat for this part of the world. I soon discovered that Esquimalt—about 10 minutes outside of downtown Victoria—is full of historic sites, including a naval museum, commemorative monuments and gorgeous heritage homes, all with fascinating stories.

**THE SONGHEES FIRST** Nation had lived in this “place of gradually shoaling waters” for thousands of years before a Spanish ship anchored in the peninsula's well-protected harbour in 1790. It was the first recorded visit of Europeans in Esquimalt. Two years later, Captain George Vancouver explored and gained control of the region for Britain and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The British Royal Navy followed, >

Macaulay Point Park, Esquimalt's hidden gem and a canine favourite.





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buying three wooden buildings from HBC on prime waterfront land (now home to Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt). With its superior harbour, some predicted that Esquimalt would become a great commercial import-export centre. Instead, it became the Pacific headquarters of the Royal Navy—in a time when Vancouver was pretty much Gastown, Hastings Mill and dense forest.

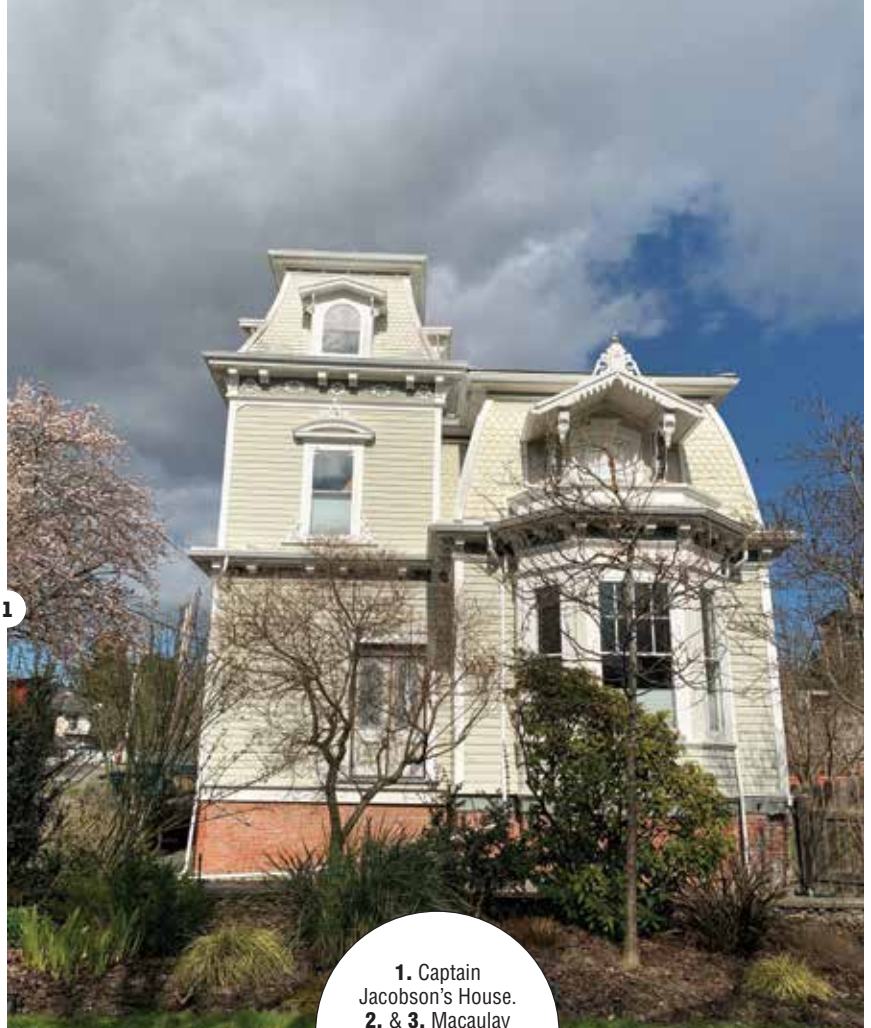
But the discovery of gold along the Fraser River in 1858 added to the popularity and growing population of Vancouver Island. Ships from all over the world, from San Francisco to Australia, deposited prospectors in Esquimalt harbour, where “Indians with canoes and local owners of small boats” ferried them to Victoria, where they needed a mining licence and supplies, chronicles Maureen Duffus, editor of *Beyond the Blue Bridge—Stories from Esquimalt*. Or they could tramp along the Esquimalt Trail, a dirt track in 1852 before the sailors of HMS *Thetis* built Esquimalt Road—the first planned road in Western Canada—by hacking through the bush from the naval station to Fort Victoria. Old Esquimalt Road is now designated as a heritage road, flanked by some stellar art deco houses.

After the gold rush, Esquimalt merchants went back to doing business with the local population of whites and First Nations, and the Royal Navy became their most important customer. The navy brought about permanent homes and churches. And pubs.

By 1912, “some 2,000 acres of rocky shoreline... muddy roads with board sidewalks, a village, some grand mansions, an impressive brick school and more pubs than the population warranted became the Township of Esquimalt,” records Duffus. However, “Skedaddling and bankruptcies alone are lively,” said a local bank manager. “We are commercially dull as dishwater.”

**THE NAVY ATTRACTED** the rich and famous. There’s no need to visit Oak Bay or Rockland to see heritage homes. John Adams, with Discover the Past Walking Tours, takes visitors on a “gentle walk off the beaten track” that takes about 90 minutes, ending with a beer at Spinnakers Pub.

Starting at the Esquimalt border, Captain Jacobson’s House is a great example



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1. Captain Jacobson's House.  
2. & 3. Macaulay Point fortifications.  
4. West Bay Hidden Harbour Marina.



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of steamboat gothic architecture, built by the captain in 1893 when he was 80 years old after a successful career owning the Victoria Sealing Company. We walk past West Bay and Hidden Harbour Marina (note kayak rentals and the water taxi stop) and onto Paradise Street, named by Jacobson who purchased the *Casco* in 1900, about 12 years

passionate about Esquimalt than volunteer archivist Sherri Robinson, who has lived here 70 years. (She has created seven foot-friendly treks that include maps and commentary for "Township Walking Tours" that you can download at [esquimalt.ca/explore](http://esquimalt.ca/explore).) Robinson says that some grand houses were built and later demolished but a few have survived, in-

cluding three on Wollaston Street, one of which was designed by Francis Rattenbury. A Samuel Maclure mansion at 429 Lampson Street barely missed the wrecker's ball. It was once "The Olde England Inn" and a world-famous tourist attraction, soon to be converted into condos. Several other turn-of-the-century homes that narrowly escaped destruction are now safe with a heritage designation.

after author Robert Louis Stevenson cruised on the schooner to the South Pacific, aka Paradise.

**AT MACAULAY POINT,** you can find the abandoned gun battery and lookouts

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built in 1878 to defend Esquimalt and Victoria after the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war, as Britain might have become involved, but of course no guns were ever used in anger. You can see the date carved on the lower entrance to the tunnel leading to the main observation post. And you can still see red brick artillery stores, a smith's shop and the machine gun ammunition stores building. You'll likely also see rock climbers scaling the park's cliffs and rock faces, a lot of dogs in the off-leash park and excellent views of the Juan de Fuca Strait and the Olympic Mountains.

Meander a few more blocks to Saxe Point, a perfect picnic spot with open spaces, ocean vistas and eagle nests. During the Second World War, many trees on this 7.5-hectare site were cleared and a searchlight was installed as part of shoreline defence. Now the waters around Saxe Point are explored by scuba divers.

Talk about names of places. "Prince Albert was Prince of Saxe-Coburg and this is also linked to Queen Victoria," says John Adams. Look out toward Esquimalt Lagoon and you'll see Victoria to the east, Albert Head to the west and the peninsula is named Coburg (which is also worth visiting: It's a two-kilometre spit of land with historic links to Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations).

For a jaw-dropping 360-degree view of Esquimalt and beyond, hike to the top of Highrock Park off historic Lampson Street. Here is a stone cairn and directional dial that was dedicated in 1962 during the Township's Golden Jubilee year.

**I MEET DENNIS** Maniker, as passionate about the Gorge neighbourhood as Sherri is about Esquimalt. He has been guiding historic walking tours for 29 years and published his book, *The Gorge of Summers Gone*, about the history of the Gorge Waterway.

"I found old-timers who told me stories going back to 1906. They still had photo albums from their parents and souvenirs like medals from swimming competitions at the Gorge," says Maniker. Unknown to most Victoria residents today, the Gorge Waterway was once the hub of their city between 1890 and 1930.

1. The Gorge Waterway.
2. The Japanese Gardens and teahouse in 1915.

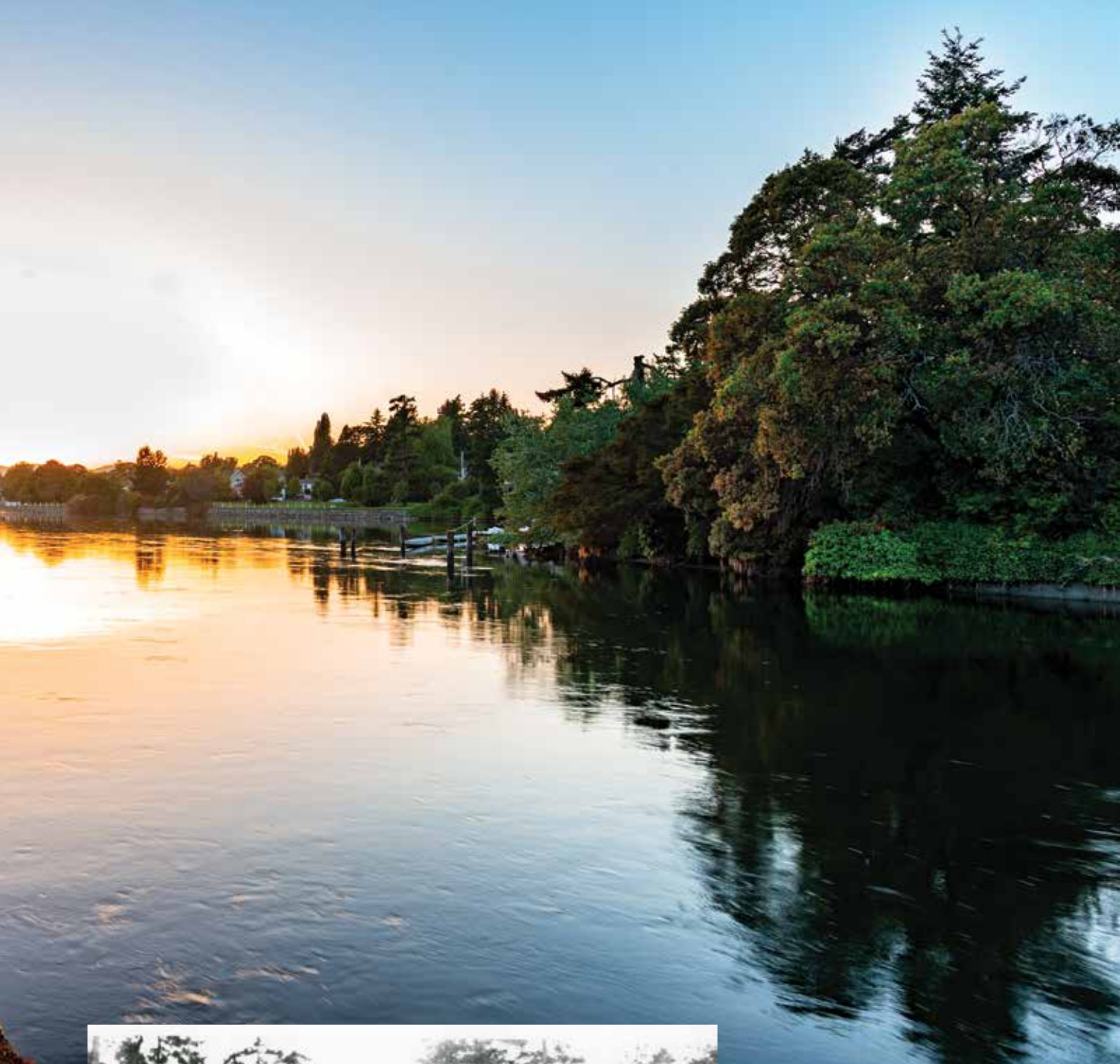
We deke under the Gorge Bridge and Maniker points out a midden, a First Nations site at least 4,000 years old. "The first bridge across the Gorge was a log," he says. "Since the 1890s the bridge became a favourite viewing point for spectators at regattas and the bridge itself became a tourist attraction: Kids clinging to the railings would wait for a crowd, pretending they were terrified of diving in so they could get enough money. They would dive in and come up laughing."

Strolling through the park, Maniker directs our gaze across the Gorge to

two huge sequoia trees. "Carol's Castle was there in the 1920s. She was running a brothel and the police did midnight raids. One night they found the entire team of baseball players from Tacoma," he says, laughing. "And beer parlours were also popular."

Time for a brew at the Gorge Pub, which is the third pub erected on this site since 1875. Photographs circa 1900 line the walls, including one titled "Indian Canoes Race Up The Gorge." Owner Mike Joss shows us a Liquor Control Board licence dated 1935. Sandwiches are 10 cents and a barrel of beer is \$23.





"You got 600 glasses from one barrel that was delivered from Victoria by horse and buggy," says Joss.

"Sundays we would walk to the Japanese Tea Gardens on the Gorge. We always went inside to have Japanese tea and toast," says Jean Woodford in her story from *Beyond the Blue Bridge*. She took the number five streetcar from Wollaston Street in Esquimalt (where she was born in 1913) to the Gorge. "There were boathouses down near where the pool is now, and we could swim in the Gorge then. There were variety shows on an outdoor stage, a shooting gallery ▶

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1. Esquimalt Town Centre, scheduled for completion this year, will include residential and commercial spaces.  
 2. Highrock Park, also called Cairn Park, is the highest point in Esquimalt.

2



and other games." These days the Rowing Club hosts a regatta in October: The race starts under the Blue Bridge (also known as the Johnson Street Bridge) and the Gorge Bridge is packed with spectators cheering them on.

**ABOUT ONE YEAR** from now, a former works yard will be transformed into Esquimalt Town Centre. "I admit our town centre is a bit disconnected because we lack a focal gathering point, but we will

soon have indoor and outdoor spaces in a new town square with shops and three *good* restaurants," says Barb Desjardins, Esquimalt's Mayor. We'll have our own Spinnakers [popular gastropub on Esquimalt's border with Victoria West] and we're already pedestrian friendly." Speaking of food, the mayor hints that food trucks and coffee carts might park at Fleming Beach.

"We have a community here, what more do you need," says Desjardins,

laughing. "Seriously, visitors return for many reasons. History buffs start at the naval museum, where they get a sense of what was happening here back in the 1850s, and the HMCS *Esquimalt* is very near and dear to us. And if you're a serious navy buff, we are developing a map that shows anchors—where they came from, why and when. It will be a reminder of our historic naval partnership." (HMCS *Esquimalt* was a minesweeper that served in the Royal Canadian Navy during the Second World War. She was sunk in 1945, the last Canadian warship to see such a fate. A memorial cairn is located on the lawn of Esquimalt's town hall.)

"Once people get here, they often return, especially since our centennial in 2012," says Desjardins, "but many visitors to Victoria see the bridge as a hurdle. They don't know that we have significant transportation to get here: it's a 30-minute walk, a 10-minute bike ride and the bus leaves Victoria every seven minutes. Our vision statement is that the town of Esquimalt is a vibrant, distinct and diverse community for people to discover and belong." 🐾



Point Ellice House Museum.

## IF YOU GO

### **POINT ELLICE HOUSE MUSEUM**

On your way to Esquimalt, stop at Point Ellice House Museum and Gardens near the Bay Street Bridge and overlooking the Upper Harbour and Gorge Waterway. Imagine three generations of hoarders: this historic home contains 8,000 artefacts—even the upholstery is original. These artefacts were used daily by the O'Reilly family from 1867 to 1975. (No relation to Paul O'Reilly, below.)

The house is internationally recognized for its display of 1890 to 1920 era décor. And the soundscape in the drawing room is so realistic, you hear the tinkling of teacups and indistinct voices. Check out the copper-lined bathtub, the interactive writing station, the stove from Albion Ironworks and faded recipes in the kitchen

(copies are offered in the gift shop). Take a woodland walk amongst the Sequoia trees and a horse chestnut tree planted in the 1870s. Holly and lilac, hawthorn and roses were planted by the O'Reillys. On the wall, a photo of the gardens at the front door looks pretty much the same as it does today.

Royal Navy officers once came here by boat along the Gorge waterway. And you can come here by the Victoria Harbour Ferry. Ask to get off at the Point Ellice House dock. Open Saturdays and Sundays.

### **NAVAL & MILITARY MUSEUM**

The CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum in HMCS *Naden* was built in 1891 to house sick officers. It included four wards, a dining room, sitting room and nurses' room.

Try to book a tour of the Naden Museum with Paul

O'Reilly. He joined the navy in 1968 and he has a wealth of knowledge. He'll explain the latest technology in 1910—the radar. "Before Google maps we used wax paper to mark your spot, such as where enemy aircraft was sighted," O'Reilly tells us. He gets visitors thinking and engages them by asking questions such as, "How would a ship at sea know the war was over?" and "What country would Canada be today if the Battle of the Atlantic had been lost?"

One room is devoted to the Korean War, and another room shows a sailor about to roll a depth-charger off the stern. A recreation of a 1950s fall-out shelter in a basement home is complete with all kinds of food supplies from that era. Fascinating. And it's just 15 minutes from downtown Victoria.

