

Vacationing in Southeastern British Columbia

Mention that you will be vacationing in British Columbia and most people probably think you will be going to Vancouver, Whistler, or Victoria. In addition to the west coast of British Columbia, there is also an agricultural area in the southern center of the Province (the Okanagan) which is home to many wineries and an area in the southern eastern part of the Province (the Kootenays) known for its natural beauty. In this article we will focus on vacationing in the Kootenays (this area is sometimes called the BC Rockies, but the mountains are really the Purcell and Selkirk ranges).

If traveling to the Kootenays by air, the easiest airport to fly in and out of is Spokane Airport in Washington. To get to there from Spokane Airport, one heads east on Interstate 90 for about 34 miles. You will pass the city of Spokane and enter Idaho. Take exit 12 in Coeur d'Alene (US 95) and go north (if you first wish to see the downtown area of Coeur d'Alene before heading to British Columbia go south on US 95)

Going north on US 95, a few miles from Coeur d'Alene you will pass the Silverwood Theme Park and about 28 miles beyond Silverwood you will come to Lake Pend Oreille (pronounced: pond-o-ray) and the town of Sandpoint, Idaho. US 95 bypasses the town, but it is easy to exit the highway to see the town and return to the highway beyond the bypass. At Sandpoint you will be joining the International Selkirk Loop (see: <http://www.selkirkloop.org/>), a 280 scenic drive through Idaho, British Columbia, and Washington.

About 30 miles north of Sandpoint you will come to Bonners Ferry, the last town of any size before you reach the Canadian border. This is a good place to get gasoline before heading into Canada as gas prices are significantly higher in Canada than in the US. (If you decide to wait to fill up your tank, there are a couple of gas stations in Porthill just south of the US/Canada border.) About 14 miles north of Bonners Ferry there will be turn off to the left for Idaho State Highway 1. Go 11 miles on Highway 1 and you come to the US/Canada border. Note that this border is closed from 11 pm to 7 am and the next closest border adds about an hour and a half to one's travels. Also, do not forget to bring your passport along.

Once in Canada, the speed limits are posted in kilometers per hour and distances are given in kilometers. The highway number changes to 21 and about 9 miles beyond the border you will come to the town of Creston, BC. The top three things to do in Creston are: take free tour and tasting at the Columbia Brewery (brewers of Kokanee beer), look at the murals in the downtown area, and visit the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area (see: <https://www.crestonwildlife.ca/>) located a few miles west of town on Highway 3. There is a Ramada Inn on the north side of town and, for those looking for a "donut fix", a Tim Horton's on the opposite side of the road from the Ramada. Most of the other lodging in the Kootenays consists of small hotels, B and B's, and campgrounds. While not on the International Selkirk Loop, Cranbrook is an interesting town (about an hour and a half north east of Creston). It is known for the Canadian Museum of Rail Travel near the center

of town as well as Fort Steele, preserved heritage town, a few miles north of Cranbrook (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cranbrook,_British_Columbia).

Going north from Creston, the International Selkirk is now Highway 3A you will pass through the town of Wynndel (there is a large sawmill there that sometimes gives tours) and the tiny village of Sirdar where there is an old country store along the side of the road. Like most of the towns in the Kootenays, these communities owe their existence to either mining or logging. Shortly after leaving Sirdar, you will reach Kootenay Lake. This main portion of the lake is about 60 miles long and about 5 miles wide and is bordered by mountains on both sides. The drive along the east side of the lake is breath-taking in terms of raw beauty and considered one of the top ten motorcycle rides in Canada (see, for example: http://www.motorcycleroads.com/Routes/Canada_129.html).



Kootenay Lake

The next locality is Boswell. Boswell is the home of the Glass House (see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glass_House_\(British_Columbia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glass_House_(British_Columbia))). This house was built out of approximately 500,000 empty embalming fluid bottles by funeral director David H. Brown and is now a tourist attraction.



The Glass House

Boswell is also home to the Destiny Bay Resort (see: http://www.destinybay.com/Destiny_Bay_Resort/Welcome.html). While the rates there per couple are in the mid to high \$200 range per night, this includes a four course dinner as well as a buffet breakfast.

North of Boswell is Gray Creek, a community that proudly advertises itself as “metric free”. The 101 year old Gray Creek Store (see: <http://graycreekstore.com/>) is an old-time general store and a good source of books on hiking and other outdoor activities that one can engage in while visiting the Kootenays. Avoid the temptation of traveling over the Gray Creek Pass to Cranbrook as the road is unpaved with lots of curves and may be either unpassable or require 4-wheel drive in places. While a shorter distance to Cranbrook, it is no shorter in terms of time than driving back to Creston and following the paved highway to Cranbrook (and your rental car contract may not permit driving on such a road).

North of Gray Creek is the town of Crawford Bay, home to the Kokanee Springs Resort and Golf Course (see: <http://www.kokaneesprings.com/packages-specials/>). The Resort has rooms for let as well as a restaurant where one can eat breakfast lunch or dinner. While the room rate at the Resort can be pricey, another option for lodging in Crawford Bay is the Wedgwood Manor (see: <http://www.wedgwoodcountryinn.com/>). This historic B and B was built for the daughter of British china magnate Josiah Wedgwood and the rates per couple are typically under \$150 per night.

Crawford Bay is also home to several artisan studios (see: <http://artisansofcrawfordbay.com/>). These include the Kootenay Forge which produces forged home accessories and the North Woven Broom Company (whose brooms have been used for the marketing of the Canadian version of the Harry Potter novels as well as for the 2005 movie *Bewitched*). From Crawford Bay it is a short drive to Pilot Bay Provincial Park (see: http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/pilot_bay/) where there is an easy walk to the decommissioned Pilot Bay Lighthouse.



Pilot Bay Lighthouse

A few miles north of Crawford Bay one comes to the landing for the Kootenay Lake Ferry (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kootenay_Lake_Ferry). Advertised as the longest free ferry in North America, the boat makes the five mile journey between the east and west shores of Kootenay Lake in about 35 minutes (see: http://www.th.gov.bc.ca/marine/kootenay_ferry.htm for the ferry schedule). As there is a limited number of cars that can be carried on each crossing, during peak times in the summer you may have to wait a while to get on the ferry. A web cam showing the car line up for the ferry at Kootenay Bay (the east side of the lake can be found at: <http://mainstreet.eshore.ca/web-cams/>). The larger of the two ferries used can handle up to 80 vehicles while the smaller ferry can handle up to 28 vehicles.

The ferry disembarks in the town of Balfour, a few hundred feet from the continuation of Highway 3A to the left and Highway 31 to the right. If one goes north on Highway 31 for 9 miles you will reach Ainsworth Hot Springs (see: <http://www.hotnaturally.com/>). About 10 miles beyond the Hot Springs is a turn off to go to Cody Cave (see: <http://www.codycavetours.com/>) where one can take an escorted tour of the cave. Driving a bit further takes one to the town of Kaslo, known for hosting an annual jazz festival in early August (<http://www.kaslojazzfest.com/v3/>).

Going to the left from Balfour takes one to the historic town of Nelson. On the drive to Nelson you will pass Kokanee Springs Provincial Park (see: http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/kokanee_crk/) where you can observe salmon spawning (usually in August and September). Beyond the park is a turn off on the right to the Kokanee Glacier. The road to the parking lot to hike to the glacier is about 10 miles and can be rough at times. Once you get to the parking lot, you will still have to do a fair bit of hiking to get close to the glacier.

Continuing on Highway 3A for another 12 miles will get you to the historic town of Nelson (see: <http://www.nelson.ca/EN/main/visiting/about-nelson.html>). A former mining town, it has a 1960's hippy-like feel (many Americans moved there in the late 1960's and early 1970's) and has approximately 350 Heritage Buildings (see: <http://kootenay-lake.ca/lakeside/Nelson/heritage/> for a self-guided tour). The 1987 movie Roxanne, while supposedly set in a small Washington ski town, had a majority of the outdoor scenes actually filmed in Nelson (see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roxanne_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roxanne_(film))). The main shopping street of the town is Baker Street which has a number of good restaurants as well as interesting shops. There are also several nice hotels in town, with the centrally located Hume Hotel perhaps being the most historic.



An Historic Building on Baker Street

From Nelson one can continue on the International Selkirk Loop going south back to Sandpoint. Alternatively, one can go west towards Kelowna and Vancouver, or head north towards Revelstoke and then east to go on to Banff and Jasper.

Perhaps the best time to visit the Kootenays is in early to mid September. The weather is good and you avoid the summer crowds. Try to avoid June as it can be rainy. For winter enthusiasts, there is a ski resort south of Nelson, but if you are driving, be aware that the area can get lots of snow and some roads may require chains.

Frugal Ferper Vacation Tip

While I have never been a fan of owning a time share (it seems much of the cost of the time share goes towards the marketing effort and the yearly maintenance cost is not much less than staying in a hotel for a week), many families find them attractive. For those interested in purchasing one, it can be substantially cheaper buying one on the secondary market. There are many websites that advertised “used” time shares. One site that has bargain listings is <http://vacatia.com/timeshare-deals>.