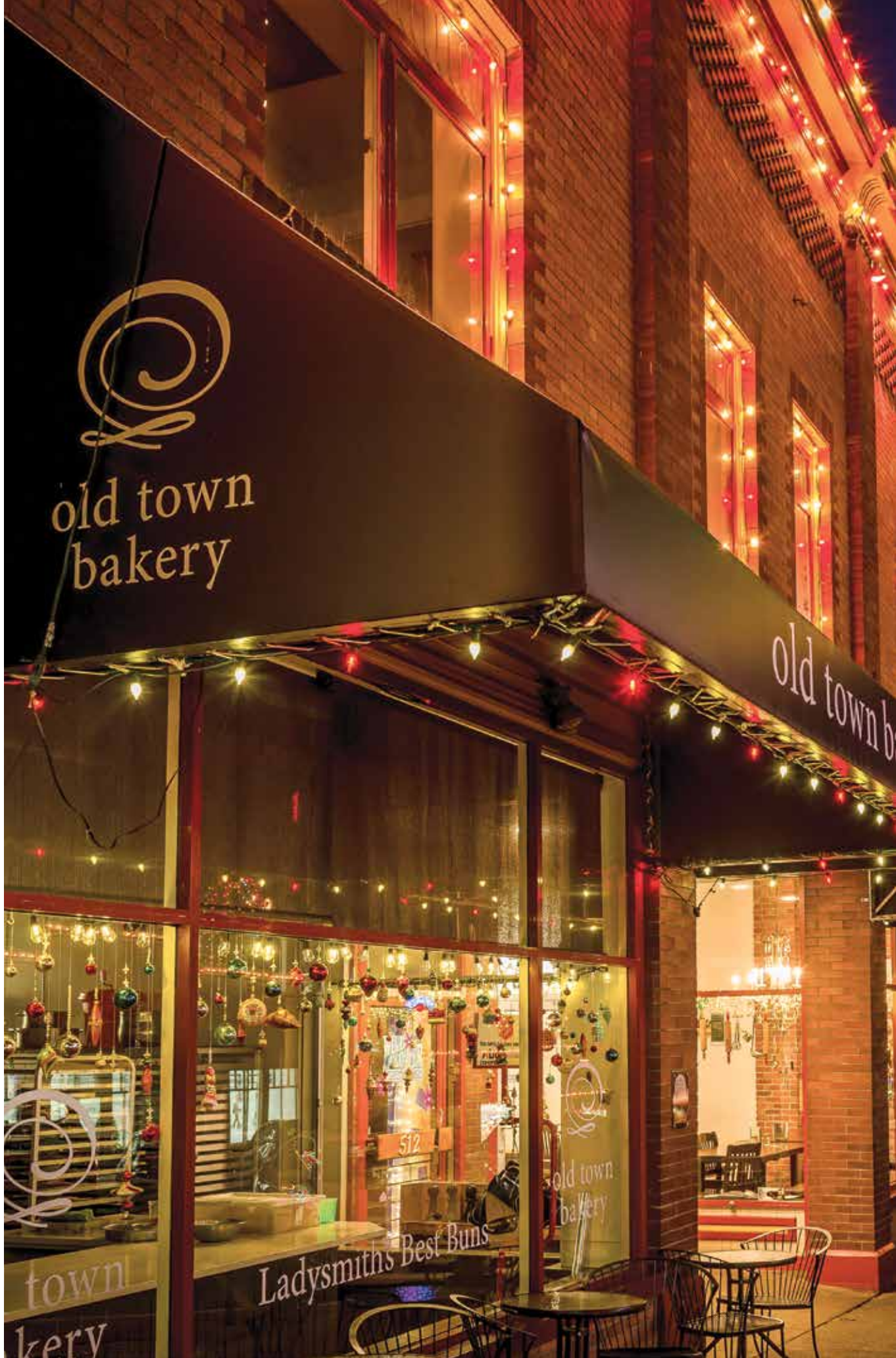


Destination





DESTINATION LADYSMITH

This charming south Vancouver Island town offers plenty of history and authenticity

BY DAVID WEBB

There's a hedgehog loose in Ladysmith, British Columbia. His name is Sonic, and he quite literally painted the town red—and blue and yellow—over a few busy weeks last summer. It was part of the Vancouver Island town's

transformation into a Hollywood film set after Paramount Pictures chose this unassuming 'burg as one of the key locations to shoot its upcoming family-film blockbuster, *Sonic the Hedgehog*.

"People really seemed to get a kick out of it—it was genuinely fun," said Mark Drysdale, executive director of the Ladysmith Chamber of Commerce. It's a sentiment Jacquie Chellew, an administrator at the chamber, echoes: "It was special to see how welcome [the film crew was]."

Ladysmith has always been big on community pride. As one of the island's most historic townsites, this place once dubbed "Oyster Bay" had its modern foundations in the late 1800s thanks to coal mining, logging and, more obviously, oyster fishing. It was also ground-zero for the province's labour movement, when residents banded together to demand better working conditions for the miners on whom the economy rested at the time.

Home to just 8,000 residents, Ladysmith is nestled on the 49th parallel just over ▶

Decorations in the Old Town Bakery on First Avenue during the Ladysmith Festival of Lights.



an hour north of the provincial capital of Victoria, the second-largest metropolitan area in BC, and 20 minutes south of downtown Nanaimo, a city of more than 10 times the population of Ladysmith and the hub of central Van Isle. From a tourism perspective, it's regionally overshadowed by the British glory of Victoria's Inner Harbour, the wild coast of Tofino, the shopping centres of Nanaimo and the beach resorts of Parksville.

In spite of this, Ladysmith has seen 5.9 percent growth in recent years, was voted home to "The Greatest Street in Canada" by the Canadian Institute of Planners in 2017 and is in the process of unveiling a multi-decade-long waterfront revitalization project. This tiny town attracted some 30,000 onlookers to its Christmas Light Up in 2017—now the largest family event on Vancouver Island—and the cinnamon buns at Old Town Bakery have garnered near-legendary status. It begs the question—what's this little Lady's secret to success?

I ONLY MADE it halfway through my Cherry Garcia crepe, leaving behind a slurry of chocolate and fruit on the plate. Delicious, but *holy cow* that's decadent. The bitterness of my Americano is the ideal complement here on the garden patio of Ironworks Café & Creperie, located just off Highway 19 at the foot of Ladysmith's downtown. It's high-time for brunch and as the crepe settles, I'm left with one thought: *This place should be busier.* It's lively enough, but I thought I'd be waiting in line for such a prime seat at a hip eatery.

I recall Jacquie Chellew's words at the Visitor Centre: "Ladysmith is a breath of fresh air to Victoria and Tofino... people stop here and their pockets aren't picked by the tourism operators. They can spend the whole day here, relaxing with their family or spouse. They're delightfully surprised."

Sugar and caffeine rushes are useful when strolling the streets of Ladysmith. From the highway, it's a San Francisco-style slog up steep sidestreets to the town's heritage showpiece of First Avenue, where the laidback vibe continues in a picturesque downtown.

Storefront facades along First Avenue hearken to Edwardian times and shopkeepers are chatty and welcoming at every

stop—even for obvious browsers like myself. Residents smile and wave with pride from the other side of their living-room windows when they spot me admiring their heritage homes. (One at Warren Street would particularly catch my eye.)

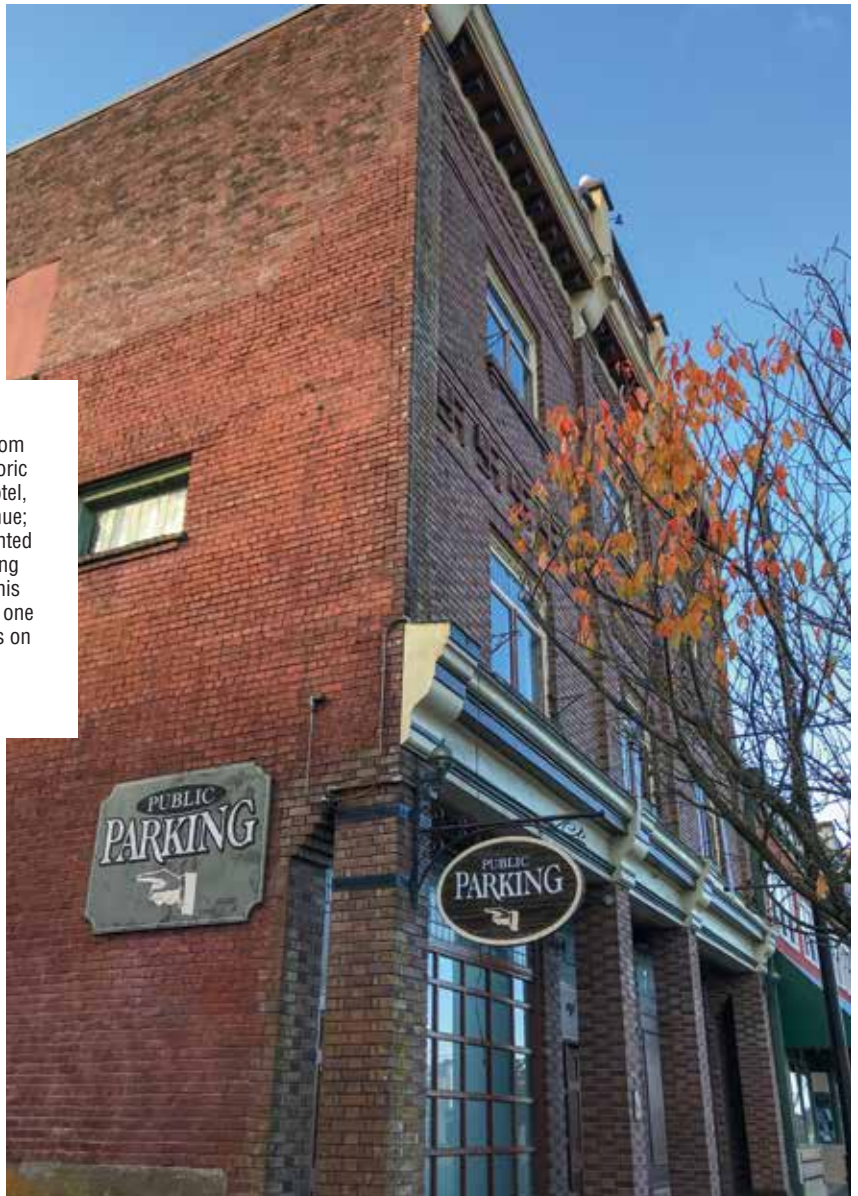
The town's century-old coal mining and logging history is on brilliant display. I seek out historic machinery that dots the sidewalks to inspect their interpretive plaques: a Fordson Steam Donkey, an ore car, a 1920s-era tractor, a mid-century ship-anchor dropped onto a roundabout, a locomotive and more.

At Gatacre Street, a plaque memorializes a 1909 mine explosion that killed 32 miners; one of the leadups to worker

unionization efforts that formed in the face of turn-of-the-last-century coal baron James Dunsmuir's quest for Western economic dominance. Their efforts would kill the mining industry in Ladysmith, but ultimately laid the groundwork for similar movements and their associated benefits all across BC.

"There's a slower pace here, you wander around. Everywhere you look there's something to see," Chellew had explained. "You're not pushed by a schedule—just by really cool stuff you'd never think you were going to see on your trip."

Truly—in only two blocks between Roberts and High Street on First Avenue, I discover 13 heritage buildings—all dating from between 1900 and about 1913. Ac-



Clockwise from left: The historic Travellers Hotel, on First Avenue; Buildings painted for the filming of *Sonic*; This locomotive is one of 23 artifacts on display.

According to the Ladysmith Heritage Walk maps, there are 34 historically significant structures in town, from the turn-of-the-last-century to the 1920s, as well as 23 artifacts from throughout the early to mid-20th century. In the near future, I learn, the town will have a mobile app to further illuminate these rich displays.

MAYOR AARON STONE grew up in Ladysmith, returning as an adult to start a business and eventually take office in 2014 at the age of 39. For this young mayor—who, in true lowkey Ladysmith fashion, is easy to track down—the town’s past is not just an interesting story, it forms the basis of its future.

“We’ve become a very progressive

community with great initiatives and environmentalism and embracing tourism—but we put extra effort into making sure we preserve our heritage and put it under a lens to magnify it, so people can see it in a way that it tells stories,” Stone explains. “We won the Great Street for Canada in 2017 because of that intact heritage. All the improvements have enhanced that, rather than modernize it and take it away.”

For Stone and most Ladysmithers, it’s not as much about the buildings and machinery displays themselves as it is about the people behind it and what these stories mean to the community. For example, coal mining led to the grassroots union movements of the early ▶



LEFT & TOP: DAVID WEBB; ABOVE: MARIANNE SCOTT

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1900s, which evolved into today's robust community associations and volunteer organizations that in turn spur the various events and facilities bringing Ladysmith to life today.

"There's a lot of pride in volunteerism and community associations. I'd say per capita we probably have the most people volunteering and involved in community associations than almost any other community," says Stone. "People seem to come out of the woodwork to volunteer... It's a big benefit to the town."

After coal mining left in the 1930s, and logging lessened over the decades to come, entrepreneurs and artists took over, evident in the town's vibrant boutique shopping streets and lively arts scene. Many of the stores are housed in former homes that illuminate 120 years of local history. Just ask, and you'll hear the story.

"We have experiential retail—people need to feel special when they come in... [business owners] treat people really well and they know the experience they leave with is what will bring them back," continues Stone.

AUTHENTICITY IS IN right now. As more travellers seek out *real* experiences, destinations develop to capitalize on it, which often leads to a loss of the authenticity they sought to highlight in the first place. It's a razor's edge and Ladysmith seems keenly aware of this balance.

"Our economy is fairly diversified. There are a lot of communities on the island that live and die by the tourism industry, that's not the case here. Because we're not so reliant on it and because we're not inundated by tourists, the experience becomes a lot more authentic," says Drysdale. Even when *Sonic the Hedgehog* brought some glam, Ladysmith remained low-key and community-minded.

"[Downtown] is full of vibrancy, a polish that we haven't seen in three decades. A lot of this was spurred on by several years of work leading up to this renewal, and *Sonic* was the cherry on top," adds Stone. "In 2017, we were the third-fastest growing community in BC and the fastest growing on the island."

That's Ladysmith's secret—it's all in the execution. Don't strive for authenticity. Just be authentic. Do it for the right reasons and you'll see the right results. 🇨🇦



Lush coastal rainforest on the Holland Creek Trail.

IF YOU GO

EAT

The 49th Café (1) serves soup, sandwiches, seasonal fare and hot drinks on historic First Avenue. 1020 First Avenue. 250-245-3221

Old Town Bakery (2) is famous for its cinnamon buns—in fact, it's one of the few places in town you may find a lineup. 510 First Avenue. 250-245-2531

Wild Poppy Bistro (3) has a way of making you forget their food is gluten- and peanut-free—it's that good. 541 First Avenue. 250-924-8696

In the Beantime's (4) cozy atmosphere and frequent live music performances will encourage you to stretch-out your breakfast or lunch. 18 High Street. 250-245-2305; beantime.ca

Maya Norte (5) offers Spanish-Mexican fusion, creating sumptuous tapas and tacos with tequila to pair. 18 Roberts Street. 250-924-1300; mayanorte.com

Zack's Lounge (6) is a heritage pub with loads of character, as well as craft beer on tap and hearty fare. 530 First Avenue. 250-245-2749

Ironworks Café & Creperie (7) serves crepes both sweet and savoury, as well as rich coffee and gluten-free goods. 422 Esplanade Avenue. 250-710-9441; ironworkscfe.ca

Head to **Fox & Hounds (8)** for hearty British pub-style food and 16 beers on tap. 11 High Street. 250-924-1747; foxandhoundsladysmith.com

Appetit Food For Thought (9) is a local hangout with home cooking and a friendly vibe—serving breakfast and

lunch. 534 First Avenue. 250-924-1321; appetit.business.site

Housed in a bright yellow heritage home, **Roberts Street Pizza (10)** is hard to miss and the town's premier place for eat-in or take-out pies. 20 Roberts Street. 250-245-1119; roberts-street-pizza.com

PLAY

Visit **Transfer Beach (11)** at any time of year for a scenic stroll along the Marine Walk or the Estuary Trail. It's one of Vancouver Island's premier sea kayaking destinations; in summer, it's a lively sand beach, attracting families from all over the island. Located next to Highway 19 on Transfer Beach Boulevard.

Ladysmith has a rich collection of hiking trails, many of which are usable year-round. **Holland Creek Trail (12)** is one of the best—running for

5.8 kilometres around serene Holland Creek. Access from the western terminus of Methuen Street at the south edge of downtown. Download the hiking trails map at tourismladysmith.ca/top10/hiking.php.

Ladysmith Golf Club (13), located just to the south of downtown, offers nine pleasant holes attractive to golfers of any skill level. In fall and winter, a \$10 per-golfer flat rate applies—payable via honour box. ladysmithgolfclub.ca

The Waterfront Gallery (14) hosts a rotating selection of exhibitions throughout the year—with a special Christmas gift shop running throughout December. 610 Oyster Bay Drive. 250.245.1252; ladysmithwaterfrontgallery.com

Take a walk along the **Ladysmith Heritage Route** and discover both artifacts and heritage buildings dating



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Ladysmith, BC, is, in fact, named after the South African city, which itself was named after British General Harry Smith's charitable wife, Lady Smith. During the Second Boer War (1899 to 1902), Ladysmith, South Africa, was besieged for nearly a year. After the Brits defeated the Boers and freed the city in 1900, coal baron James Dunsmuir renamed his mining community of Oyster Bay "Ladysmith" in honour of the victory. To this day, all of Ladysmith's original grid streets are named after British soldiers who served in the Boer War.

According to Mark Drysdale of the Ladysmith Chamber of Commerce, the BC town had its first visitor from the South African namesake just this year—or at least the first one to officially identify himself.



Juana María de los Dolores de León Smith (Lady Smith).

back more than 100 years. tourismladysmith.ca/top10/heritage.php

STAY

Ladysmith and the surrounding area is home to several bed-and-breakfasts, boutique accommodations and hotels. Find the one that suits you at tourismladysmith.ca/eat-stay/stay.php.

EVENTS

The **Ladysmith Festival of Lights** kicks off with the Light Up on November 29 and runs until the second Sunday in January. It's one of Vancouver Island's most popular holiday season events, attracting tens of thousands to experience the cheer. ladysmithfol.com

FOR MORE INFO

Visit tourismladysmith.ca to learn more about the town and download the Ladysmith **Heritage Walk Map I** (Artifacts) and **Map II** (Buildings).

