

# DESIGNATION





# DESTINATION BOWEN ISLAND

Take a trip to a unique island community just a stone's throw from British Columbia's biggest city

BY DAVID WEBB

**J**an Chilvers describes her home with a chuckle: "It's like our own little country!" A Bowen Island resident for 20 years, Chilvers operates "the world's smallest candy shop" in Snug Cove—one of several dozen small businesses in the island's main hub and entrepot.

Sitting at the mouth of Howe Sound, a 20-minute ferry ride from Horseshoe Bay in West Vancouver, the community on Bowen Island is, in fact, hard to classify. It's part of the Greater Vancouver Regional District but doesn't feel like any facet of urban sprawl.

It's co-managed by the Island Trust, a federation of governments for the islands of BC's Salish Sea, while being geographically and emotionally distinct from any other member. It's listed on BC Ferries' Sunshine Coast routes, but nary a resident considers themselves a part of that particular region either. And it's the only island in

the province with its own mayor and council; a singular municipality in BC's emerald sea.

Most small island communities maintain their uniqueness through vast separation from a major population centre. Bowen, in contrast, can be reached by public transit from downtown Vancouver in a little over an hour. It begs the question—can the scant three nautical miles separating Bowen from the urban mainland permanently preserve the island's unique character?

**BOWEN ISLAND'S POPULATION** ebbs and floods like the seawater rushing through Howe Sound. The low-line sits at about 3,700 ▶

Snug Cove and Deep Bay on Bowen Island.



residents, with as many as 1,500 seasonals pouring in during summer, then returning to sleepytime by December. The island itself is a mountainous 50-square-kilometre landmass rising from the Salish Sea, coloured verdant by fir, redcedar and the occasional arbutus—BC’s only broadleaf evergreen. On the northwest side, Mount Gardiner juts to just over 700 metres and Mount Collins nips at its heels from across a valley, a few hundred metres stubbier. The village of Snug Cove nestles in between on the coast facing the mainland.

Artisans who fled Vancouver’s rat-race call Bowen home. As do urban commuters and telecommuters; seasonal workers and summer students; entrepreneurs and, from time to time, luxury developers. The sidewalks and parks are mostly filled with day-trip tourists and weekenders like myself, lured from the city by the island’s easy accessibility yet dot-in-the-ocean feel.

**SNUG COVE**, which welcomes a BC Ferries vessel as much as 16 times a day, is home to what most tourists will see of Bowen. Folks who walk on the ferry can access several hours’ worth of dining, shopping and recreation within a couple clicks of the harbour. For the visitor, cars are a pain—there’s scant parking and most services are clustered around the ferry terminal anyway. And while BC’s Gulf and Discovery islands are often

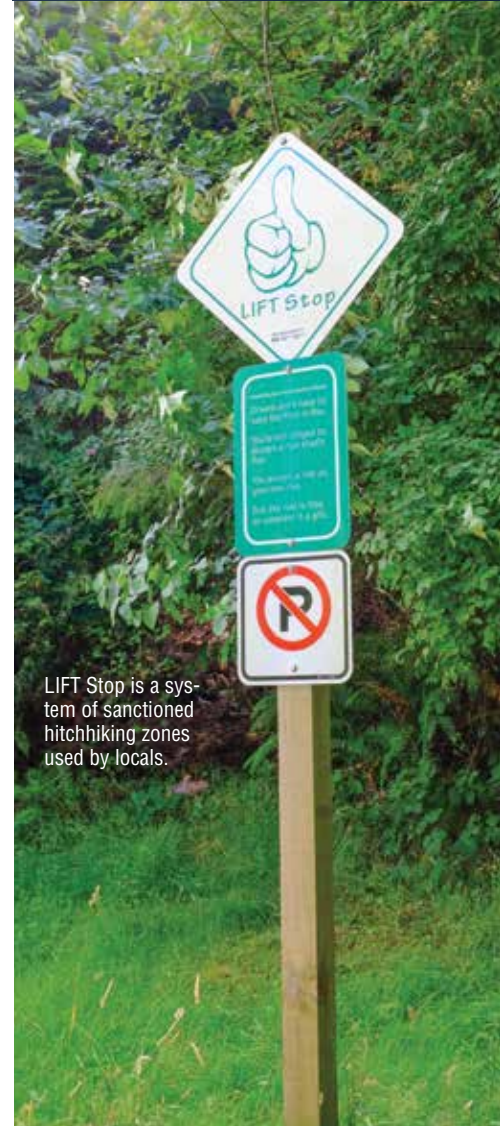
cycle-touring dreamscapes, Bowen is a bit more abrupt. Cyclists must have Tour de France legs and a bike with a heckuva lot of gears if they plan on tackling these formidably steep roadways. There are also a couple bus routes, but the de facto public transit system immediately illustrates the island’s cultural separation from the city. Roadsides are speckled with “LIFT Stops;” sanctioned hitchhiking zones whose rules read like a poetic ode to Bowen itself:

*Drivers don’t have to take the first in line,  
You’re not obligated to accept that’s fine.  
You accept a ride at your own risk,  
But the ride is free, so consider it a gift.*

It’s a cute idea but I brought a motorcycle, so the island’s my oyster. At the Visitor’s Centre a cheery student named Ashley directs me to Tunstall and Bowen bays. Set side-by-side on the southwest coast, they’re two of her favourite serenity zones.

I putt past the first LIFT Stop on Grafton Road behind a couple of locals who clearly take the 40 km/h speed limit very seriously. Hey—if you’re in a hurry, you’re in the wrong place. Residences along the road show a dichotomy of owners—broken-down school busses and ratbagged Westfalias hint at classic island life while private roads holding seaside villas conjure images of the new-school influx of venture capitalists and Coal Harbour lawyers.

The road is so curvy it seems like the city planner used a Spirograph.



LIFT Stop is a system of sanctioned hitchhiking zones used by locals.



A BC Ferries vessel sailing into Snug Cove. Below: Jan Chilvers in her shop, Candy in the Cove.

Grafton, which started as Bowen Trunk Road, turns inexplicably into Adams before I start a long and windy descent into Tunstall Bay. I pass a walker heading up, her feet dragging against the asphalt as she moves at a geologic pace. On a bicycle, this would be torture.

Tunstall is a rocky crescent-moon with pleasant views; Bowen Bay is smaller and sandier. Both are fine picnic sites, but there are no services to speak of. Outside of Snug Cove and the immediate area, Bowen exists mainly for locals. Ashley had, though, pointed out the Ruddy Kitchen and Alderwood Farms, both located mid-island on Adams Road, as quality purveyors of picnic fare for west-beach explorers.

Snug Cove is really where you want to be. After motoring around scenic Cape Drive at the southern point and a few other tentacle roads that all seem to finish with “private drive” signage, I return to the hub for lunch.

**CANDY IN THE COVE,** Jan Chilvers’ overstuffed confectionary on Snug’s main drag, also doubles as an unofficial information centre. She explains how she once owned a B&B with her husband but sold after his passing and bought this simpler shop five years ago.

Over the past two decades, Chilvers continues, Bowen has gotten a bit more upscale. The continuous influx of Vancouverites cashing out of the country’s hottest real estate market for island life brings both opportunities and challenges.

“But it’s got a great social net. We have our own food bank,” she continues. “The whole island runs on volunteerism.”

Community spirit is the glue that bonds Bowen. Chilvers cites the new Cove Commons, a 2,800-square-foot community centre and artists’ space that opened this year after folks at the Bowen Island Public Library and the Bowen Island Arts Council fundraised \$1 million to make it happen. Much of the work—from initial design to project management—was done *pro bono* by locals. The fellowship and support of island merchants and artists is just as robust. Bowen holds the title of BC’s second-biggest arts community and the fifth-most artistic community in Canada.

Artisan Square, just a kilometre uphill from the ferry, illuminates the rich arts scene and entrepreneurial spirit. ArtsPacific Gallery, a local collective, boasts works from various craftspeople ▶



Bowen Heritage building in Davies Orchard.





The original Bowen Island Public Library, with the new Cove Commons building behind.

ranging from knitted octopuses to wall art. Vikki Fuller enchants with gentle landscape and animal paintings on display at Juniper Studio Gallery. Indulge at Cocoa West Chocolatier; pick up a pot at Cloudflower Clayworks; get outfitted at Wren Boutique; and if the island particularly enchants, plunge into some skin-ink at Bowen Island Tattoo Shop. There is no heavy industry or chain stores allowed. Boutiquey Bowen thrives through its mantra: “Malls are for Mainlanders.”

Chilvers sends me for lunch at The Snug Café, a family joint in operation since the '80s. But not before convoluting my dining options by pointing out the Bowen Island Pub is all-new this summer, 31 years after

it first opened its doors, and the owners of the Snug Café also own a great Spanish tapas bar next door. Plus there's Doc Morgan's, the Tuscany Italian trattoria or Rustique Bistro...

“Oh, I know who else you should talk to,” Chilvers suddenly interjects. She picks up her phone to call her friend Michael, another longtime local and information torrent. Turns out Mike's on a train-trip from St. Petersburg to Moscow—Bowen Islanders do get around—but she takes my number in case he returns soon. All this, after walking into her shop five minutes earlier.

**SNUG CAFÉ SERVES** quality espresso and craft beer, as well as home-cooking

that no matter what gets ordered always seems to take “25 minutes.” As I sip a pale ale and wait for my cheesesteak, I eavesdrop the conversations around me. Accents from Europe; political banter from south of the border; residents who gab far too long with restaurant servers. Even with the ferry approaching and half the folks here parked in-line, no one seems in a hurry. Islands have a way of creating their own time-zones—even when BC's biggest city is literally within eyeshot.

Next door, the bare-wood of a vodka distillery under construction dominates the view. It will be unique on Bowen, offering locals and visitors a chance to sip homegrown craft libations in a chic



setting. Chilvers had explained that, like all new commercial construction on the island, Copper Spirit Distillery was required to incorporate housing in its structure—an apartments-above-retail model. (It'll be the only distillery in Canada with onsite residences.) Even Bowen Island Pub's new building, a much-needed rebuild of a beloved watering hole, had to comply with the housing regulation. It's one of many municipal efforts aimed at keeping community members on-island in the face of skyrocketing real estate prices and rental properties increasingly being eaten up by short-term stay listings like Airbnb.

Bowen is caught between two worlds;

a happy isle of not-quite-this, not-quite-that. It's a mouse-community next to an urban-elephant with just a slight swath of ocean between them. But it's not the seawater that maintains Bowen's charm. It's the people who call the island home, who live, work and volunteer here, and

who are passionate about preserving island lifestyles and artistic charm while also pursuing new, but appropriate, opportunities.

No doubt, for whatever this island has been, is and may become—it will remain uniquely Bowen. 🐭

## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

Access Bowen Island from **Horseshoe Bay Ferry Terminal** in West Vancouver. [bcferries.com](http://bcferries.com)

From Vancouver, Bowen Island can be accessed entirely by public transit. Just hop the 257 bus—the **Horseshoe Bay Express**—from downtown or West Vancouver's Park Royal Mall. [translink.ca](http://translink.ca)

### EAT

Within walking distance of the ferry terminal you'll find 15-plus places to eat. Find them all at [tourismbowenland.com](http://tourismbowenland.com). A sample includes:

**Snug Café** serves hand-crafted casual fare and rich coffee. [snugcafe.ca](http://snugcafe.ca)

**Barcelona Tapas & Wine Bar** offers a lively and social evening meeting place. [btwb.ca](http://btwb.ca)

Mingle with locals at the all-new **Bowen Island Pub**. [bowenislandpub.com](http://bowenislandpub.com)

**Tuscany** specializes in authentic Italian pizza made from local and regional ingredients. [tuscanypizza.com](http://tuscanypizza.com)

**Cocoa West Chocolatier** offers sweet confections and sumptuous ice cream. [cocoawest.com](http://cocoawest.com)

**Doc Morgan's Pub** is famous for its fish and chips. [docmorgans.ca](http://docmorgans.ca)

**Paradise Grill** is the island's only hot dog stand. At the Bowen Marina, seasonal.

### Lime & Moon Pie Company

serves organic pies, both sweet and savoury. [limeandmoon.com](http://limeandmoon.com)

**Artisan Eats** is a locals' favourite that also offers cozy accommodation in Artisan Square. [artisaneats.ca](http://artisaneats.ca)

### PLAY

**Zoom Zoom Bowen Island** rents 49cc scooters so you can explore the island without breaking a sweat or possessing a motorcycle licence. [zoomzoombowen.com](http://zoomzoombowen.com)

One of the country's most picturesque nine-hole golf courses, **Bowen Island Golf Club** welcomes all to play their 3,003-yard par 35. [bowengolf.com](http://bowengolf.com)

Ply the scenic waters around Bowen via sea kayak or stand-up paddleboard—rentals and guided tours available at **Bowen Island Sea Kayaking**. [boweniskayaking.com](http://boweniskayaking.com)

There are 13 marked hiking trails on Bowen Island. From **Snug Cove**, two of the nicest are the 1.5-kilometre **Dorman Point** hike or the eight-kilometre **Killarney Lake Loop**. Or trek inland on the demanding **Mount Gardiner** hike—a 17-kilometre grind that climbs more than 700 metres. [bowentrails.ca](http://bowentrails.ca)

Let an engaging guide lead you through the highlights of the island by booking a day with **Bowen Island Tours**. [boweniskayaking.com](http://boweniskayaking.com)

### EVENTS

Head to **Applefest** on October 7, 2018. Held in **Davies Orchard** (Snug Cove), this annual gathering celebrates all things apple. [bowenheritage.org](http://bowenheritage.org)

Hike the trail toward Killarney Lake in mid-October and you may see **spawning chum salmon** swimming up the fish ladder in **Killarney Creek**.

The season of good cheer comes to Bowen on December 1 with **Light Up Bowen in Artisan Square**. [artisansquare.com](http://artisansquare.com)

### SHOP

There are roughly **30 shops** in **Snug Cove**, **The Pier**, **Village Square** and **Artisan Square**. All are walkable from the ferry terminal. And stop by the **Visitor's Centre** (first right after you get off the ferry) to purchase some Bowen schwag and grab an island map. [tourismbowenland.com](http://tourismbowenland.com)

### STAY

Find a full listing of **cabins**, **B&Bs**, **apartments** and more, or connect with Bowen Island's **accommodation reservation service**, at [tourismbowenland.com](http://tourismbowenland.com).

**Bowen LIFT** nowadays has an app, driver and rider tags and an online map of pickup locations. [bowenlift.com](http://bowenlift.com)