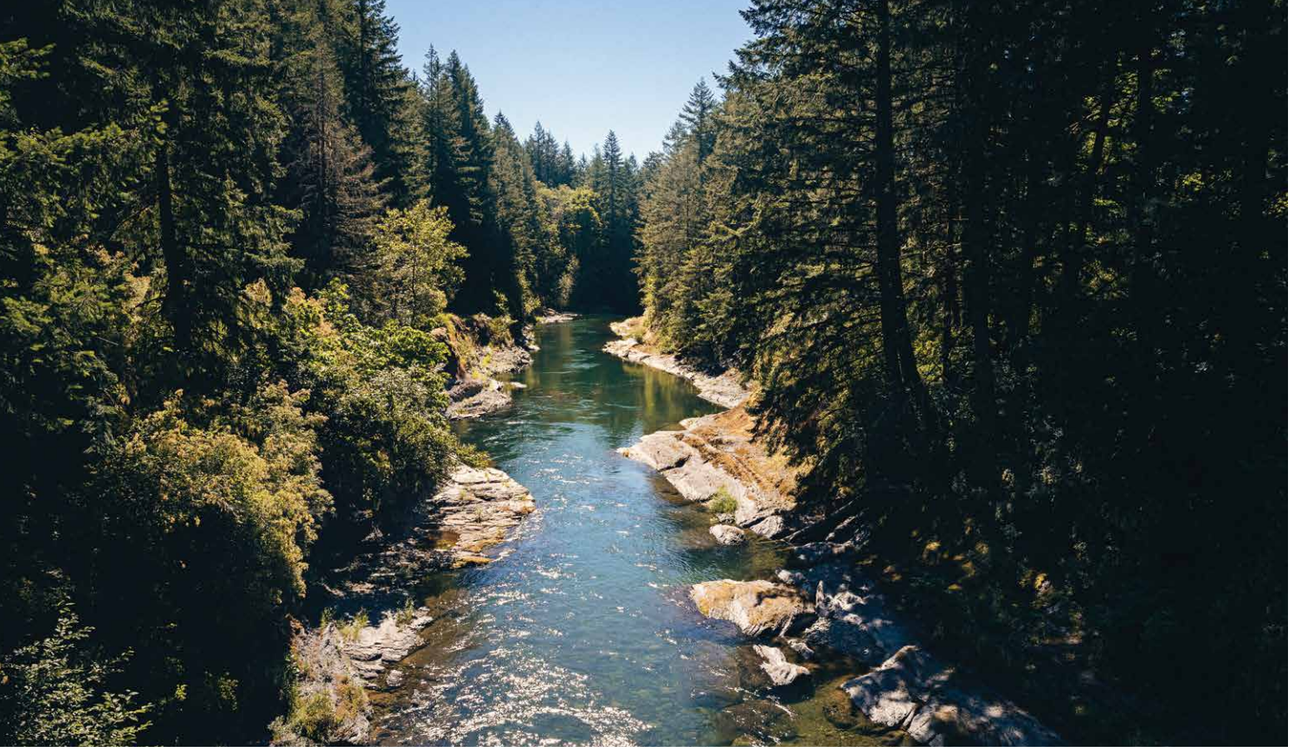
COWICHAN CONNECTION

Built on the legacy of former rail lines and logging routes, the Cowichan Valley Trail now links its users to Vancouver Island's history, cultures and communities

BY SUZANNE MORPHET
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBIN O'NEILL

The restored Kinsol Trestle spans the Koksilah River and is one of many dramatic highlights to be seen along Vancouver Island's Cowichan Valley Trail.



ON A HOT July afternoon, a young mother ambles across a long wooden trestle, her toddler pushing alongside her on a small trike. The child is too young to know it, and his mother has probably walked this former rail bridge too many times to give it a second thought, but the Kinsol Trestle near southern Vancouver Island's Shawnigan Lake isn't just any old bridge. Yes, its weathered fir timbers elegantly span the Koksilah River with a pleasing geometric symmetry, but at 44 metres high and 187 metres long, it's not just the highest wooden trestle in the Commonwealth but also one of the largest wooden trestles in the world.

The trestle is a dramatic highlight of the Cowichan Valley Trail, a 122-kilometre segment of The Great Trail that winds along the island's southeastern coast between Malahat and just beyond Ladysmith, passing through conifer forests with dense understories of salal and fern, over eight restored wooden trestles (including the Kinsol), past former logging and mining towns, and alongside the Cowichan River, a Canadian Heritage River renowned for its salmon and steelhead trout.

> The trestle is **a dramatic highlight** of the Cowichan Valley Trail.

But for all the nail-biting around the trestle's near demise and subsequent rescue (see "Saving the Kinsol Trestle" sidebar on page 66), its history, and the history of the Cowichan Valley Trail, is only one part of a much bigger story — one that intertwines Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's Confederation-era "national dream" of a railway that linked the country from coast to coast and the development of Vancouver Island.

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE today, but in the late 1800s more people lived on Vancouver Island than the British Columbia mainland. Victoria was, after all, the colony's largest and capital city, so when a transcontinental railway was proposed, people naturally expected it to terminate on the island.

But with rugged mountains on the mainland and the Strait of Georgia in between, "it didn't make sense from an engineering point of view," says Bob Turner, a transportation historian and the author of *Vancouver Island Railroads*. "So Vancouver Island got the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway, kind of as a compensation." Esquimalt was the site of a Royal Navy base next to Victoria, and Nanaimo was an important coal-mining centre, "so a connection between them was seen as being a good idea in any case," Turner adds.

The Cowichan Valley, about halfway between Victoria and Nanaimo, had an enviable climate, and the E&N, as it was known, spurred settlement after it was completed in 1886. (Macdonald himself, who'd represented Victoria as an MP from 1878 to 1882 without ever visiting the city, drove in the last spike near Shawnigan Lake.) The main hindrance for settlers was the enormous trees that were an obstacle to farming. For others, however, the trees were the plum. "Much of the valley was this amazing stand of 300- to 400-year-old Douglas fir, which was highly prized for its lumber," says Turner. "From the perspective of forest companies, and probably the province too, this was like a gold mine."

In 1912, the E&N opened a branch line from Duncan to Lake Cowichan to serve the burgeoning logging industry. It was a game changer, according to Tom Paterson, who writes a twice-weekly history column for the *Cowichan Valley Citizen*. "Numerous trains came out of Lake Cowichan in a day, loaded with logs. And when I say loaded, there were cars that had only two or three of what they call B.C. toothpicks on them," he says, laughing and stretching his arms to give some idea of the massive size of the trees.

By 1924, a second railway — Canadian National — was completed from Victoria to the east end of Lake Cowichan, giving the logging industry access to even more timber, and laying the groundwork for the recreational trails of the future.

> By the 1950s, **trains were gradually pulled from service** in the Cowichan Valley, and many tracks were eventually ripped up.

Over the next quarter century, the rail and logging boom continued. But by the 1950s, the railways were losing out to trucks and cars. Trains were gradually pulled from service in the Cowichan Valley and — except for the E&N mainline — tracks were eventually ripped up.

Fortunately, the former rail corridors began to be purchased and preserved in the 1980s, and by the time the Trans Canada Trail Foundation came calling in 1997 seeking a route on Vancouver Island, the key pieces of land were available. By 2002, the Cowichan Valley Regional District had finalized a route, and the Cowichan Valley Trail was born.

LAST JULY, Chris Newton, a former tree faller, was smoothing out the southernmost and newest portion of the Cowichan Valley Trail, the Malahat Connector, which had opened a month earlier. Unlike most of the rest of the trail, the connector is hilly, with grand views of the Gulf Islands, the Olympic Mountains and, on a clear day, Washington state's Mount Rainier.

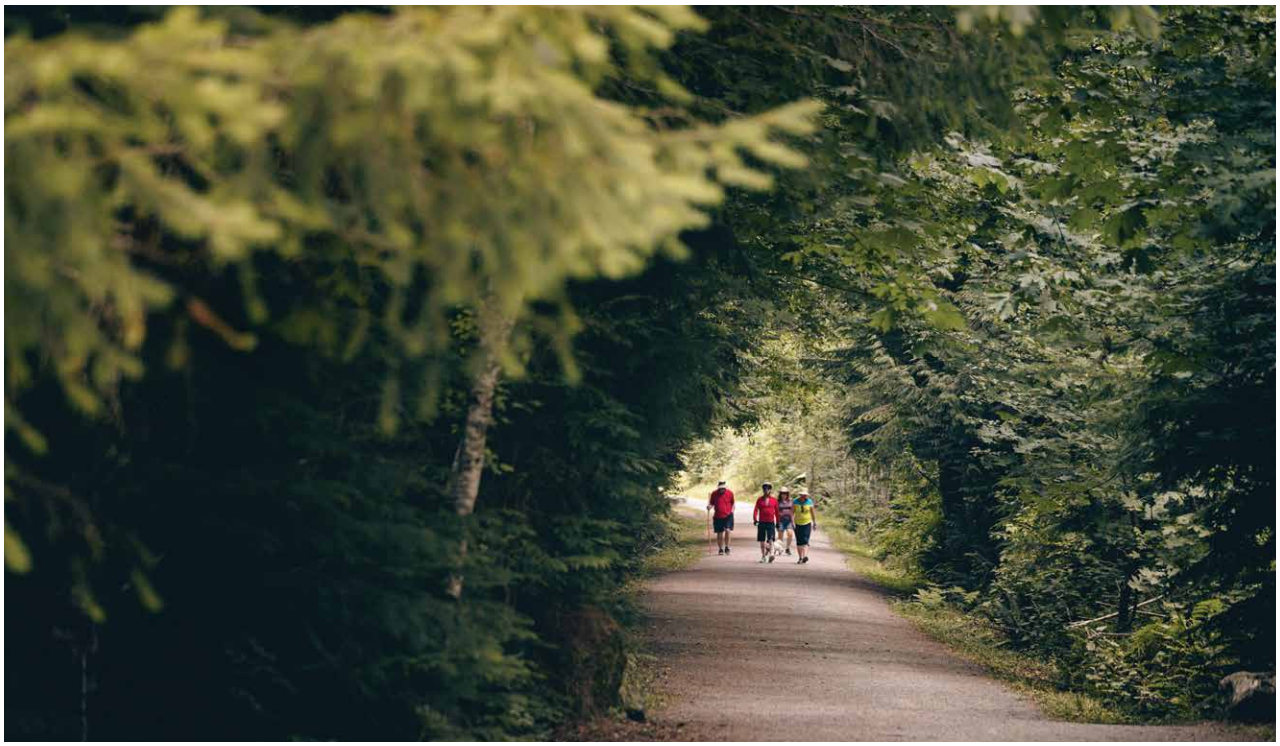
"This had been logged back in the '30s and '40s," he explained to a group of cyclists who had stopped to chat. Leaning against his dusty pickup truck in the shade of second-growth forest, Newton said that although still relatively young, these quiet forests shelter numerous species, including black bears, Roosevelt elk, deer, cougars and wolves.

From the Malahat Connector, the trail flattens out as it pushes northwest past

Clockwise from ABOVE: Old-growth forest along the trail; a cyclist rides over one of the trail's restored bridges; the Cowichan River.

Suzanne Morphet (@SecretsSuitcase) writes regularly about adventure travel for publications such as the Globe and Mail *and* Vancouver Sun. *Robin O'Neill is an outdoor lifestyle and action photographer whose work has appeared in* Mountain Life, explore *and* Powder *magazines.*

MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CAN GEO



Hikers make their way along the trail after visiting the Kinsol Trestle.

Shawnigan Lake, across the Kinsol Trestle and the Koksilah River, and along the Cowichan River before reaching Lake Cowichan, one of the largest lakes on the island. From there, it hooks east and descends slowly but steadily, passing Paldi, a former logging community named for its Punjabi founder's hometown in India. At Duncan, which once echoed with the rumble of passing log trains, it turns north and up the island's east coast, through Chemainus — famous for its murals, many of which depict its sawmill heyday — and into Ladysmith, originally a coal-mining community and rail hub where boxcars filled with merchandise from the mainland were transferred from barge to rail.

In short, there is no dearth of rail-and-logging-related sites along the trail; Duncan alone is home to two of the six museums in the region — the BC Forest Discovery Centre and the Cowichan Valley Museum — that help preserve this aspect of its history.

But there is more to the Cowichan Valley Trail than lumber and steel.

SAVING THE KINSOL TRESTLE

Constructed by hand between 1911 and 1920, the Kinsol Trestle is a magnificent feat of engineering from the Age of Steam that today is the must-see site on the Cowichan Valley Trail. A little more than a decade ago, though, the historic railway bridge seemed destined to be lost.

In 2006, after years of neglect, vandalism and two arson attempts, a Victoria engineering firm recommended to British Columbia's Ministry of Transportation that the trestle be demolished and replaced. The Cowichan Valley Regional District agreed, and the following spring the province announced $1.6 million in funding toward a new bridge, on top of a previous commitment of $1.5 million to dismantle the original trestle.

That's when Macdonald & Lawrence Timber Framing, a local company specializing in building and conserving timber structures, decided to study the trestle and offer a second opinion. "I had never been there before and I was blown away by what an impressive structure it was," says Gordon Macdonald, the company's CEO. "I realized a couple things. One was that there was a lot of good material in the bridge. The other was that there were well-proven ways of repairing structures like the trestle that hadn't been considered."

Macdonald also sought input from other volunteer experts, including the retired senior engineer for CN Rail who had been responsible for the Kinsol Trestle for more than 30 years.

In June 2007, Macdonald's group convinced the Cowichan Valley Regional District that the trestle could, and should, be saved. Rehabilitation would be cheaper and more environmentally sound than replacement. But foremost, says Macdonald, the trestle was simply too significant to lose. "It was one of the few survivors from this era when no project was too big or too crazy to be undertaken."

It took about a year to restore the trestle, including a couple of "intense months" when seven sections of the bridge were removed, from the top deck down to the foundation, leaving the rest of the bridge "just standing there, temporarily guyed together," Macdonald recalls, noting that he barely slept during that time.

The result? "Our dream of making it a destination has come true," says Lori Treloar, curator of the nearby Shawnigan Lake Museum and a vocal proponent of saving the trestle. "We have hundreds of people out there every week. We consider it a jewel in The Great Trail."

Farm Table Inn owners George Gates and Evelyn Koops (ABOVE). Old railcars at the BC Forest Discovery Centre in Duncan (BELOW).

In Duncan, for instance, trail users can detour onto the Totem Tour Walk and see how the city honours the culture and history of the Cowichan Tribes and the Coast Salish people with one of the world's largest outdoor displays of totem poles, now numbering 40.

In the local Hul'q'umi'num language, Quw'utsun (Cowichan) means "warm land," a reference to the climate that drew early settlers eager to reap the agricultural bounty the valley still offers.

Among those who knew a good thing when they saw it was Dionisio Zanatta, who moved from Treviso, Italy, in the 1950s and helped pioneer the local wine industry by providing an acre of his property to the provincial government as a test site for grapes. Later, Zanatta and his daughter opened Vigneti Zanatta, one of the first commercial wineries on the island. Located just southwest of Duncan, it's less than two kilometres from the trail.

Although still relatively young, **these quiet forests shelter numerous species,** including black bears, Roosevelt elk, deer, cougars and wolves.

More recently, Rick Pipes and Janet Docherty found their dream property near the Kinsol Trestle — a small farm called Merridale that was planted with heritage varieties of apples. Today, the couple produce more than 200,000 litres of cider per year, in addition to operating an on-site distillery and gastropub. Most wouldn't be surprised to find an apple orchard on the island, but less common crops pop up, too, including lavender, tea and, on an experimental basis, olives. "These are things you wouldn't think of normally being grown in Canada," says Docherty.

The same mild, sunny weather that's good for agriculture makes the trail an appealing year-round option for everyone from the cyclists that stop for sleep and sustenance at businesses such as the Farm Table Inn, a B&B and restaurant about halfway between Duncan and Lake Cowichan, to hikers and history buffs such as Tom Paterson, the *Cowichan Valley Citizen* columnist who strolls its course searching for railway artifacts. "It's quiet and your imagination's at work, and you realize that a train used to come along right where you're walking," says Paterson. "Well, for every mile on the trail, there's a hundred stories."

Read an interview with Gordon Macdonald about his restoration work on the Kinsol Trestle and the history and culture of the Cowichan Valley at cangeo.ca/jf18/trestle.