



The Fisgard Lighthouse National Historic Site at the mouth to Esquimalt Harbour commemorates the first lighthouse on Canada's West Coast.

Historic

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

Esquimalt Harbour

**Venture beyond Victoria's Inner Harbour
and you'll find a world rich in military history,
with pleasant parks and good brew**

Historic Esquimalt Harbour is an often overlooked but worthwhile destination. Here lie two national historic sites, several waterfront parks, two good pubs and secure anchorage. Also within reach is the 55-kilometre Galloping Goose Regional Trail, which extends from Victoria beyond Sooke. There's enough to do and see at Esquimalt Harbour to keep you here for several days.

FORT RODD HILL AND FISGARD LIGHTHOUSE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES

Canada's first West Coast lighthouse stands at the harbour's mouth. Fisgard Lighthouse has guided mariners since 1860 and is now a national historic site. The lighthouse contains many interesting historic pictures and interpretive displays covering shipwrecks on the coast and the light's history. Adjacent is the Fort Rodd Hill National Site. Both contain well-preserved equipment, museum-quality displays and sweeping views across the Juan de Fuca Strait.

The British government built Fort Rodd Hill in 1895 to protect Victoria and Esquimalt Harbours. The fort remained an important coastal fortification through World War II and today is considered Parks Canada's premier military site. Built into the hill are three separate gun batteries, munitions magazines, barracks, command posts, guardhouses and searchlight emplacements. The facility is mostly invisible from the water, so it's surprising to go ashore and



DAVE BARNES ILLUSTRATION

The original gun at Fort Rodd Hill's Upper Battery, with the Fisgard Lighthouse in the background.



discover such extensive infrastructure.

CANADIAN FORCES BASE (CFB) ESQUIMALT We both hail from Victoria, where Esquimalt is synonymous with its naval base. Esquimalt Harbour's naval heritage spans more than 150 years. The British Royal Navy established a port here in 1848 and made the harbour its Pacific station headquarters in 1862. Control of the facility was transferred over to Canada in 1910, when Britain could no longer afford to maintain a global fleet.

Today, Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Esquimalt encompasses 10,300 acres on both sides of Esquimalt Harbour. Its primary mission is to support the Canadian

Pacific Fleet. The cranes and ships of this naval port dominate the scene inside the harbour mouth. CFB Esquimalt now also controls access to the harbour (see sidebar for details).

ESQUIMALT GRAVING DOCK Directly north of CFB Esquimalt lies the Esquimalt Graving Dock (EGD). Opened in 1927, the 1,200-foot dry dock is still the largest on the Pacific coast. The EGD has

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Cranes, ships and a submarine at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Esquimalt.

a capacity of up to 100,000 deadweight tons, which would include roughly 90 percent of the world's ships. A recent celebrity customer was the 965-foot cruise ship *Infinity*, which developed propulsion problems midway through its inaugural Alaska cruise season. The

EGD's massive cranes, emblazoned with "Canada" and our flag, are prominent as you pass.

PORTAGE REGIONAL PARK extends north from Thetis Cove (east of Dyke Point) almost to Portage Inlet. The

park preserves the historic portage trail between Esquimalt Harbour and Portage Inlet. Connecting Esquimalt Harbour to Victoria Harbour via the Gorge Waterway, the trail allowed sheltered water

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travel between the two harbours. Today, the park provides a convenient landing point with excellent walking trails.

Four Mile Roadhouse is adjacent to Portage Regional Park. The roadhouse was established in 1858 and operates in the fourth oldest house in Greater Victoria. An award-winning renovation in the 1980s created an attractive 19th century-style pub and restaurant reminiscent of its early roots. The flower-filled deck is a wonderful setting for a delicious meal or a refreshing pint. In cooler weather, the bright and cozy interior is equally enjoyable.

COLE ISLAND is the most protected and picturesque anchorage in Esquimalt Harbour. In clear weather, the Olympic Mountain's rugged peaks are etched against the skyline. At night, the naval

base lights reflect on still waters—magic.

Cole Island is part of the Esquimalt Naval Sites National Historic District, which commemorates the area's military history and 19th century structures. The British and Canadian Navies stored munitions here between 1860 and 1938. The island was an ideal munitions magazine because it could only be shelled from within the harbour but was sufficiently distant from the base that an explosion would not be a significant threat to human life.

Two buildings on the east shore are particularly interesting to explore. Raised storage rooms sit above century-old brick arches through which you can fit a dinghy. The walls above are five bricks deep at points, presumably to contain an explosion. A trail runs south from the magazines to a ruined jetty and house.

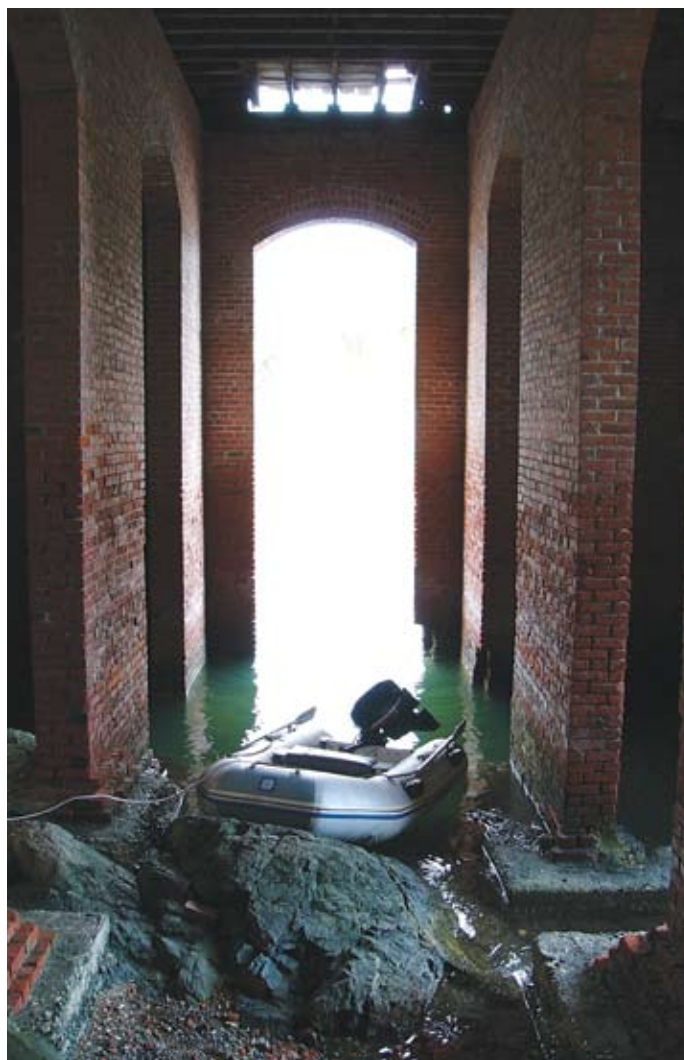
NAVIGATING IN ESQUIMALT HARBOUR

Since the events of September 11, Canadian Forces have guarded the entrance to Esquimalt Harbour, and in 2005 the Queen's Harbour Master at CFB Esquimalt assumed control of traffic through the harbour. All boaters, particularly those in pleasure craft, should contact QHM Operations prior to entering, leaving or moving about the harbour (use VHF Channel 10 or call 250-363-2160). Compliance isn't mandatory, but if you don't check in, an armed crew in a high-speed inflatable will likely challenge you.

Don't let these formalities deter you, though. Esquimalt Harbour is definitely open to the public. The only navigation restrictions are a seven-knot speed limit and 100-meter exclusion zone around any navy ships or property.



The British and Canadian Navies once stored munitions in these buildings on Cole Island.



The buildings' century-old arches can be explored by dinghy.

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Visit Victoria this spring and be part of the international yacht racing excitement! Victoria's magnificent Inner Harbour and waterfront are the settings for many of the city's most exciting marine events. With three amazing world-renowned races coming this spring, Victoria is truly an international race gateway. One of the highlights will be the Clipper 05-06 Race, the world's longest sporting event in both distance and time. This nation-versus-nation, around-the-world sailing race involves ten cities and ten nations and an international crew of amateur sailors on board a fleet of identical, 68-foot sailboats. Follow the new race schedule on-line and visit Victoria this Spring to get involved in what promises to be a fabulous marine festival. Highlighted maritime events for 2006 include:

- **Clipper Round the World Yacht Race** Victoria arrival Spring 2006 – dates TBA
- **BCYBA Victoria Harbour Floating Boat Show** April 20 to 23
- **Fireball International Championship** May 13 to 26
- **Swiftsure International Sailing Race** May 26 to 28
- **Classic Boat Festival** September 1 to 3

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PARSONS BRIDGE crosses the tidal flats where they narrow at the northeast corner of Esquimalt Harbour. Parsons Bridge Park rings the peninsula, which juts into the flats east of the bridge. The park's paved walkway runs below a condomin-

ium complex, and includes a gazebo with views across Esquimalt Harbour.

Directly west of Parsons Bridge at the north end is Six Mile House. The pub was established in 1855 to serve horse-drawn carriage travellers on the

Old Island Highway and thirsty British sailors. Today Six Mile House holds the longest continuous pub licence in the province. The food and beer are excellent, the interior bright and cheery. The large heated patio and well-kept gardens form a delightful horticultural retreat, while a massive brick fireplace provides warmth in colder weather.

IF YOU GO

FORT RODD HILL AND FISGARD LIGHTHOUSE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES have a visitor's dock open between May 1 and October 15, with a three-hour maximum stay. To land here, you must call ahead at 250-478-5849 for permission and agree to walk to the nearby park entrance and pay the entry fee (\$4 per adult, \$2 per child). The dock was designed to accommodate high-speed eco-tourism RIBs. Depths may not be suitable for larger pleasure craft, and tourist vessels have priority. If the dock isn't available, you can land on the adjacent beach or along the dock's cement causeway.

Anchor either north or south of the park dock for good holding in five fathoms with plenty of room to swing. Protection is moderate, but this is a fine overnight anchorage in settled weather. Ensure you are at least 100 metres south of Yew Point, which is Navy property.

PORTAGE REGIONAL PARK Richards Island in Thetis Cove is also part of the park. Anchorage is possible northwest of the island. The plywood plant shown on Chart 3419, and its associated log dump and booms, is no longer operational. But you'll be exposed to swells and the shoreline is fairly built-up to the north.

To reach Four Mile Roadhouse, land at Portage Regional Park and take the gravel path north. A few hundred metres from shore, a smaller gravel path hooks off to the northwest. Follow this path a short distance to the park entrance, which is directly behind the pub.

COLE ISLAND Anchor southeast of Cole Island in two to three fathoms with plenty of swing room. Holding is excellent in thick, cement-like mud. Protection is reasonable, even with big winds blowing in the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

The provincial government now owns Cole Island, and permits public shore access. Evidence of middens and possible Native gravesites has recently surfaced, so shore access might be restricted in the future. In the interim, visitors should

respect the island's heritage and not disturb anything ashore.

PARSONS BRIDGE Tidal flats border the park and are awash at roughly one metre of tide in Esquimalt. With 1.2 metres of tide, a channel 1/3-metres deep reaches under Parsons Bridge directly below Six Mile House. You can tie off here and walk back under the bridge and up to the park path. Landing is possible along the park shore when the tide is 1.5 metres or more.

Six Mile House has no dinghy dock, but flat, stair-shaped rocks directly below make a reasonable landing. The way up to the pub is somewhat steep though, so for easier access take the stairs that lead up to the main road from Parsons Bridge Park.

At high tide, you can navigate Mill Stream for roughly a kilometre to Mill Falls. With nearly three metres of tide, the minimum depth is about 1/3 metre. Favor the south shore for maximum depth.

GALLOPING GOOSE REGIONAL TRAIL

To reach the trail, walk slightly north from Parsons Bridge to Six Mile Road, which intersects the trail about a half kilometre to the west. For trail maps and additional information, visit www.gallopinggoosetrail.com or www.crd.bc.ca/parks/brochures/gallop_goose_info.pdf.

MILL HILL REGIONAL PARK The main park entrance is nearly three kilometres from Parsons Bridge. Follow the Galloping Goose Trail from Six Mile Road until the trail crosses over Mill Stream at a substantial pedestrian bridge. Just before the bridge is a trail, exit to Atkins Ave. Walk west (left) along Atkins Avenue to a four-way intersection. Cross to the north side and follow Atkins Avenue west to the park entrance.

Two trails lead to the summit: the groomed Auburn Trail and the more rugged Calypso Trail. The Auburn Trail is wide, gravelled and well maintained, and has better views en-route than the Calypso trail. See www.crd.bc.ca/parks/mill_hill.htm for park details, including a map.

MILL STREAM empties into the tidal flats at Parsons Bridge. At high tide you can navigate the creek for nearly a kilometre to Mill Falls.

The creek is lovely. Once beyond the first bend, most signs of civilization disappear and the waterway feels like a bird sanctuary. The navigable channel ends at a tranquil pool and small waterfall. A dirt road along the north shore leads a short distance through tall firs to Mill Falls, which drain into another tranquil pool next to a cement fish ladder.

Hudson's Bay Company built British Columbia's first sawmill beside Mill Falls in 1848. Unfortunately, the torrent of water that would power the mill was due to an unusually high rainfall that summer, and the mill closed within a decade.

Mill Stream was also the freshwater source for British Navy, which built flumes to channel the water. Steel rods that supported the flumes still protrude from rocks directly in front of the fish ladder.

GALLOPING GOOSE REGIONAL TRAIL

Near Parsons Bridge runs the Galloping Goose Regional Trail, the pride of the impressive park system of Capital Regional District, which extends from Port Renfrew to Victoria and includes the Saanich Peninsula and southern Gulf Islands.

Starting in Victoria, the rail-trail extends 55 kilometres west to Sooke and beyond. The trail is two to three metres wide and easy to walk. Any non-motorized transport is allowed on "The Goose," including horses, bicycles and inline skates. You can walk east 11 kilometres all the way to Victoria. Or, an enjoyable short walk leads one kilometre west to a substantial pedestrian bridge over Mill Stream.

MILL HILL REGIONAL PARK Sixty-hectare Mill Hill Regional Park lies roughly one kilometre west of Parsons Bridge.

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This steel rod at Mill Falls supported a flume to supply fresh water for the British Navy in the late 1800s.

The 203-metre summit of Mill Hill has impressive views in all directions, particularly across Esquimalt and Victoria harbours to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and east to the San Juan Islands. Mill Hill is also renowned for its colourful wildflowers and diverse ecosystems.

Walking the summit would be easy were it not for the tremendous gain in altitude—almost one metre for every three walked. But if you're up for an energetic hike, this one is worth doing.



Jennifer and Alayne Hamilton "do the Goose."

Esquimalt Harbour has a surprising number of attractions. Each time we return, we find more things to do. Whether you want to hike, enjoy a pint, learn a little history, check out the maritime industry or simply enjoy the mountain views, Esquimalt Harbour is an unexpected treat.

Jennifer and James Hamilton are regular contributors to Pacific Yachting. They also maintain a cruising website at www.mvd-irona.com. Between them, they have logged more than 30,000 miles cruising year-round throughout the West Coast.



The 203-metre summit of Mill Hill has impressive views of Esquimalt Harbour and beyond.