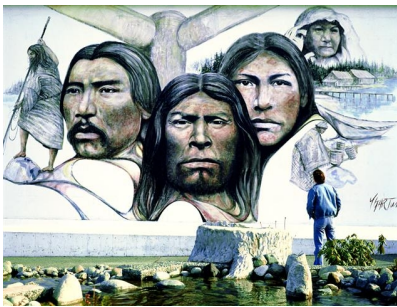


# Chemainus, British Columbia: The Little Town that Re-Invented Itself!

Driving north for about an hour on the scenic highway out of Vancouver Island's city of Victoria, visitors see large signs inviting a right turn to Chemainus ([chemainus.com](http://chemainus.com)) with its world-renowned collection of outdoor murals that illustrate the history of this town. A five-minute meander on a narrower road through verdant green forest opens directly into the sea-front community with its picturesque harbor dotted with islands. Here is a chance to step into the colourful tale of a 155-year-old town brought to life on the walls of its public buildings, store fronts, restaurants, fire hall, train station and more. Dozens of local, national and international artists have contributed their talents and artistic styles over the past 30 years to create a remarkable outdoor record of a pioneer heritage so very different from the way we live and work today.



In fact, Chemainus's story stretches back much further – as both the name and some murals remind us – with native settlement of this area drawn from the ancestors of those who crossed the Bering Strait from Mongolia through Alaska and down the west coast of North America thousands of years earlier. Chemainus, meaning Broken Chest, comes from the name of a native shaman and prophet who survived a massive wound to his chest to become a powerful chief.

In the early 1980s, the one-industry logging and lumber town of Chemainus also experienced a massive wound that threatened its existence when its out-dated mill closed. A quick slide into ghost town status was predicted as people moved elsewhere for employment. However, a group of visionaries not content to administer last rites to their community so quickly proposed to re-invent Chemainus as a tourism destination by telling its story in massive, compelling murals accessible to anyone with an interest in history, art and the unique cultural lifestyle of a small town on the Pacific Coast. On my recent visit to Chemainus, I met a surprising number of people who came on holiday to see “the little town that did!” and stayed to make it their home. Yes, they became one of nearly 5,000 present-day Chemainiacs, as the locals call themselves!



Chemainus is worth a visit of several days, not only to wander the upper and lower parts of this well-preserved town in search of murals in obvious and not so obvious places, but because of the diversity of things to do. This is wisely not a one-attraction town but a vibrant centre for music, theatre, art, gourmet dining and a range of physical activities. It even has its own currency with over \$50,000 in circulation.

With a longer stay, it is possible to take in a production of the Chemainus Theatre Festival ([chemainustheatre.ca](http://chemainustheatre.ca)), a year round professional theatre company launched in 1993. It offers five mainstage shows ranging from award-winning comedies and musicals to classic dramas and original debut plays as well as children's shows each summer. The exquisite Italianate building with domed lobby and sweeping staircase not only houses the intimate 274-seat theatre but a large dining room and exceptional gift shop of artisan-made items. Many people book the buffet dining and play package for their performance night with meals timed to the start of the show and a discreet reminder from your server when it is time to move into the theatre.



And there's no excuse not to stay, with a good variety of accommodation around the town. For those who enjoy the distinctive experience of down-home hospitality with well-informed resident hosts, try one of the bed & breakfasts ([chemainus.com/accommodations/bedbreakfast.htm](http://chemainus.com/accommodations/bedbreakfast.htm)) that are popular year round. I sampled two b&b's, Timeless Rose ([timelessrose.ca](http://timelessrose.ca)) and A Small World ([asmallworld.ca](http://asmallworld.ca)) and especially enjoyed their signature breakfasts.

Still visibly immersed in the town's heritage is the Horseshoe Bay Inn ([horseshoebay-inn.com](http://horseshoebay-inn.com)), opened in 1892 as a convenient port of call for loggers and sailors. Rates were \$1 a day or \$6 a week for room and board. Mega-rich American tycoons, John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, stayed at the inn within ten days of each other in November 1900 while checking out their British Columbia forestry investments. Today the inn is best known for its traditional pub and tasty restaurant menu, though the rooms upstairs remain popular with visitors for their period furnishings and the friendly ghosts who pay a call from time to time. Another attractive option in the modern hotel category is the Best Western Plus

Chemainus Inn ([chemainushotel.com](http://chemainushotel.com)) offering a complete menu of amenities and a variety of added-value activity packages.



In the sheltered, bird-and-marine-life-rich waters that distinguish this area, it is also tempting to get out on the water or even under it. Launching from one of the town's beaches, I spent a magical morning in a kayak on mirror-like waters exploring the shoreline with Bud Bell, owner of Sealegs Kayaking Adventures ([sealegskayaking.com](http://sealegskayaking.com)), learning some kayaking skills and observing the wildlife close-up and personal. The company offers a variety of local day trips and several multi-day kayaking/camping packages farther afield.

In the "unlikely but true" category, scuba diving enthusiasts have been making a beeline for Chemainus since 2006 to explore the only Boeing 737 airplane artificial reef in the world. Yes, there is an environmentally-scrubbed-clean, 100-foot by 100-foot plane deliberately sunk off the Chemainus shoreline, sitting on 15-foot high pedestals so as not to impact the sea floor and so divers may easily observe the 124 species of sea life that have moved into this created habitat. This is one of many scuba attractions in the area offered by Divemaster ([divemaster.ca/divemap.htm](http://divemaster.ca/divemap.htm)).

Perhaps most surprising for such a small town with a "meat and potatoes" culinary background is the array of cuisine options and creative spaces to enjoy them. Odika Restaurant ([odikacafe.com](http://odikacafe.com)) is a prime example of what owners, Murray and Marina Kereliuk, modestly refer to as a "Global Comfort Food" menu. Their dearest desire is to have guests walk in the door and order something they have never had before. Indeed that desire seems to sum up the surprises of this little town quite well ... visitors to Chemainus are in for a treat.

### **By Alison Gardner**

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