

Bellingham, WA

Take a Break in Historic Bellingham

By Joanna Nesbit



For BC residents, Bellingham is a favorite stateside stop for affordable Costco shopping, but if you haven't explored further, you're missing out on the town's true self. Also known as the City of Subdued Excitement, Bellingham's indie restaurants, off-beat museums, and outdoor opportunities offer fun for all ages. Add in accessible size, and you've got a great weekend getaway for Vancouver families. Here's what our family recommends.

You can start by bunking at the Fairhaven Village Inn in the 'Ham's historic neighborhood. Over the years, Fairhaven's red-brick district has undergone a major facelift to become a popular destination. It's cute, compact, and packed with shops and restaurants just a few minutes walk from each other. I also like the friendly evening vibe for family strolling (downtown is safe but can feel seedy after dark).

Hang out on the Village Green with a statue of Dirty Dan Harris, Fairhaven's 1890's developer, and wander through the Toy Garden, Paper Dreams, and Village Books. Avenue Bakery makes fabulous sandwiches and don't miss Katie's Cupcakes. My kids are teens now and still love it.

On Saturday mornings, downtown's covered Farmers Market comes alive with buskers, artisan crafters, and farmers. Sample local fare and stop in at the adjacent Ralf's Pretzel Bakery for a fresh Bavarian pretzel. Street parking can be tricky, but it's possible if you don't mind a little walk.

Be sure to check out the nearby Cultural Arts District for museums, second-hand bookshops, and the Pickford Cinema. Mindport Exhibits, the all-ages discovery museum, blends hands-on science and art under a soaring ceiling. It's been compared to the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, but it's tiny and has its own flavor. Explore quirky displays like Magnetic Molasses, Swirl, and Backwards Speech. Admission \$2 (www.mindport.org).

If your kids like antique stuff, the Spark Museum of Electrical Invention exhibits scientific achievement through the ages with original inventions by Edison, Tesla, and Morse. It's pretty amazing what's packed in here, including a gallery of antique radios and a place to play with static electricity. On weekends, the MegaZapper Electrical Show sends out 4,000 volts of purple lightning. Fair warning, it's loud; noise-sensitive kids will want to skip it. Admission \$6/3 under 11 (www.sparkmuseum.org).

Artsy families will appreciate Whatcom Museum's stunning Lightcatcher for its fine art galleries and Northwest-themed Family Interactive Gallery (best suited for 8 and under). Older kids can peruse the art exhibits while younger sibs play in the children's area. As you tour the museum, notice the 180-foot curved wall glowing with soft light. That's the lightcatcher catching sunlight. Admission \$10/\$8/\$4.50 for 2-5 (www.whatcommuseum.org).

Henderson Books, down the block, is worth a visit for book lovers. It's Bellingham's mini-version of Powell's Books in Portland, and with floor-to-ceiling shelves, it's easy to linger here.

For an evening out with older kids, check the Pickford Film Center's schedule for family-friendly indie flicks. The Pickford, founded by a group of local film-lovers, was renovated two years ago to feature two screens and a café. You'll be mingling with the locals here. For blockbusters, we have a brand-new Barkley Village Cineplex with stadium seating and 16 screens, including IMAX, RPX and 3-D. It rivals any big-city complex, and it's just few minutes from downtown.

Traveling with teens? My kids and their friends love the Upfront Theatre's live improv performances (Thursday-Saturday nights). The small, club-style venue makes kids feel grown up, and the comedy is hilarious. Tickets are available online or at the door if the show's not sold out. Depending on your views of incidental salty language, it's probably appropriate for kids ages 11 and up. Tickets are \$10/\$8.

Bellingham has a range of restaurants. Our family frequents downtown's Taco Lobo for authentic fish and carne asada tacos. Order at the counter and help yourself to the salsa bar in the Southwest-themed dining area. Fairhaven's Mambo Italiano (reservations recommended) and La Fiamma's wood-fired pizza are also sure bets.

'Hamster families flock to Mallard Ice Cream for homemade ice cream and futuristic red barstools. It's fun. And if you like really good cake, head to Pure Bliss Desserts, where slices are generous enough to share (my daughter recommends the salted caramel). Your kids will feel they're attending a proper tea party with the dainty pink-and-black color scheme.

As you leave town, your family will feel a new kinship with your Washington neighbor. Bellingham's soul lies in its laid-back cultural scene and stunning landscape, and a weekend here will show you why we love it. ●

Joanna Nesbit lives in Bellingham with her husband and two teen kids. She loves calling the Cascadia region home.

Resources

- City of Bellingham www.bellingham.org
- Fairhaven info www.fairhaven.com;
- Fairhaven Village Inn www.fairhavenvillageinn.com;
- Farmers Market www.bellinghamfarmers.org;
- Pickford www.pickfordcinema.org
- Upfront: www.upfront.com