

Ladysmith Downtown Experience

Ladysmith's downtown of the future is an ecologically, socially and financially vibrant, warm and welcoming place. Its heritage architecture has been preserved and restored, offering a visual feast and connection to the past. Nestled alongside these historic icons are contemporary Pacific Northwest buildings that provide a balance of old and new, giving Ladysmith a look and feel that honours its past while providing the energy of the present and future. Quite literally – every building in town complies with local green building codes, and Ladysmith has become an exemplar of sustainability, creating a gold standard to which other communities aspire. With low buildings, no more than three or four storeys tall, the street creates a feeling of expansiveness, one of the many indicators that this is a town that embraces the outdoors.

The shops along 1st Street feature a variety of goods and services offered by independent merchants – no big box stores here, and no need to go to Nanaimo or Duncan to find one. Everything a resident could need is sold here, from handmade furniture (crafted from sustainable forest wood) to chemical-free linens, First Nations artwork (in a store run by members of the Chemainus), ceramic dinnerware barely cool from a local potter's kiln, artisan chocolates and more. 1st Street is a mosaic of boutique and bespoke destinations catering to a diversity of ages, incomes, ethnicities and, of course, tastes.

Above these shops, students and young families dwell in affordable apartments; interior decorators, accountants, tailors and other small businesses offer their services; and artists embrace the creative life in their live-work studios. On sunny afternoons, building residents can be seen caring for the green roofs that adorn all the 1st Street buildings.

Looking down from these rooftops, one sees a street distinctly pedestrian – no parked cars to be seen, now that there's an underground parking lot down the street. Residents and visitors alike stroll along broadened sidewalks lined with a multitude of trees; they pause to admire the local artists' sculptures and carvings woven into the streetscape. Many of these stone, wood and metal pieces focus on historic elements of Ladysmith, going back 5,000, and together, south to north, they tell the town's story. Café patios provide the opportunity for residents and visitors to people-watch over a latte, interact with friends passing by or sip a glass of wine before attending a concert down on the Waterfront.

After the concert – or late on any other evening – people head back to 1st Street for a nightcap at one of the local pubs, where visual artists' work is featured on the walls and even strangers are greeted as long time friends. Those whose

tastes run to the more gourmet can dine at the two restaurants that keep the kitchen open late.

The cobblestone side streets in downtown Ladysmith flow under a canopy of trees awash in colour: rich green hues through the summer; or autumn's palette of magenta, saffron and burgundy. It is a rare and special winter day when time stands still beneath the magical glints of ice- and snow-covered branches.

Heritage buildings and homes have been restored – not renovated – and most feature front-yard gardens (many residents have an additional garden in back). The scent of a rosemary bush mingles with the rosebush across the street, a reminder of the friendly competition that exists among neighbours as each tries to outdo the others. Every one is rich with flowers, herbs, vegetables and other treats for the eye. As residents tend to their rosemary, roses or rhubarb in the front garden, they converse easily with neighbours and passers-by, and they can also tend to practical matters – such as keeping an eye on the children playing hopscotch on the sidewalk.