

# Celebrating Valley's new air service

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The route and elevation, Howard explains, can vary depending on the pilot and the weather.

Howard prefers to fly low, even on the sunniest days.

When his passengers prefer, he'll glide over the water watching for sea lions on uninhabited smaller islands, floating over sheep on one of the islands off Lasquiti and if he's lucky, finding pods of dolphins swimming just under the water's surface.

"I think this route is more scenic than our scenic flights," Howard offers as he points out the name of different islands on the route.

"My favourite is seeing the mist come off the mountains and sitting here in this warm cab."

Air service to Vancouver is not new. Those wanting to skip the ferry line-ups, have had the option to fly direct to Vancouver International Airport's south terminal via Pacific Coastal Airlines scheduled service to Vancouver's south terminal at a similar price for some time.

The route is perfect to catch a connecting flight or to do business in the Lower Mainland.

For a more direct downtown route, politicians, anglers and business people can charter flights to the Valley for a price.

Many of the same people have simply driven to Nanaimo to catch one of West Coast's flights to Vancouver for its speed and ease.

The new service is different.

West Coast Air offers downtown-to-downtown service three times a day - enough to get a Vancouver business



**The gang's all here.** There's snow, snowboards, shellfish cheese and wine, for all who will listen to an Invest Comox Valley press trip to Vancouver announcing the new scheduled service to Nanaimo.

**"I think we're underestimating the impact of West Coast Air ... on the Comox Harbour."**

person to Comox for an early morning meeting and back in time for dinner, or even a late lunch.

Company president and CEO Rick Baxter also hopes the service will attract tourists and tours to the Valley and points north.

"Our ultimate goal is to have a twin otter on this route," said Baxter, which

would bring the flight capacity to 18 passengers.

He hopes to offer the service to Rendez-Vous Canada, Canada's largest tourism trade conference targeted at selling Canadian tourism products to the international market.

This year's conference will be held in Vancouver in May.

"This will be one of the new and exciting products we present," he said.

West Coast's scheduled service started April 1, with flights busy with recreational and business travelers but will continue into the slower tourist season as well.

"We're in this for the long term," Baxter said.

Already, the ease of service has some Valley business leaders crossing their fingers and hoping that the flights will grow bringing with it another, much smaller "WestJet effect" that has opened up the recreational housing market to Calgary and Edmonton.

"I think, initially, we underestimated the effect that first WestJet flight had on Comox," said Comox Valley Economic Development executive director John Watson. "In the same way I think we're underestimating the impact of West Coast Air and its impact on the Comox

Harbour."

Comox Mayor Jim Brass said arrival was a bit of a coup for Comox, as West Coast's only other scheduled flights run out of the major urban centers of Nanaimo and Victoria.

The timing couldn't be better for Peter Gibson, executive director of Mount Washington Alpine Resort, which recently signed a training contract with the Swedish National nordic and biathlon teams for the 2010 Olympics.

The Canadian Snowboard Team has also followed suit.

"I think the logistics of getting teams of people to the Valley will require vans and ferries, but this will be invaluable for coaches and people who need to go back and forth to Vancouver," said Gibson.

The resort is in the process of pitching its slopes and services to Olympic teams, and easier, faster transportation routes to Vancouver go a long way to securing sites.

At least one Vancouver resident, whose business does work with the Invest Comox Valley, says the flight gives him the opportunity to come up more often.

"It's certainly a whole lot easier than it ever was before," said Bruce Wilkie, of MarketPulse Strategic Direction Inc. "We're also thinking about investing there. We definitely have more opportunity to come up now and look at our options."

For Valley residents wanting to get to a hockey game, concert, medical appointment or just a romantic date with a loved one, the flight will add a whole new meaning to whisking away to Vancouver.

At \$149 one-way plus tax, the flight isn't the cheapest way to travel but the scenery is worth it.

The flight from Nanaimo is \$75.50, but you still have to drive to Nanaimo and back.

West Coast Air is offering quick ticket books of 22 tickets to reduce the cost. Pay as you fly books of 25 tickets and monthly invoicing books are also available.

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