

Best of Vancouver

Dunbar

Best of Vancouver By Marg Meikle

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At shops-anchoring Dunbar Theatre (4555 Dunbar Street), a staff member introduces the movies. Fiona Garden photo.

Sleepy Dunbar still has much going for it.

There's a lot to be said for a quiet, safe, and maybe a tad dull place to live. If that's what you crave, Dunbar was made to order. Fifteen minutes to downtown and 10 to UBC, flower-filled, with wonderful old trees creating arbours, it is an urban oasis. A seriously family-oriented neighbourhood that boasts record turnouts for soccer matches, a theatre (the Dunbar) where a staff member always introduces the movies, and a library branch with a great children's librarian, this is a nice place to grow up.

Dunbar has been home to the Musqueam First Nation for 3,000-plus years. In 1908, the first non-Native settlers in the area bought a lot on 22nd Avenue, and they built a shack there in 1912. The majority of the first settlers were from the British Isles. Dunbar—which is bordered by 16th and 41st avenues and Mackenzie/Puget Drive, Camosun Street—was originally part of the municipality of Point Grey (which formed in 1908) and joined Vancouver in 1929. About 20,000 residents now live here, mostly in single-family dwellings.

Point Grey was very orderly in its planning and in 1922 enacted Canada's first zoning bylaw: it wanted residences only, thus beginning the NIMBY tradition that carries on today. In 1926, the Point Grey Town planning commission (and Dunbar was still part of this) had this vision: "a city in which the best type of home could not only be built, but also adequately safeguarded from the encroachments of undesirable types of development".

Long story short: zoning and planning and community visioning are horribly time-consuming and a little like watching paint dry, so the members of the residents' association who are monitoring the implementation of the City of Vancouver's community-vision process are saints for doing it, but they had high stakes. Way back in 1997, Dunbar bought into densification (now Mayor Sullivan's EcoDensity): along the commercial pathway there will be mixed-use buildings, as in most communities. But now residents say city hall is unilaterally increasing the scope of densification throughout their neighbourhood, and they're upset.

NPA councillor Peter Ladner says this isn't true. "We are not planning to do what they say we are planning to do. Some carefully planned densification is necessary. This will result in more affordable housing. For this city to be sustainable, this is an answer."

Dunbar is backing into the 21st century very slowly and carefully. Dunbar is mostly a white neighbourhood: the 2001 census found that 71 percent of residents in Dunbar-Southlands spoke English as their mother tongue, with Chinese as the next-most-common language, at 17 percent. This compares with the entire city at 49.4 percent English and 26.4 percent Chinese. Nor is it economically diverse. In 2001, average household income was \$110,698, compared with the city average of \$57,916. Then there are the real-estate values, where all Vancouver discussions seem inevitably to lead. Prices in this neighbourhood today are mostly more than \$1 million, and large four-bedroom family homes are about \$2.5 million.

That said, Dunbar has a lot going for it.

Best West Side culture tour

Are you a fool for architecture? Don't linger outside these homes too long; the cops will take an interest in you. But show an interest and maybe you'll befriend the house-proud inhabitants—at least enough to strike up a conversation about everyone's favourite topic: just how much did this place cost you?

Begin at 3566 West 20th Avenue, an example of a California or Craftsman bungalow from 1915. From there, cross Dunbar and head south to 3806 Highbury Street. This gigantic house was originally a stucco Vancouver Special, but was reclad to look very much of the Arts and Crafts period. Highbury is a great arbour street, too, so continue down to 29th Avenue, then turn right for a detour to the brink of UBC. St. George's School, 4175 West 29th Avenue, hosts the largest annual neighbourhood event of the year, the St. George's spring fair, in its junior school, which was originally the Convent of the Sacred Heart, built in 1913. It's as close to a castle as you will see in Vancouver. Head back across Dunbar, almost as far as Balaclava Park, to the eclectic 3500 block of West 31st Avenue, as good an example of the Dunbar mix of styles as any. From there, head south to 5503 Blenheim Street. The Morrisette farmhouse is a rare example of a historic farmhouse in the Dunbar area. Around the corner at 5600 Balaclava Street is Knox United, the oldest church in the area, dating from 1910.

If you are new to Vancouver, you need to know that the bible is Chuck Davis's 1997 massive "urban encyclopedia", *The Greater Vancouver Book*. Just published by Ronsdale Press, the Dunbar home-based publisher, is the 441-page *The Story of Dunbar*, edited by Peggy Schofield. It has a wonderful community-project feel and more info than you ever knew you needed about Dunbar. Finally, the city's community page is at vancouver.ca/community_profiles/dunbar-southlands/index.htm.

Best commercial bookends

The Dunbar shopping area is anchored by fabulous businesses that really define the neighbourhood. At the southern extremity are the Dunbar Theatre (4555 Dunbar Street) and Stong's Market (4560 Dunbar Street). What's not to like about Stong's? A friendly family business, it was named best independent grocer in two of the past four years by the Canadian Federation of Independent Grocers. It embraced technology in 1997 and started the ever-growing "Stong's Express", providing a full on-line ordering and delivery service. And its olive tapenade is to die for.

Dunbar Lumber (3637 West 16th Avenue) and Cheapskates (various locations) lie to the north. Contractor Don Pickering lives in Kits and tends to work on heritage homes in his neighbourhood. "I love Dunbar Lumber," he says. "It is so great to have them here. Their prices are very competitive and they deliver."

After the shut-down scares of last year, folks all over town got behind Cheapskates and none were as vocal as its neighbours, who praised it as not just a used-sporting-goods mecca but a wonderful sustainable service too.

Best name for a bakery

Butter Baked Goods

4321 Dunbar Street
604-221-4333

Butter opened the same day the schools did, and boy, are Rosie, Pixie, and their mom (also called Pixie) busy. Run, don't walk, especially for their homemade marshmallows. My nine-year-old and a pal declared their Oreo-ish cookies "unbelievably good", and I say the same about the cupcakes. It is also a beautiful space.

Best cafe with or without offspring

Kokopelli Café

4593 Dunbar Street
604-228-0818

Kokopelli was started by two Dunbar moms who got that the neighbourhood needed a great meeting place with excellent coffee where parents could unwind once they'd dropped the kids off at school or at the community centre. And they got that those same parents might like to buy a reheatable casserole dinner. It has a great little enclosed play space for kids. A friend who is running a major carrot-cake taste-off (anonymously) thinks theirs is the best by far.

Best trove I

Pinks Gifts for Home and Garden

4235 Dunbar Street
604-222-3772

Pinks gift shop has an exceptional buyer. It feels like a secret: no matter the person I'm shopping for and their hobbies, I always find something wonderfully quirky and unique in this tiny shop.

Best trove II

The HOB (Hospice Opportunity Boutique)

3352 Dunbar Street
604-733-1412

Kisa Consignment

5587 Dunbar Street
604-266-2885

Both of these consignment stores are worth a wander. The HOB is a fundraiser for the Vancouver Hospice Society, which hopes to lease office space for day hospice services and, ultimately, a freestanding hospice on the West Side. (Details on a November 9 fundraising dinner are at www.vancouverhospice.ca/.) Kisa's slogan is "Think outside of the blue box: shop green, shop consignment."

Best fresh connection with the past

Longhouse Seafood Market

4288 Dunbar Street
604-731-2047
www.longhouseseafood.com

The Musqueam who run Longhouse live just down the road. Their fish is fresh, and staff is very good about sharing recipes, traditional and contemporary. Their salmon wrapped in phyllo is fantastic.