

Coastal Playground

Tofino is an elegant destination on rugged Vancouver Island

By Eric Lucas

I'm riding my bike along the very edge of the North American continent. Sounds precipitous, but it's actually a swath of golden sand that spreads ever so gently hundreds of yards wide between a lovely forest and the Pacific Ocean. Long, frothy threads of sea foam mark the measured march of each wavelet up the beach, which is packed hard enough to make bike riding possible.

Not just possible, but fun. Few beaches would support an hour-long, mile-and-a-half bike ride, but Chesterman Beach in Tofino, British Columbia, is no ordinary strand of sand. It stretches a long way from the headland that holds the Wickaninnish Inn, one of Canada's most famous lodgings, to a narrow isthmus where, at low tide, one can scramble onto an outlying stone headland where the ocean's swells roll driftlogs into tiny coves and channels. This ceaseless concatenation makes a rhythm that my wife, Leslie, especially enjoys—something about the muscle of the sea shuddering energy into the rock, a primordial music our feet can absorb.

"The fingers of half a planet," I observe, measuring my fondness for the ocean at our feet, and its immensity. She shrugs.

"I just like the sound," Leslie says.

Simple enough. In many ways, Tofino is a very simple place.

We love coming here because this westernmost roaded locale on Vancouver Island is both peaceful and powerful. Water, woods, sand, stone and air—the elements envelop you, with sight, sound, touch and smell providing minute-by-minute reminders of the character of the place. Every roll of wave, brush of wind and touch of toes in warm sand is a sensory spice.

This beach is a famous stage for showcasing the wild temperament of the ocean, with waves thrashing the rocks and winds sweeping the sand. At the moment, however, it's about 62 degrees; the spring sun is westering at an angle that heats the sand pleasantly; and the waves are barely big enough to prevent napping by the three half-hearted surfers who bob on their boards

50 yards offshore. After our bike ride, we settle in by the dunes that back the beach, soak up the sun and wait for ... well, nothing in particular. This is a place where time shifts character from a measurement to a current. Today, the current is calm and soothing.

Meares Island trees demonstrate why the area was named a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

There was a time when Tofino and Ucluelet, the peninsula's bookend towns, were packed with visitors in July and August, and practically deserted the remaining 10 months of the year. Visitors came to stroll the beaches and ancient forests of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, which runs along the 40-kilometer (25-mile) shore between the two towns and features its own famous



strand, a 10-mile shoreline arc of beaches called the Long Beach unit. Then native son Charles McDiarmid, scion of the Tofino town doctor, returned from a global career in hotel management and built an ultraluxe, four-star lodge on the headland that forms the north edge of Chesterman Beach. It's hard for a deluxe hotel to meet expenses with only two months of visitor traffic, so McDiarmid proposed he would draw guests from November through April to snuggle up to the fireplace and watch the ocean's tempests through specially designed picture windows in the lobby and restaurant of the Wickaninnish Inn.

Naysayers thought he was misguided, but winter travel boomed and thus was born a new Pacific Coast attraction: storm-watching. Today, 15 years later, Vancouver Island's west coast is transforming into a 12-month destination whose merits range from simple beachcombing to high-octane lodging and cuisine; from ancient forest trails to two of the province's most intriguing visitor attractions: the Tofino Botanical Gardens and the Ucluelet Aquarium.

Ucluelet has long been described as the blue-collar cousin to Tofino. In the quintessential Tofino coffee shop, Common Loaf, the bulletin board features yoga mats and VW vans for sale. In Ucluelet, bulletin boards list fishing boats and half-ton pickups.

But things are changing in Ukie, too. A big new resort, Black Rock, perches on its own oceanfront promontory and goes head-to-head with the major lodges in Tofino for style, luxury and setting. Local icon Oyster Jim has led the creation of the Wild Pacific Trail, a delightful strolling path that curls along the waterside cliffs and through the spruce-fringed forests that ring Ucluelet. And the harborfront aquarium sports a distinction that may be

Tides on Chesterman Beach leave beach sands that are perfect for family outings.



unique among all of Earth's natural-history showplaces.

What other aquarium has a community festival each fall in which the town's citizens carefully return all the tanks' denizens to the waters from which they came? I didn't know of this one until Leslie and I stopped in one morning and found eager young docents at hand to describe the shellfish, fish, flora and other oceanic creatures held temporarily on public view at the Ucluelet Aquarium.

"The nudibranchs, anemones, crabs, rockfish, sea cucumbers—back they go, in the bay, all of them, every autumn?" I ask.

"Every one," a docent tells me. "They are just guests here." They are colorful guests, indeed—vermillion rockfish, green surf anemones, ivory nudibranchs, orange cup corals, six-rayed sea stars. One specimen in particular, a graceful decorator crab, catches my eye. I've never noticed this crustacean before, despite many hours spent exploring Pacific Coast tidepools, and it turns out there's a reason: This 6-inch creature, *Oregonia gracilis*, considers itself a canvas and attaches all manner of algae, sponges, seaweed and other oddments to its body, creating a walking, abstract collage that blends in with its shoreline surroundings. But against the backdrop of the aquarium's tanks, it is notable for its flamboyance.

So is the 8-foot spire of the Himalayan lily at Tofino Botanical Gardens, a quirky plant zoo at the south edge of Tofino. Crowned with fragrant ivory trumpets well above head height, the lily would be a braggart of a plant if it weren't sheltered by other botanical giants.

Carefully tucked into 12 acres of rain forest on the inland side of the Long Beach Peninsula, with tall Sitka spruces and Western hemlocks shading the gravel walkways and plant beds, the garden, a local institution, dedicates itself to displaying temperate rain forest plants from around the planet—Canada to Chile to Nepal—thus encouraging support for preservation of these ecosystems.

Tofino is an apt location for such an arboretum. Poised at the edge of Clayoquot Sound, the town became famous for agreements reached among the province, activists, forest-products companies and First Nations bands that prescribe limited logging and preserve the rest of the region—water, land and ancient forests alike. In 2000 the area was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

One of the icons of that settlement stands today, unmoved by time or politics, at the end of a lovely trail on Meares Island, in Clayoquot Sound (less than a mile east of Tofino Harbour). The

Hanging Garden Tree is a 1,500-year-old Western red cedar festooned with huckleberry shrubs, salal, salmonberries and seedlings of younger, smaller trees that have hitched their wagons to this arboreal star. Oft depicted on posters and in print, the tree is merely the most conspicuous among a thick forest of giant cedars, firs and hemlocks here. The cedar is so big that it forms its own community, with a clutch of birds that twitter among the branches, including scrappy rufous hummingbirds just arrived from their winter homes in California. They aren't here for storm-watching; the fuchsia bells of salmonberry blossoms attract these tiny visitors.

The area is now a First Nations park; the Big Tree Trail has been bolstered with a boardwalk that carries visitors above the skunk cabbage low spots; and the trail is among the most popular visitor destinations, easily reached with a 20-minute water-taxi ride from a downtown Tofino dock.

Calling it "downtown" is, of course, a mild exaggeration. Aside from Common Loaf, central Tofino is a scenically situated, compact six square blocks of small shops, cafes and stores. These include SoBo (short for "Sophisticated Bohemian"), a favorite local food shrine whose signature dish, superb fish tacos, was its stock-in-trade when it began business a decade ago as a food cart at Tofino Botanical Gardens. Famed First Nations artist Henry Roy Vickers has a nearby gallery, fashioned of cedar planks like a traditional longhouse, filled with his neotraditional takes on indigenous Pacific Coast art. You can stroll the whole town in an hour, poking your head in here and there, remarking on both the scenic beauty and the quiet, uncrowded atmosphere.

Tofino has but 2,000 residents; Ucluelet, 1,500. Aside from tourism, the mainstays have for decades been, and remain, fishing and logging, and the harborfront "downtown" holds a gaggle of fishing boats and floatplanes.

The rugged shoreline of Vancouver Island's outer coast reflects gargantuan clashes between the North American tectonic plate and various smaller tectonic islands sheared from the Pacific oceanic plate and pasted onto North America. Though this is no

Left: Tofino's beaches are popular among surfers—wet suits advised.
Right: Fishing remains a mainstay of the local economy.

WHEN YOU GO...

General visitor information on the Tofino/Ucluelet area and Pacific Rim National Park Reserve is available at www.pacificrimvisitor.ca. Michael White's Browning Pass Charter service can be found at www.browningpass.com; 250-725-3435. Tofino Water Taxi provides regular service from downtown to Meares Island and back, but it's best to make a reservation; www.tofinowater-taxi.com; 877-726-5485.

WHERE TO STAY

WICKANINNISH INN: "The Wick" has doubled its capacity with a second building tucked into the forest bordering Chesterman Beach. All of its very comfortable rooms feature muted décor tones of forest and sand, with recycled Douglas-fir trim; the Ancient Cedars Spa includes treatments incorporating island materials such as Pacific seaweed and local basalt; and the Pointe Restaurant is a leader in West Coast sustainable cuisine. www.wickinn.com.

PACIFIC SANDS BEACH RESORT: Tofino's venerable family resort is a large complex fronting Cox Bay, with hiking trails to its own headland and a large grassy area where kids can run around. The resort's comfortable hotel-style rooms have been supplemented by sensational and more expensive villas tucked into the spruce forest. www.pacificsands.com.

WHALERS ON THE POINT GUESTHOUSE: One of the nicest hostels in B.C. has a great location on a small promontory in Tofino. The exterior features West Coast log-lodge design; bright Caribbean colors inside cheer up the ambiance. www.tofinohostel.com.

BLACK ROCK RESORT: A gleaming new stone, wood and glass facility, Black Rock looks over the shore west of Ucluelet. Spare décor focuses attention on what's outdoors, and Fetch, the resort's restaurant, offers impressive West Coast seafood. www.blackrockresort.com.

TERRACE BEACH RESORT: This eclectic collection of cottages ranges along a small cove in Ucluelet. All units have kitchenettes, and the Wild Pacific Trail is just a few steps away along boardwalk paths. www.terracebeachresort.ca.

longer a volcanic zone, the earth's geological activity seeps to the surface at one of Clayoquot Sound's most famous destinations, Hot Springs Cove. Reached by an hour-long boat ride from Tofino, this park has a hot spring whose waters arise near shore and run down to the sea.

Energetic visitors who clamber down to the sea-level rock pools can experience a natural version of the hot/cold cycle so dear to Finnish sauna advocates. You lie down in hot water, wait a minute and—swoosh—a North Pacific swell arrives to chill the scene. As the seawater recedes, hot water cascades down behind it again.

We've come here aboard local skipper Michael White's 36-foot yacht *The Browning Passage*, a rock-steady boat whose inboard engines minimize disruption to undersea life. On the way back to Tofino, we detour far back into Clayoquot Sound to visit Freedom Cove, a backwater where Catherine and Wayne Adams have established a floating-home complex of flower and vegetable beds, cabins, work studios and greenhouses. They welcome visitors to their flower-bedecked environs, in part to convey the colorful and precious character of the surrounding wilderness. Kingfishers chitter along the shore; herons scout the shallows; eagles glide the sky above. Though we are in the middle of a rain forest, with a nearby inlet famous for receiving 300 inches of rain a year, today the sun is shining, and the breeze is mild. I don't really have to ask why they have named their cove "Freedom," but the moment suggests an obvious conversational gambit.

"Freedom from ...?" I watch Catherine tend seedling lettuce and dahlia plants.

She just smiles. ▲

Eric Lucas writes from Seattle.

GETTING THERE



Tofino is accessible via scheduled service to Nanaimo, British Columbia, or charter service to Tofino, on Alaska Airlines' newest partner, Kenmore Air. For more information, visit alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR.