

Coastal playground

Tofino is an elegant destination on rugged Vancouver Island
By Eric Luceas

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.

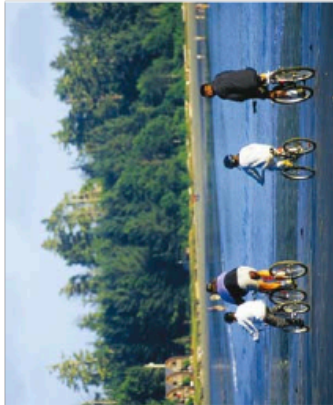
"The fingers of half a planet," I observe, measuring my fondness for the ocean at our feet, and its immensity. She shrugs. "I just like the sound," Leslie says.

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 westerling at an angle that heats the sand pleasantly; and the waves are barely big enough to prevent napping by the three halfhearted 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.

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



CHRIS CHESTERMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK

strand, a 10-mile, shoreline arc of beaches called the Long Beach unit. Then native son Charles McDiarmid, action of the Tofino town doctor, returned from a global career in hotel management and built an ultra-luxe, 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: stern-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 quaintest 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