

How to Experience Tofino on Vancouver Island, B.C., Like a Queen

Our digital editor's whirlwind expedition to one of Canada's most idyllic villages

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Tofino, on the southern edge of the Clayoquot Sound

PHOTO CREDIT: RUTH HARTNUP

"Have you traveled or been in contact with anyone who has visited Liberia, Sierra Leone or Guinea in the past 21 days?"

The question startled me. I hadn't been outside the U.S. since the Ebola crisis began so I hadn't expected anything but routine inquiries: "Why are you visiting Canada?" "Do you have anything to declare?" But now, as I stood at the Vancouver International Airport Customs and Immigration booth getting quizzed on my whereabouts, I felt slightly panicked.

I do that when people catch me off guard with questions. Something as simple as "What's your favorite book?" can send me spiraling. Books? Do I read books? This has to be some kind of disorder.

"I'm going to Vancouver Island," I told the customs agent. "Tofino. I'm a magazine editor. It's a press trip."

His eyes narrowed. More questions: What's a press trip? What places are you going to visit while you're there?

Oh dear god. I fumbled with my printed itinerary (yes, this digital editor still prints things out). "Uh, let's see. We're going to Wolf in the Fog restaurant and I'm going to ride on some boat and then it looks like I check into the Wickaninnish Inn—I think I'm pronouncing that right...is that right?—and then we drive to Victoria for tea..."

"Have a nice visit." He interrupted my babbling, stamped my passport and off I went to board the smallest plane this nervous flyer has ever boarded, to Tofino, British Columbia.

If you've never been to Tofino, you must go immediately. The village of about 1,800 people on the West coast of Vancouver Island boasts some of the most beautiful, lush scenery I've seen yet and offers ample opportunities for surfing, whale watching, hiking, camping, paddle boarding and storm watching. During the summer months, it's teeming with active tourists--so much so that it can be impossible to find a place to stay if you don't plan ahead. The winter months are quieter, calmer. But don't let that fool you: There's still plenty to do.

Like eat. Tofino's dining scene is regularly touted as outstanding, with options that span the spectrum from fine dining to grab-and-go. *Conde Nast Traveller* wrote about the locale's transformation from "hippy to hip thanks to a buzzing, surfer-friendly food scene" and its Wolf in the Fog restaurant was named one of Canada's best new restaurants in 2014 by Air Canada's *enRoute* magazine. More on that later.

After arriving safely at Tofino's tiny airport (*Orca Airways* offers several daily flights out of Vancouver, depending on the season), a private shuttle then whisked me off through the dense forests along the winding Pacific Rim Highway; the majestic *Lone Cone Mountain* loomed in the distance.

Then I saw it: The Wickaninnish Inn. This incredibly grand, family-owned beachfront inn, which has won pretty much every award a hotel can win, including being named a *Relais & Chateaux* property, would be my base camp for the next three days. I hopped out of the shuttle and ran my fingers over the hand-adzed cedar pillars and carved entryway door, details I later learned were the work of Tofino artist Henry Nolla. The Wick--as locals call it--was filled with subtle artistic details (handmade driftwood chairs in each guestroom, commissioned sculptures and native artwork in its common areas) and I soaked it all in on a tour with managing director and owner Charles McDiarmid, whose father opened a second iteration of the inn in 1996. (The original Wickaninnish opened in 1955 and was later converted into a marine interpretive center.)

Its guestrooms were equally as impressive as the grounds. Each room had a floor-to-ceiling view of the Pacific Ocean and Chesterman Beach, a balcony (I left the sliding glass door open at night to listen to the waves crashing and frogs croaking), a fireplace, a soaking tub and a closet loaded with necessary beach-strolling items like flashlights, rain coats, blankets and binoculars. Exhausted from my travels thus far, I flipped on the fire, curled up in front of the window and surveyed the misty gray surrounds.

When you're in Tofino, reserve an evening to dine at the hotel's Pointe Restaurant, which has a magnificent 240-degree view of the ocean and a stunning hammered copper fireplace as its centerpiece. My favorite dish was the Outlandish oysters--they were *almost* too pretty to eat. I capped off the evening with a glass of scotch from its dreamily long scotch list. The presentation was thoughtful and refined.

It was still dark when I awoke the next morning and surprisingly calm considering the area is known for its *thrashing winter storms*, something I'd be grateful for a few hours later. I suggest ordering breakfast in your room; it was relaxing to enjoy a pot (yes, pot) of coffee and a flaky croissant with locally made jam in front of the fire while the sky began to brighten.

That day I was scheduled to go on a fishing boat with a few of the gents (including chef Nick Nutting) who own and work at the Wolf in the Fog restaurant in downtown Tofino. They (emphasis on they) would be fishing for salmon to prepare for my dinner. I searched my luggage for suitable fishing attire, words that rarely share the same sentence for me. Turquoise ballet flats were the only non-heeled shoe I brought, so I slapped on some distressed denim and a sweater and was ready to hit the water.

Luckily for this fishing rookie, there was little wind and the swells were relatively low. We didn't catch anything--it wasn't peak salmon season--but I spotted several gray whales tail-slapping in the distance. On our way back into the harbor, the guys stopped by their crab traps, which sure enough, contained a few choice crustaceans to prepare for dinner. I watched as they skillfully determined which ones were "ripe" without getting pinched. When it was time for the kill, I had to look away. I'm not the person who's able to watch her dinner travel literally from sea to table. And I'm OK with that.

For lunch, I hit up Tacofino, a vivid orange food truck outside of the area's downtown core serving Baja-style fish tacos that were repeatedly referred to as "the best ever" and a "must-try the second one arrives in Tofino." I ordered two of the tempura ling cod fish tacos with a side of rice and beans and they did not disappoint. The portions were beyond huge, however, so I'd suggest sharing. And seating can be hard to come by when it's busy--there are two long communal tables with mismatched stools and chairs that fill up fast. For a dose of something sweet, saunter your full belly several yards to Chocolate Tofino, a chocolate shop brimming with housemade treats such as organic lavender truffles and strawberry cream starfish.

It's impossible to be bored in Tofino. Outdoorsy types can hike year-round amid the towering, mossy-trunked Sitka spruce trees in the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve; beachcomb on Chesterman Beach; or glide along the area's calm (read: no ocean swells) Inlet waters and experience marine wildlife on a guided standup paddle boarding session with [T'ashii Paddle School](#). (T'ashii also offers a guided Cultural Canoe tour in which you'll experience Tofino from a First Nations perspective while perched in a traditional dugout cedar canoe.) Black bear-watching via boat or kayak is a welcomed alternative to whale watching tours. The Tourism Tofino site has the full rundown of activities in one, easy-to-navigate list [here](#).

My last night in Tofino was spent--appropriately--at its new superstar restaurant [Wolf in the Fog](#), which serves seasonal dishes using locally foraged and wild caught fare in its warm, den-like surrounds. The eatery formerly sat atop a quaint surf shop, but has since taken over that spot and expanded to two floors.

You must start with a cocktail here, lovingly shaken and stirred by bar manager Hailey Pasemko. I ordered a Tiny Tim's Swizzle with gin, cherry heering, maraschino liqueur, fernet branca and lime and I enjoyed every sip. I'm told the cedar sour with cedar-infused rye, lemon, thyme and egg white is also boozy winner. Chef Nick Nutting cooked up a few not-on-the-menu dishes just for me and my dining companions--I think to the dismay of surrounding tables who kept quietly asking "which dish is that?" Our freshly caught crab from earlier in the day made its final curtain call with chunks of tangy grapefruit and greens.

It was dark by the time I returned to my room at The Wickaninnish. I slid open the balcony door one last time to a chorus of frogs and powerful waves. That night I got the thrashing wind storm I had hoped for. And at 7:30 a.m., right on cue, my pot of coffee, warm croissant and locally made jam arrived. This is what Tofino mornings are made of.

Stay tuned to read part two of my Vancouver Island journey, in which I travel to Victoria, B.C., for tea, spectacular tea-infused cocktails and more tea. For more on what to do and where to stay in Tofino, visit the official [Tourism Tofino site](#).