

Meryl Streep at the end of the world

Bryan Appleyard reaches Tofino, a tiny town with awesome restaurants and a celebrity following



Down by the docks in Tofino, there's a sign showing a leaping killer whale and, beneath, the words "Pacific Terminus Trans-Canada Highway". One of the world's longest roads — 5,000 miles from Newfoundland — ends here, where the Pacific turns west into east. "Next stop west of here, Japan," locals say. "South, New Zealand." Tofino is at the edge of the world. Which is odd, because Meryl Streep and assorted other Hollywood stars, hipsters and execs like to hang out here, not least because its super-cool restaurants serve some of the best food on the planet.

There's poetry in distance and, in the case of Tofino, it isn't lost even if you cut out the highway and fly to Vancouver. You still need to drive down to Horseshoe Bay (30 minutes), take the ferry to Nanaimo (two hours) and then drive across Vancouver Island (another three hours). But this journey is dramatic at every stage.

On the west coast of Vancouver Island lies the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, a glorious landscape consisting of wild rocky or dark sandy seashore and dense temperate rainforest. The rainforest comes right down to the shore. Wherever you walk at whatever time of day, you are confronted by dramatic or moody vistas. As an introduction, take the easy walk along the Wild Pacific Trail in Ucluelet, a 40-minute drive south from Tofino (wildpacifictrail.com). Deep forest gives way to waves crashing against dark rocks in vertiginous coves.

This landscape is precious. Britain was once temperate rainforest, as was much of the world, but now it is scarce. Tofino is the heart of this place. Set at the end of a little peninsula, it was, until quite recently, a fishing and logging town. This changed when Hollywood arrived, thanks to the weakness of the Canadian dollar and the fact that Vancouver can be made to look like almost any American city. The last time I was in Vancouver, they were filming *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In 2009, they shot *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* in Tofino. The village became a downtime place for the cinematic elite. Locals are discreet about saying exactly who has visited, but Meryl Streep's certainly been.

One astounding effect of this is that tiny Tofino — which has a permanent population of 1,900, swelling to maybe 20,000 in the summer — contains three places where I have eaten some of the best food of my life. First, there is Sobo. Run by a couple from Texas, this started out as a food truck and is now housed in a very unappetising room that looks like the lobby of a 1970s insurance brokerage. Don't be put off. The food is extraordinary. If they're doing the halibut ceviche, have it twice. Prices are absurdly low: starters from £4; £13 for a dozen great



oysters; mains about £17 (sobo.ca).

A short walk away is Wolf in the Fog, which combines a laid-back, dark-wood, rock'n'rolly feel with genuinely unique food. There are hipsterish check shirts and beards, but this is Canada, so it's not a fashion, it's just normal. And finally there's a touch of jockism: the very visible, and audible, kitchen staff accept tips in the form of a six-pack of beers, which causes them to roar and bang tables. This is not a temple of food — I hate those places —

it's just a great place to eat. Go for the tuna with confit pork (mains from £10; wolfinthefog.com).

Finally — and this brings me to where you should stay, too — there is the Wickaninnish Inn. Eating here is more formal than at Wolf, but the food is no less extraordinary (mains about £20). Again, the food is original — pork with seafood is a big and delicious thing — and the location is sensational, on a rocky point that, in winter, can be surrounded on three sides by water. The rooms too are ingeniously comfortable



This is five-star Tofino, if not six star (doubles from £190; wickinn.com).

Down the road is the more laid-back Pacific Sands, run by an amiable surfer dude named Shane Richards, who drives a 1966 Ford F100 pick-up truck. You stay in lovely modern beach houses, right on the beach,

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Top, the Wickaninnish Inn. Above, humpback spotting. Right, scallops at Wolf in the Fog; and Meryl Streep, a Tofino visitor



around which the rainforest is wrapped like a dark cloak (beach houses from £240; pacificsands.com). The surfers had just begun to arrive when I was there in September, but the waves really started to get serious in October. If you don't surf, autumn and winter have been annexed for storm-watching stayovers.

To prove that Tofino really isn't just the preserve of Hollywood's most privileged, doubles at the Middle Beach Lodge start at just £75. It's a warm, wooden, very Canadian place amid rocks and rainforest, with spectacular ocean views (middlebeach.com).

But it's the sea that is the biggest draw of all in Tofino. Tragedy struck the local whale-watching business last October — five Britons died when a boat capsized. It seems to have been a freak accident and I don't think it should put anyone off some quite wonderful experiences.

I went out both whale- and bear-watching with Remote Passages Marine Excursions (whale-watching £50pp; remotepassages.com). It's run by the genial and enthusiastic Kati Martini and Don Travers, who, like me, eat lunch at Sobo. They dress you up in full bright-red survival suits, making me look like the worst astronaut in the world. They use Zodiac boats, inflatables that whizz noisily through the waves.

We only managed one young Pacific grey whale, but took in bad-tempered sea lions and harbour porpoises, too. The island's black bears, meanwhile, are smaller and smart. Not only do they completely ignore the humans in their bobbing boats that crowd round like paparazzi round a movie star, they also farm crabs. I watched one male calmly turn over rocks on the shore at low tide and scoop up the crustaceans. They revisit the same rocks daily.

It's almost impossible to communicate how thrilling these trips were. Everybody got off the boats laughing and chattering. Remote Passages keep you safe, but without making you feel you're just watching on TV.

Tofino is a unique combination of comfort and wilderness. The comfort — meaning, primarily, the food — is extreme, as is the wilderness. I can't imagine there is anywhere else quite like it.

● Bryan Appleyard was guest of Wexas Travel and Destination British Columbia (hellabc.com). Wexas has a 14-day Pacific Coast Experience, which includes two nights in Tofino, as well as stays in Vancouver, Whistler and Victoria, from £2,495pp. Vancouver tolls and the

hawksworth communications

WOLF IN THE FOG

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