

SURF 'N TOUGH TURF

Winter waves in Tofino not for the faint of heart — but there's plenty more to explore



ANDREW PENNER

My plan was coming together nicely. The sea — a gleaming, red-orange sheet that gently rolled into the western sky — seemed rather “friendly.” And I liked that. Considering these very waters, just a couple of days earlier, were a chaotic mess of wind-authored madness, I felt fortunate to look out and see something, well, “surfable.” There was just one problem with my plan. I can't really surf.

But, in case you haven't heard, there are quite a few people hanging out in Tofino who can. And many of them — such as the dude making mouth-watering Mexican grub at the legendary taco joint, the young lady working the counter at Surf Sister, and the tongue-pierced hipster pouring pints at our resort — were very helpful in terms of directing me to the right beach with the right board at the right time with the right wind so the right waves could keep me right-side up. Didn't work.

Thankfully, the success of my short and sweet Tofino trip didn't entirely hinge on the quality of the surfing. Or, more accurately in my case, the floundering around in ice-cold water, cursing, with a hair-pulling, organ-squeezing neoprene wetsuit on that was way, way, way too small. But, let's just go with “surfing” if, for no other reason, it just sounds better.

Tofino — clutching the rugged, wave-battered shores on the western edge of Vancouver Island — has become a bastion for beach bums. Lovers of a remote, West Coast way of life that's still rough around the edges (the locals still refer to it as “Tuff City”) have found their happy place there. But, located literally at the end of the road (Highway 4), approximately 200 kilometres west of Nanaimo, you do have to put in some effort to get there. More and more people, surfers and otherwise, are realizing that it's worth it.

In summer, when the water is calm and the temperatures climb, the famous beaches, such as Chesterman, Long Beach and Cox Bay, are ideal for a family-friendly holiday. In July and

August, the population swells from a couple of thousand to quadruple that. And the corridor between Tofino and Ucluelet, much of which lies within Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, is choked with vehicles.

But in winter, thanks to the pounding surf and the wicked winds, there is a different vibe. And significantly fewer people. But, yes, storm-watching tourists — and surfers of all makes and models — flock here when the conditions get gnarly. (The best surfing and storm watching is from December to March. The beach walking is incredible year-round.)

Indeed, the battered headwalls, the thundering explosions of water on rock, are quite the spectacle. Stand on a beach — and there are dozens between Tofino and Ucluelet — and there is nothing between you and Japan. Except, of course, 7,429 km of foam-flecked sea that, with one savage storm, becomes about as inhospitable — and awesome to behold! — as any natural show on the planet.

On my recent visit, we were fortunate to get a “good” storm. Not a boiling behemoth with eight-metre waves and a man-eating storm surge, but one good enough that my surf lesson had to be cancelled. My instructor gave me the terrible news and capped off the conversation by stating, rather confidently, “you will not find anyone who values their life in the water today.” That was good enough for me.

This was our cue (my wife, Dawn, was along for the joyride) to head down the highway to the quaint port town of “Uke” to saunter along the amazing Wild Pacific Trail to watch “the show.” Rimming the ragged shore — with a historic lighthouse and plenty of viewing platforms high



A “real” surfer struts his stuff at Chesterman Beach. ANDREW PENNER

above the swirling surf — the 8.4-km Wild Pacific Trail offers numerous vantage points to take in the drama. For hikers, photographers, and storm watchers, it shouldn't be missed.

Likewise, traipsing through the towns (both Tofino and Ucluelet are ripe for exploration) should also be part of every itinerary. Touring the art galleries in Tofino — such as the ones owned by esteemed seascape painter, Mark Hobson, and legendary Indigenous artist Roy Henry Vickers — can be a powerful experience. The artisan coffee outposts, the surf shops (there are now six in Tofino), the booming Tofino Brewing Company, and at least a handful of awesome restaurants (Wolf in the Fog, Kitchen 1909, and the Tofino Resort & Marina, and world-class The Pointe Restaurant at The Wickaninnish Inn immediately come to mind) will

all give you a greater appreciation for the local culture. And, even though you may have to endure a lineup, a trip to the orange Tacofino truck, an iconic foodie fortress tucked away in the parking lot behind the Live to Surf store, is mandatory.

While a personal surfing experience in Tofino is definitely not “mandatory,” it will either a) grow your appreciation for this difficult sport or b) heighten your hatred for a futile endeavour that will, if you're a raw beginner, cause much humiliation, exhaustion, and salt water intake. And, yes, I realize this isn't a glowing endorsement for coercing your innards into a wetsuit (if you don't want hypothermia in the four-degree water) to ride the “big blue broncos.”

But, truth be told, my surfing experience in Tofino (I rented a board, wetsuit, hood, gloves, and boots from Live to Surf for \$60) wasn't all bad. For starters, I lived. And, shockingly, thanks to “the broncos” being rather benign at Chesterman Beach, I actually got on my feet a handful of times. Sure, I spit out some salt water, bounced on the bottom a handful of times, pleaded for mercy. But I got a taste for it. I smiled. I laughed. I burned calories. I was one with the sea, felt it heave beneath me, the waves propelling me forward (or under). And I can tell my kids, my future grandkids, I surfed in Tofino. Or something that possibly bordered on that.

IF YOU GO

To get to Tofino from Calgary, fly to Comox or Nanaimo, rent a car, and drive three hours west along the Pacific Rim Highway through Port Alberni to the coast. For the ultimate Tofino getaway, a beachside room at the luxurious Wickaninnish Inn will not disappoint. Their tag line — “rustic elegance on nature's edge” — sums it up nicely. For more information, check out www.wickannish.com. Rates start at \$340 per night.

Perfectly situated in the heart of town, the newly renovated and completely reinvented Tofino Resort & Marina is another excellent option for a home base. With views of the waterfront and Meares Island, this budget-friendly resort definitely captures the charms of the wild West Coast. For more information, go to www.tofinoresortandmarina.com. Rates start at \$129 for a king suite.



The tumultuous sea puts on a show in Ucluelet. ANDREW PENNER



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