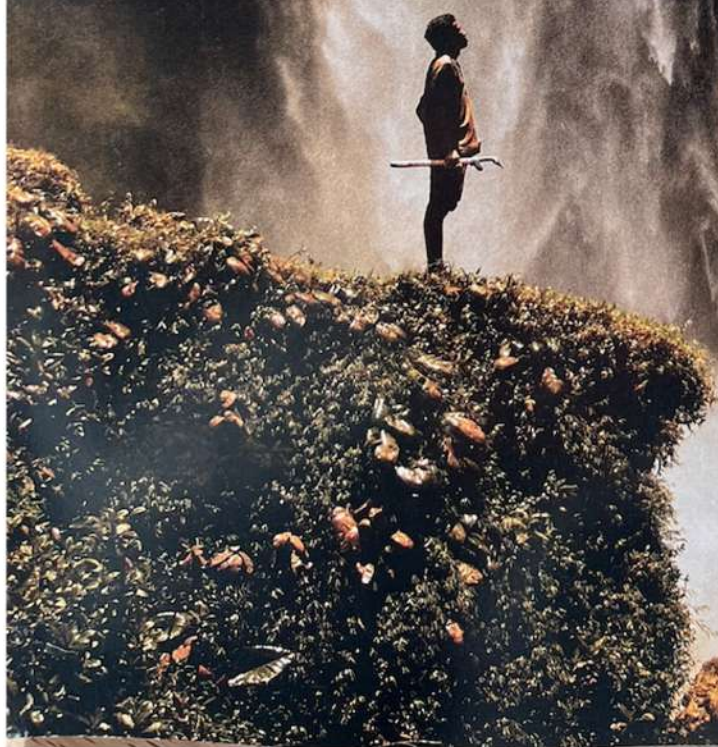


TRAVEL + LEISURE

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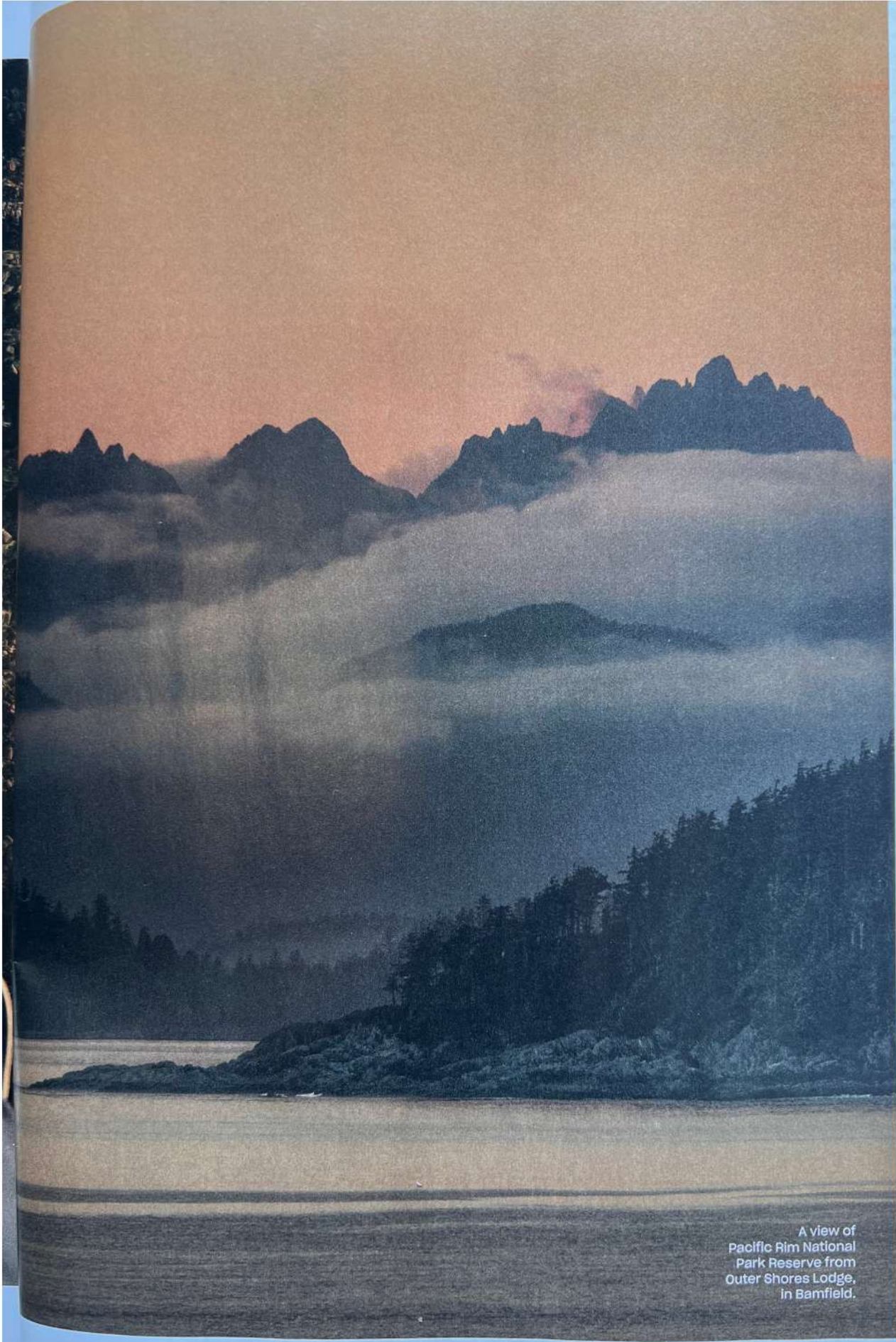


Treasures of the Tide

In the tidal pools and coastal forests of Canada's Vancouver Island, Jen Murphy discovers a marine environment that's both minuscule and magical.

Photographs by Grant Harder

Wading through tide pools in Bamfield, on Vancouver Island.



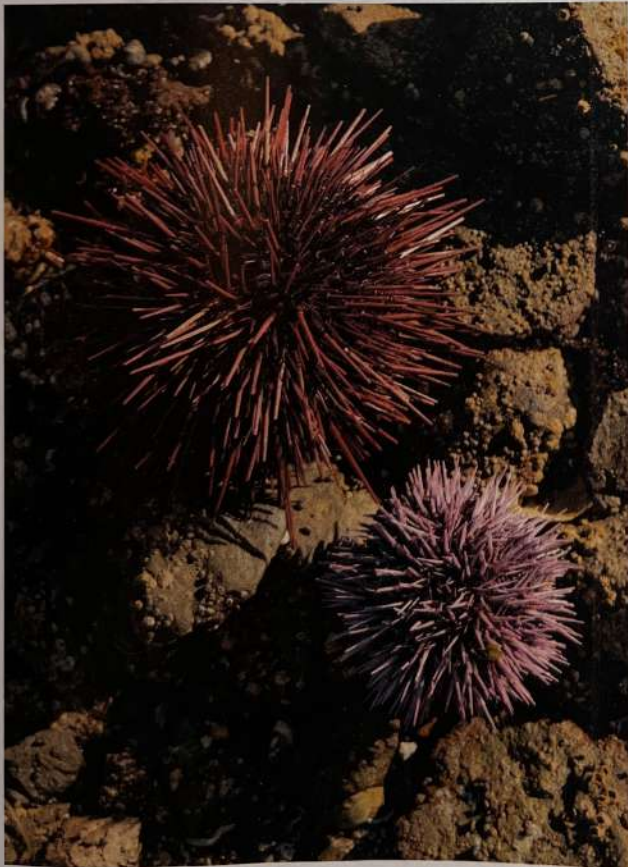
A view of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve from Outer Shores Lodge, in Bamfield.

I USUALLY DISAPPROVE OF footwear at the beach. But even I agreed to wear wellies as I walked through the tide pools at Sombrio Beach, where a thick bed of midnight-blue mussels and pointy goose barnacles was slicked with glossy green surfgrass.

It was a sunny day in early May on a wild stretch of sand in the Juan de Fuca Provincial Park, on the southwestern coast of Vancouver Island, in British Columbia. The sky was so clear I could see the outline of Washington's Mount Olympus some 60 miles away. The water was full of surfers in wet suits; colossal Sitka spruce, Douglas fir, and cedar trees lined the shore.

Everything about this epic landscape tugged my attention upward, but my guide, Annalee Kanwisher of **Coastal Bliss Adventures**, encouraged me to focus my gaze down. "Wait for it," she said excitedly. The tide was going out and a creamy layer of ocean-whipped foam was sucked back out to sea, leaving behind a glassy tide pool teeming with life. Ruby-red sea stars were plastered on the rocks, and hermit crabs scampered across driftwood. The purple tentacles of a sea anemone blossomed like

Red and pink sea urchins along the shore in Bamfield.



petals of a dahlia, and a sluglike nudibranch with electric orange spots clung to a ribbon of kelp.

Vancouver Island is a place where old-growth forests are named for holy spaces (like Cathedral Grove, in a park on the island's eastern edge) and trees can have celebrity status ("Big Lonely Doug," Canada's second-tallest Douglas fir, is a main attraction). People travel there to be awed by the immensity of nature. But I wanted to see the smaller wonders hidden in the island's intertidal zones. My 10-day journey resembled a high school field trip, but with cushy lodges and fantastic restaurants. I could walk the beaches on my own, but to truly appreciate the complexity of the tiny ecosystems, I'd need the help of an expert or two. So I enlisted First Nations members and guides, like Kanwisher, who could impart local wisdom and provide context to what I saw.

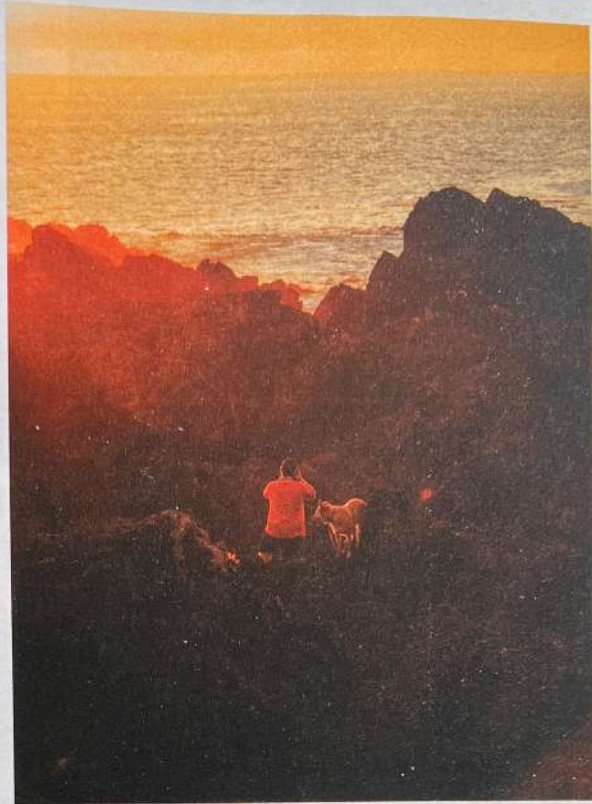
Victoria to Port Renfrew

On the surface, Victoria can feel staid. But the provincial capital, which was named in honor of the British queen, definitely has a wild side. From my home base, **Magnolia Hotel & Spa** (doubles from \$289), it was a short walk to the Inner Harbour, where **Havn**, a World War II barge turned floating sauna complex, recently opened. I popped in for restorative steam. Then I took one of the hotel's bikes for a spin along some of the city's many paths, which trace the driftwood-strewn coast from downtown to the natural rock pools of Sooke Potholes Park. Still, in the larger scope of Vancouver Island's wilderness, this was nature lite.

That afternoon, I hit the road, and the landscape turned rugged surprisingly quickly. Highway 14 curves past wave-battered cliffs and traverses some of the world's most ancient forests. Two hours later I arrived in Port Renfrew. This small village has been dubbed the Tall Tree Capital of Canada, but it's also home to some of the West Coast's richest intertidal zones.

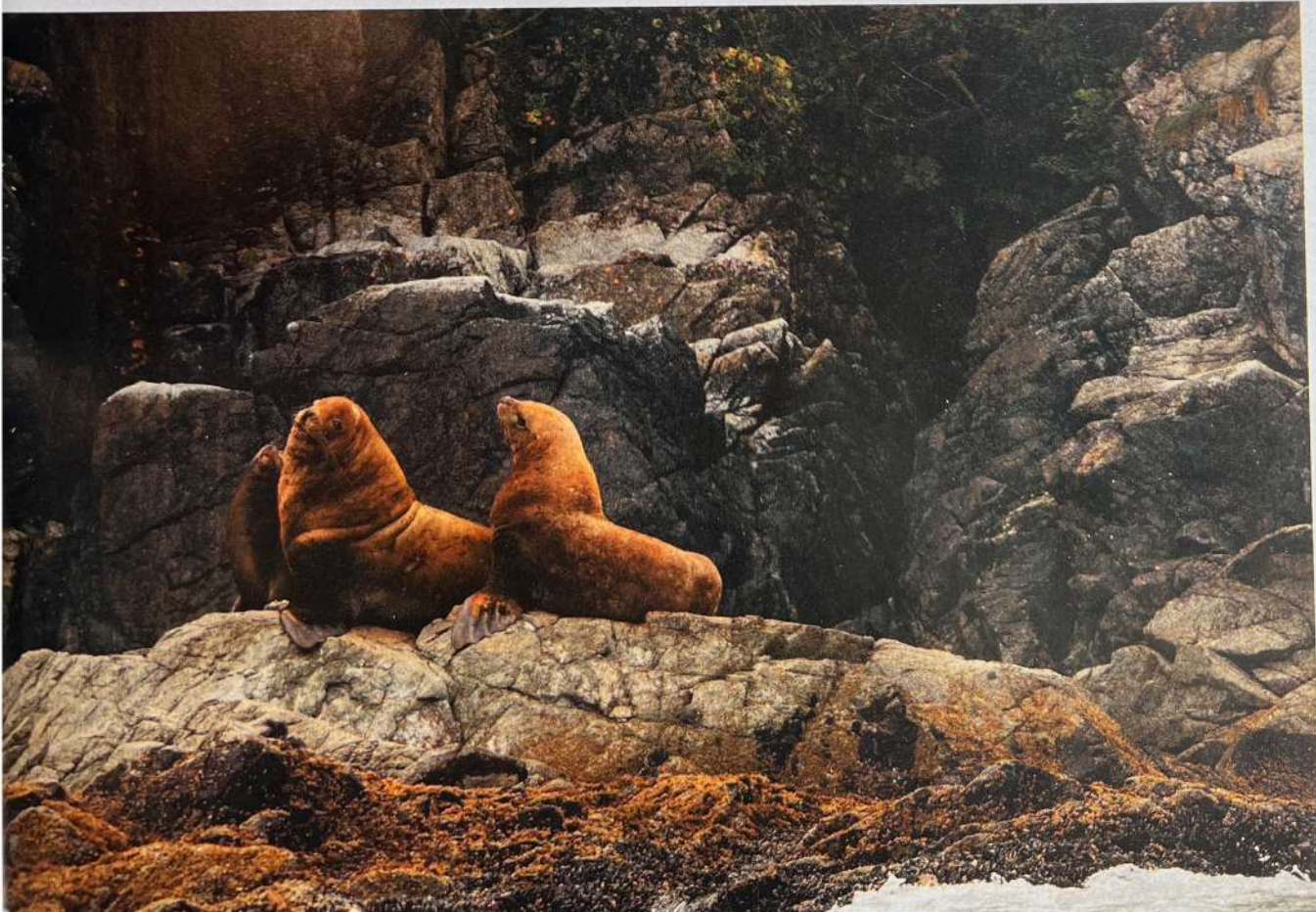
My waterfront log cabin at **Wild Renfrew** (doubles from \$202) was conveniently tucked between two popular coastal trailheads: the challenging West Coast Trail and the less intense, yet no less spectacular, Juan de Fuca Marine Trail. Kanwisher had agreed to guide me on a 9½-mile portion of the latter, beginning at Sombrio Beach and finishing at Botanical Beach.

Along the way, she gave me a quick lesson in marine anatomy, explaining how a sea star can push its stomach out of its mouth to engulf its prey, and that a goose barnacle has the largest penis-to-body-size ratio in the animal kingdom. It was peak low tide when we arrived at Botanical Beach, and the shore looked like a sandstone moonscape of turquoise tidal pools, each home to a symbiotic ecosystem.



Views along the Wild Pacific Trail in Ucluelet.

Sea lions on the rocks near Bamfield.



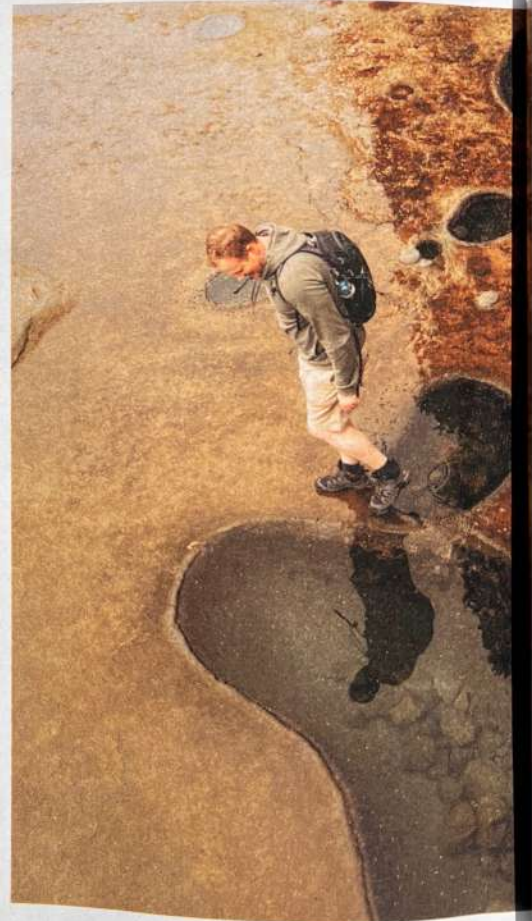


◀ The sitting area of a room at the Nami Project, a hotel in Ucluelet.



▶ Moss along the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail.

A layer of ocean-whipped foam was sucked back out to sea, leaving behind a glassy pool teeming with life.



◀ The Grotto Spa at Ting Na Mara Resort, in Parksville.



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▲ The Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre, on the island's western coast.



▲ Walking on Botanical Beach, near Port Renfrew.



▲ A sailboat in Port Renfrew.



▲ A Canada goose in the water near Parksville.

Up close, each of these pools resembled a bountiful garden of colorful brittle stars, spiny urchins, and blue-striped chiton—a species that, I learned, pre-dates the dinosaurs. When I recalled my tide-pooling discoveries to the bartender at **Wild Mountain Food & Drink** (entrées \$16–\$33) later that evening, she teased me for my eager interest. But, it turns out, my interest wasn't so unusual: in the early 1900s, seashore ecology was in vogue. In his tome *Treatise on Marine Ecology and Paleoecology*, the marine biologist and environmentalist Joel Hedgpeth declared: "A well-ordered holiday was incomplete without exercise in the identification of seaweeds and zoophytes." I briefly wondered if I should launch a TikTok tide-pooling feed to resurrect the trend.

Port Renfrew to Parksville

Two days later, I drove through the Cowichan Valley wine region to reach the island's tamer eastern shore. My destination, Parksville, is a beachcomber's paradise, especially when the tide is changing. The water receded



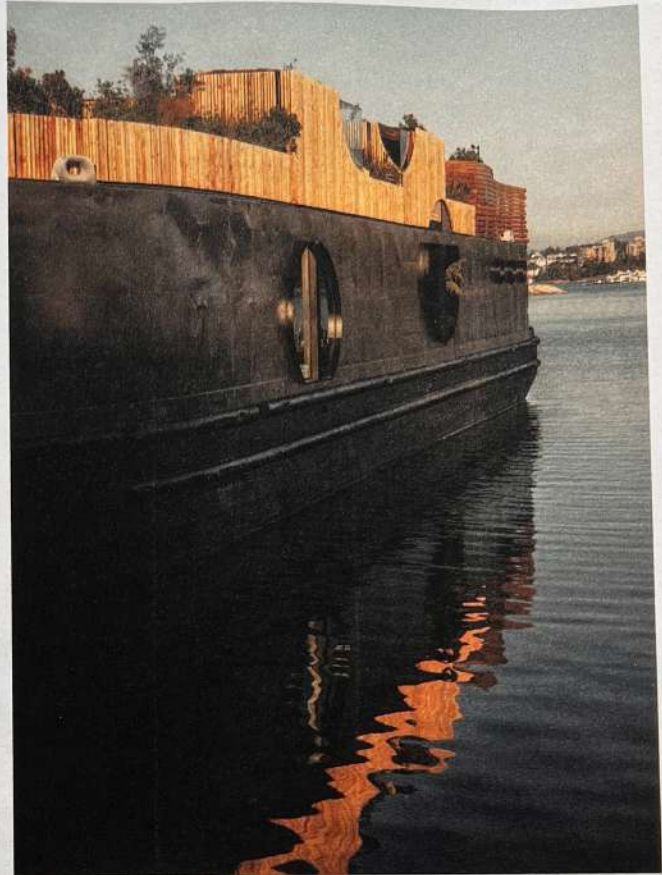
Sombrio Beach, near Port Renfrew.





◀ Catching the sun on the deck at Outer Shores Lodge.

▶ The floating Havn saunas, in Victoria.



▼ A dessert of spruce sponge, blackberry, chocolate, and candy rocks at Pluvio Restaurant & Rooms.



more than a half-mile on the beach fronting my hotel, **Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort** (doubles from \$205), leaving behind a swath of sand littered with sea critters.

I could have spent an entire afternoon soaking in the mineral pools at the resort's Grotto Spa, but I willed myself to drive 30 minutes north to **Deep Bay Marine Field Station**. Vancouver Island University's shellfish research facility, which is open to the public in the summer, offers guided tours of its two aquariums, intertidal-zone touch tanks, and labs where research ranges from aquaculture to microplastics. Field station manager Carl Butterworth pointed out clam and Pacific oyster larvae that are being bred to be more resilient to climate change. He then asked me to gently pick up a slimy sea cucumber. "Most people who grew up on this coast just look at the intertidal creatures," he said. "They are too scared to touch and interact with them. They never take time to understand what they're seeing on the beach."

Parkville to Ucluelet

After exploring the east, I headed back to the island's western side. In the village of (Continued on page 137)