



End of the road on a British Columbia island

Bonnie Wach
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Heading west, we caught the Pacific Rim Highway, a road remarkable for its seductive curves through dramatic geology. Before a dirt road was built in 1959, the only way to reach the remote west side of the island was by water. It wasn't until 1972 that they paved the highway, opening up Ucluelet and its sister port, Tofino, to tourists, surfers, isolation-seeking celebrities and storm watchers.



Bonnie Wach / Special to The Chronicle
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Within a half hour of the caverns, we entered an entirely new ecosystem. MacMillan Provincial Park is home to a stand of the continent's oldest and tallest Douglas fir trees - 250-foot monsters more than 800 years old that shoot straight up to the clouds like toothpicks for the gods. As we walked down wooden boardwalks, gnarled and twisted roots of gigantic felled trees created eerie gargoyle faces, and Old Man's Beard hung in ragged wisps.

Back on the road, the technical part of the drive - the part where Pete gets a silly grin on his face and I do a lot of air-braking - began in earnest. We passed through Port Alberni, a west coast salmon and logging port that, because of a 25-mile glacier-carved inlet, is geographically closer to the island's east coast. From here, the highway cuts across the spine of the 7,000-foot Vancouver Island Mountains, crisscrossing at least seven provincial parks, three alpine lakes, and creeks and rivers too numerous to count. Rounding a bend, we find crystal-clear Sproat Lake backed by snow-dappled glacial peaks.

"Lake!" "Snow!" "Bald eagle!" "Bank turn!" we shouted. The skies grew gray and the temperatures dropped 20 degrees as the fog crept through the mountain gaps. In the mist, the walls of spruce and cedar and the flanks of purple wildflowers took on a DayGlo hue. At Kennedy Lake, the fallen trees were layered so high you couldn't see the forest floor.

We plunged back into the fog for the final stretch to Ucluelet.

Even though the vaporous fog had turned into a liquid, we left the car to explore Ucluelet's main street, browsing the few shops, native art galleries and cafes, and stopping in to see the catch-and-release aquarium - a delightfully hands-on affair in a makeshift shack at the foot of the harbor.

Surrounded by Pacific Rim National Park, Ucluelet (Ukee to locals) was late to catch the tourism wave that swept over its sister city, Tofino, in the '80s, though the luxury resorts springing up along its shores these days are making up for lost time. Separated by a hammerhead shark-shaped stretch of sand called Long Beach, the two towns enjoy an amiable kind of sibling rivalry.

(Eco-artsy-hippie Tofino quickly took on the mantle of Canada's surfing capital. Not to be outdone, Ucluelet's mayor picked up boogie boarding a few years ago, and the town now bills itself as Canada's boogie boarding capital.)

The next day, all it took was the mention of shipwrecks to convince Rowan to hike the Wild Pacific Trail along the treacherous coastline known as the "Graveyard of the Pacific." Past Amphitrite Point Lighthouse, we take in spectacular views of Barkley Sound and spot the Broken Group Islands through breaks in the clouds.

Later, to give our end-of-the-road trip true legitimacy, we decide to head over to Tofino. Before the road connecting Ucluelet to Tofino was built during World War II, slogging across sand, boardwalk and muddy forest was the only way to get from one town to the other, and spending the night in a driftwood shelter on the beach wasn't uncommon.

I drive the smooth, paved highway with newfound appreciation. At Tofino's Common Loaf cafe (which looks exactly like it sounds), a blonde, dreadlocked barista shrugs when I ask about the town's nickname, Tuff City.

"It's the end of the road. It can be kind of tough there," she says. "Nowhere else to go." Over thick slabs of homemade bread and blackberry jam, I consider this conundrum along with our next move, and conclude - bucket list or no - that the only logical thing to do is turn the car around and go back the way we came. --

IF YOU GO

Vancouver Island is 2 1/2 hours from Seattle via the Victoria Clipper high-speed passenger ferry, or 1 1/2 hours from Vancouver via car ferry.

LODGING

In Parksville/Qualicum Beach, try the family-friendly log cabins (and killer spa) at Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Resort. Rates \$149-\$349; www.tigh-na-mara.com.

In Ucluelet, Reef Point Cottages offers modern wooden bungalows with fully equipped kitchens and hot tubs overlooking Spring Cove. Rates \$99-\$199; www.reefpointcottages.com

FOOD

We had a terrific meal at the Spotted Bear, a small bistro that serves global cuisine and takes full advantage of the local bounty. Entrees average \$20. 101-120 Fourth St., (250) 725-2215.

The fresh, regional cuisine and floor-to-ceiling ocean views at Black Rock Resort in Ucluelet are well worth the price (about \$30 for entrees). 596 Marine Drive, www.blackrockresort.com.

For more info:

www.visitparksvillequalicumbeach.com, ucluelet.travel.bc.ca

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