

Tofino and Uclulet, Vancouver Island, British Columbia

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Forget reality TV. Visitors witness real power and storm action along Vancouver Island's Rain Coast in winter. (Photo courtesy of Wickaninnish Inn)

BRING ON THE STORMS

By Claire Walter
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When planning a winter vacation, most people think of languishing on a tropical beach, swatting golf balls on a palm-studded course or cruising calm seas on a big ship. Those with a taste for adventure might prefer to ski through down-soft powder snow, ride perfect waves on a surfboard or scuba dive to a glorious reef or shipwreck. But for an adrenaline rush of a different sort, those of us who lust for a combination of excitement and raw natural beauty think about heading into the teeth of wild winter weather. For a

growing cadre of stormwatchers, nothing but nothing beats the Pacific Coast of British Columbia's Vancouver Island.

There you will find the only stretch of the island's central coastline accessible year-round by paved road. Between forested mountains and lakes to the northeast and the Pacific Ocean to the southwest stretches a sliver of Pacific Rim National Park Preserve, known for its fine-sand beaches, rocky headlands embracing scenic bays and coves, and rainforest hiking trails cut through thick old-growth red cedar and Western hemlock.

The Pacific Rim Highway, a two-laner flanked by these towering, moss-draped trees, runs right through the park with Tofino on one end and Ucluelet on the other. These funky hamlets just 25 miles apart that enjoy some of western Canada's mildest winter temperatures and endure some of its heaviest rainfalls and most potent storms. What the 3,000 or so locals endure has made these towns meccas for winter stormwatchers, who treasure this dramatic and remote area to watch Pacific storms roll in with power, fury and wild beauty.

Some 328 centimeters (that's more than 130 inches, if you don't think metric) of average annual rainfall fall on this part of Vancouver Island, which is nicknamed the Rain Coast. Of that, 50 centimeters (20 inches) can pour from the skies in a single storm. Even in relatively tranquil periods between storms, impressive swells roll onto shore, crashing against rocky headlands, sliding over the wide beaches, littering the white sand with whiter oyster and clam shells, fringing the tideline with seaweed and rearranging the driftwood.

Eight-foot waves are not uncommon. Add wind and rising tides, and when all the elements of waves and weather converge to create the proverbial perfect storm, waves have been known to crest to 30 or 40 feet, occasionally more. Driftwood isn't limited to diminutive sticks and ordinary-size logs, but includes enormous tree trunks cast upon the beaches and piled into bayheads like spilled toothpicks. Beneath the turbulent waves lie nearly 250 shipwrecks, sunk over two centuries, in the so-called "Graveyard of the Pacific."

A dozen significant tempests, give or take, hit this coastline each month during storm season, which kicks off in late October or early November and shifts into high gear in January and February. In midwinter, you'll see sheets of rain, buckets of rain, horizontal sheets of rain, sprays of rain shooting through the salt-kissed air – but rarely snow. It is improbably romantic, whether you prefer to share the raw and invigorating experience of the outdoors, protected by fetching fishermen's slickers that lodges lend to guests, or to snuggle in the warm, dry coziness of one of the handful of inns and lodges that remain open. Even from indoor comfort, you will be mesmerized as wave after wave washes up on the beach below, crashes onto a nearby cliff, and sprays your double-paned window. You might also luck upon nature's light show from a winter electrical storm.

During low tides and calm periods, there's nothing finer than an invigorating walk, either on a trail or directly along the shore. Step onto a beach as the tide goes out and gaze out at the restless sea and down by your feet to examine what the water has deposited on the sand. Still, it is imperative to keep a cautious eye for changing weather, and retreat when the ride begins to change. Beaches be especially hazardous during a true winter storm, when massive drift logs ride the waves and jumble onto land and pile up like Brobdinagian Pick-Up Sticks. Except during the most potent storms, when hoteliers

and innkeepers caution guests to stay inside, you can don heavy-duty raingear and venture out into the weather, staying on marked trails and staying off wet rocks.

The best stormwatching spots include designated safe areas along the well-named Wild Pacific Trail that snakes along the top of sea cliffs and Big Beach, a relatively sheltered, horseshoe-shaped strand near Ucluelet. Radar Hill, crowned by remnants of a long-abandoned World War II installation at nearly 500 feet above sea level, provides a stunning panorama of coves, bays, breakers and clouds but can be terribly windy during a howling storm. Perhaps best of all is the Amphitrite Point Lighthouse overlooking with views of Barkley Sound, Broken Group Islands and the open sea. Near the operating Canadian Coast Guard Station this squat, square signal structure is a coastal landmark at the tip of the peninsula below Ucluelet.

In late February and early March, gray whales begin migrating northward along the coast, and stormwatchers begin to give way to whale watchers. An estimated 22,000 gray whales – the entire North American population of this awesome species – passes close by on their 5,000-nautical-mile journey from mating and calving lagoons of the Sea of Cortes between the Mexican mainland and Baja California, to their summer feeding grounds in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. That’s one heck of a commute – and it happens just off-shore of Vancouver Island. Most grays are gone by May, but some spend the entire in Clayoquot Sound, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve just northwest of Tofino.

The rocky headlands jutting out toward the sea offer fine vantage points for spotting these splendid marine mammals, and during the Pacific Rim Whale Festival (Mar. 18-27), free public viewing stations are set up at Amphitrite Point Lighthouse, and charter boat and floatplane operators from Ucluelet and Tofino being their season. The festival features 70 events, ranging from a seafood chowder cook-off to an art show.

Wildlife viewing is not restricted to whales. Bald eagles overwintering in this area can often be spotted in sheltered harbors, perched on trees or pier pilings in the harbor. The region’s black bears do not go into deep hibernation, so it is not uncommon to see bears even in the wettest weather. By March, you can often spot a bruin or two on skunk cabbage growing in roadside ditches or marshy areas.

Tofino was a fishing town, while Ucluelet’s economy was once based on logging. First Vietnam-era war protestors and later eco-activists added a layer of idealism to the pragmatic working-class popular, which still is only about 3,000 people spread between the two towns. Local business signs now indicate such enterprises as “Massage therapy,” “art gallery,” “fishing charters” and “whale watching trips” now form the base of the local economy.

Summer accommodations range from super-luxe to very basic, but in winter, it’s the high-end properties that remain open to welcome stormwatchers. Exceptionally comfortable accommodations, top-line spa services, and lovely sea-view restaurants such as the Wick’s Pointe or Tauca Lea’s Boat Basin Restaurant serve carefully prepared and served meals mean that stormwatching on Vancouver Island is a wild experience, but not a wilderness expedition.

IF YOU GO

Location and Transportation: Ucluelet is 444 kilometers (267 miles from Victoria), approximately a 5-hour drive. Tofino is 42 kilometers (25 miles) farther. The *M.V. Coho*,

a year-round car and passenger ferry, services Victoria from Port Angeles, WA (contact Black Ball Transport, Inc.; phone 360-457-4491; website www.cohoferry.com) for \$35.50 one-way per car and driver, and walk-on passenger service from Seattle is available on the *Victoria Clipper* fleet (Victoria Clipper, phone 800-888-2535 and 206-448-5000; website www.clippervacations.com) for \$106 roundtrip, \$86 with seven-day advance reservation. In winter, Regency Express has one daily flight Mon-Thurs and Sat and two daily flights Fri and Sun between Vancouver and Tofino (phone 800-228-6608 and 604-278-1608), starting at CDN\$268 roundtrip. From Victoria, the Tofino Bus operates daily service between Victoria and Tofino (phone 866-986-3466 and 250-725-2871; website www.tofinobus.com) for CDN \$95.32 roundtrip; the ride takes 5 hours.

Lodging and Dining

Best Western Tin Wis Resort, 1119 Pacific Rim Highway, Tofino, BC VOR 2Z0; 800-661-9995 or 250-725-4445; www.tinwis.com. This comfortable and unpretentious First Nations-owned lodge overlooking McKenzie Beach offers several room types, including loft units. All have a mini-fridge and coffee maker, and some have fireplaces, Jacuzzi tubs and/or kitchenettes. Also on-site are a restaurant and small fitness center. Storm season rates through Mar. 31 start at CDN\$119 nightly for two.

Clayoquot-Orca Lodge, P.O. Box 906, Tofino, BC VOR 2Z0; 888-611-1988 or 250-725-2323; www.tofino-bc.com/orcalodge/. This eight-room lodge, currently expanding to 40 rooms (completion anticipated in spring), is located on a private bird sanctuary. All rooms have fridge, coffeemaker and patio. Guests cozy up in the Chuckling Oyster Lounge and friendly guest living room. Two nights from CDN\$159 double per room through Mar. 15.

Long Beach Lodge Resort, 1441 Pacific Rim Highway, P.O. Box 897, Tofino, BC VOR 2Z0; 877-844-7873 or 250-725-2442; www.longbeachlodgeresort.com. Perched on the edge of beautiful Cox Bay, between Pacific Rim National Park and spectacular Clayoquot Sound, the luxurious 41-room resort has both a beachfront lodge and rainforest cottages. The dining room serves small-plate lunches and full dinners with an emphasis on seafood specialties and regional dishes. The Storm Gourmet Package, available from Jan. 24, starts at CDN\$269 nightly for lodging two fireside cocktails, three-course gourmet dinner and continental buffet breakfast each morning; two-night minimum.

Pacific Sands, P.O. Box 237, Tofino, British Columbia VOR 2Z0; 800-565-BEACH (565-2322) or 250-725-3322; www.pacificsands.com. Spacious and comfortable accommodations range from one-bedroom suites to three-bedroom villas. All units have full kitchen facilities and private balconies or patios. Storm season rates through Mar. 17 begin at CDN\$150 per night per unit.

Tauca Lea Resort & Spa, 1971 Harbour Drive, P.O. Box 286 Ucluelet, BC VOR 3A0; 800-979-9303, www.taucalearesort.com. Located on the harbor side, resort offers one- and two-bedroom suites decorated with handcrafted furniture, each with a water view, balcony, full kitchen, deep soaking tub and gas fireplace. On-site Boat Basin Restaurant

(reservations 250-726-4644) offers regional, spa and vegetarian cuisine. Storm Season rates from CDN\$150 nightly and CDN\$450 for five nights for two.

Wickaninnish Inn, Osprey Lane at Chesterman Beach, P.O. Box 250, Tofino, BC V0R 2Z0; 800-333-4604 or 250-725-3100; www.wickinn.com. Each of this luxury resort's 75 spacious and tasteful rooms and suites offers private balcony and picture window with ocean and beach views, fireplace, elegant bathroom deep soaking bathtub, duvet comforters and elegant custom furnishings. First-rate service, the fine-dining Pointe Restaurant and the tranquil Ancient Cedars Spa qualify "the Wick" for membership in the Relais & Chateau consortium. Two-night Winter Storm Packages from CDN\$817.25 for two, including guided nature walk.

For more information:

Tofino-Long Beach Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 249, Tofino, BC V0R 2Z0; 250-725-3414; www.tofinobc.org. Ucluelet Chamber of Commerce, 100 Main Street, P.O. Box 428, Ucluelet, BC, V0R 3A0; (250) 726-4641; www.uclueletinfo.com. Pacific Rim National Park Preserve, 2185 Ocean Terrace Rd., P.O. Box 280, Ucluelet, BC V0R 3A0; 250-726-7721; www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/bc/pacificrim/. Tourism Vancouver Island, 203-335 Wesley St., Nanaimo, BC V9R 2T5; 250-754-3500; www.islands.bc.ca.

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