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TRAVEL

LATEST NEWS AT CALGARYHERALD.COM/TRAVEL

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STORM WATCHERS

A peculiar sub-set of tourists opt
for the Pacific's tempestuous seas in winter

Photos: Mark Sissons,
for the Calgary Herald

Squeezed into a thick neoprene
wetsuit, hood and booties, a
surfer heads out for another day
of winter wave-riding on Cox Bay,
near Tofino.



MARK SISSONS
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD
CLAYOQUOT SOUND, B.C.

Gnarly gusts violently buffet the Orca Airways eight-seater aircraft, sending my stomach into a tailspin as we descend through the dripping rain-forest draped mountains toward Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island's Wild West coast.

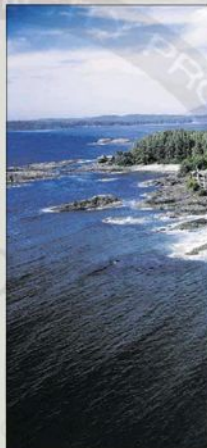
It's early November, hardly the most reliable time of year to be taking the 55-minute flight from Vancouver to Tofino. But since I've come hoping to watch one of the legendary winter storms that rise out of the Pacific without warning to lay monumental beatings on this pristine stretch of coastline, a little turbulence en route seems appropriate.

From November to March, when most winter weather-weary Canadians yearn for tropical getaways, a peculiar sub-species of traveller heads instead to Tofino, lured by the quaintly romantic notion of facing down the elements while being pampered in five-star resorts and stuffed with local delicacies like dashi braised Pacific octopus and boiled Dungeness crab.

Perched literally on the end of the road (next stop, Japan), this former logging and fishing village turned ecotourism poster-town still moves to its own mellow rhythm. Artists, activists, surfers and dreamers all flock here, where tempestuous seas pound the jagged coastline and the driftwood and bull kelp strewn beaches stretch forever.

As we touch down at Tofino's airstrip, I'm already looking forward to that first celebratory martini in the lounge of Wickaninnish Inn, with its panoramic ocean view. Certainly it won't be long before I race back to my room, pull on the hotel's complimentary lemon yellow rain slickers, and venture out into a seething, foaming squall, shouting, laughing and flapping my arms at the apocalyptic elements like Big Bird on meth as the salt spray stings my grinning lips.

But on this day, no oceanic convulsions threaten to lay siege to Chesterman Beach, where the "Wick" sits perched on a rocky outcrop, as opulent an outpost as you'll find in these parts.



Courtesy, Wickaninnish Inn

The Wickaninnish Inn is just metres from the shore on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Though calm in summer, it's wind-whipped in winter.



Piles of driftwood and bull kelp litter the windswept beaches near Tofino, enhancing their end of the world feel.

A harem of Steller's sea lions, some weighing up to 1,200 pounds soaks up the winter sun on a tiny rocky island in Clayoquot Sound near Tofino.



STORM: Rugged beauty at the edge of the world

FROM FI

Not even owner Charles McDiarmid, said to have invented the concept of storm watching here as a surefire way of drawing off-season traffic, can accommodate me by conjuring climactic chaos.

It's a good thing, then, that there are plenty of other natural wonders to watch while I wait for the big one to roll in. Whales, for instance.

Tofino and neighbouring Ucluelet are the two most popular northern grey whale-watching communities on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. Each spring, more than 20,000 of these enormous mammals swim north from their winter breeding grounds in Baja California to their summer feeding grounds in Alaska.

Many linger near Tofino, feeding intensively on invertebrates like amphipods and marine worms that live in bottom sediments. A gray whale can devour over 1,000 kg a day in Clayoquot Sound, making these waters an irresistible migratory pit stop.

"We're in luck. The whales are watching us today," says West Coast Aquatic Safaris skipper Tim Thom as we head out of Tofino Harbour for a three-hour whale watching tour.

This late in the season, our chances of spotting their tell-tale spouts are hit and miss. But Thom, a member of the Nuuchah-nulth First Nations community on nearby Meares Island, is confident of a sighting.

Sure enough, several grey and humpback whales soon deem us worthy of a friendly flick of the tail before the salt spray settles and their glistening black fins vanish beneath the surface, barely 30 metres away.

During our voyage we also encounter a harem of Steller's sea lions barking, honking, trumpeting, and roaring as they flap and flop about on their tiny rocky island. A lone bald eagle soars high overhead as a pair of curious sea otters cruise up to check us out as we idle in the calm water. When not dining on sea urchins, abalone, crabs, mussels, and clams, which they crack open against rocks they hold on their stomachs, these energetic and playful amphibious members of the weasel family wrestle, twirl and chase their tails.

"Those guys are real party animals," marvels one of our boat's guests, a German physician, as we watch these exuberant characters wrestle, twirl and chase their tails near our boat. Unlike other marine animals, Thom explains, sea otters don't have an insulating layer of blubber, relying instead on warm air trapped in their incredibly dense fur — 100,000 hairs in a space the size of a postage stamp — to stay warm in the frigid ocean water.

Back on shore, with still no storm in sight, I borrow the keys to the Wick's Lexus RX 450h hybrid SUV (complimentary for guests holding valid Canadian drivers licenses). Cruising the coastal highway dividing the old growth forests of Pacific Spirit National Park from an unbroken string of eargranting beaches, I



A solitary black bear fishes for its salmon supper near the Thornton Creek Hatchery just outside of Ucluelet, on Vancouver Island's West Coast.

Photos, Mark Sissons for the Calgary Herald



Known as the cold water surfing capital of North America, Tofino recently hosted the O'Neill Cold Water Classic, featuring the world's best surfers.

pull over at Cox Bay to watch dozens of hooded neoprene wet-suit clad warriors plow through the whitewash hunting for fast breakers. It's easy to see why this hurricane pummeled stretch of coastline is also North America's cold water surfing capital which recently hosted the O'Neill Cold Water Classic, featuring the world's best surfers.

My final destination is Thornton Creek Hatchery, at the end of a long lonely gravel road just outside Ucluelet.

I arrive in the late afternoon, after everyone has left. Everyone except the hulking black bear hunched on a rock in the middle of the icy stream, fishing for another sushi dinner to help fatten it up for the oncoming seasonal slumber. Occasionally squinting in my direction, it cautiously sniffs the crisp November air for a whiff of intrusion.

We're only 20 metres apart — as close as I dare approach as dusk descends and I try to recall what to do if a black bear

charges. Curl up or loom as big as possible?

The next morning — my last on the left coast — breaks calm and sunny. Perfect for flying, not gale gawking.

But such is the beauty of Tofino that, despite my best laid storm watching schemes gone awry, there is so much else to watch here on the edge of the world that catching a winter storm (and there are plenty of them) is but a blustery bonus.

Sound advice for avoiding hotel noise

CATHARINE HAMM
McCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

Question: On a trip to Ireland we stayed at a hotel in Dublin that was advertised as "a tranquil retreat in the heart of the city center."

It was — until about 2 a.m., when people began leaving the nightclub/pub across the street. There were fights, yelling, honking horns, beer bottles breaking. After another night like this, we decided to leave, but the hotel would not refund our money.

AnsWER: Who knew booking a hotel room would require so much research? But it does, noise experts said.

Though, a traveller's best tool may be TripAdvisor, whose reviewers sometimes cited the same middle-of-the-night noise that disrupted the writer's rest. The reviews seemed to depend on whether the room faced the street with the pub.

Exterior ruckus is one of four kinds of noise that can wreck a hotel experience, said Tom Ito, a hotel design practice leader on the hospitality team of Gensler, a global architecture firm. (The others: room-to-room racket, air conditioning and heating units, and plumbing.)

Some hotels, he noted, use "masking," which could be a hum from a heating or cooling unit. "Sometimes noise isn't bad. Sometimes a small noise from a unit that has a low sound actually has a benefit ... and has a soothing ability," Ito said.

His solution? "I ask very simply for a quiet room," he said. "If it's on the exterior facing a busy street, I want to be on a courtyard. I don't want to be next to the elevator core or close to a nightclub."

To that list, Susan Cronin, vice-president of operations for the Crescent Hotel Group, which deals with historic properties, said, in an e-mail: "Stay away from housekeeping closets, laundry rooms, ice machines and HVAC equipment (that a/c compressor on the roof can be a killer)."

She recommended asking the reservationist whether renovations for soundproofing had been done and noted, "End-of-hall locations guarantee less foot traffic (and bell carts, housekeeping carts, luggage)."

If You Go

■ **Getting there:** Orca Airways operates one daily scheduled flight throughout the winter between Vancouver and Tofino. 1-888-359-6722, www.flyorcaair.com. Driving from Vancouver to Tofino via Nanaimo and Port Alberni takes approximately 7 hours, including a 1-1/2 hour ferry crossing.

■ **Where to stay:** The Wickaninnish Inn, a landmark Relais & Chateaux property, is an upscale hotel built on the rocks of Chesterman Beach. Its Pointe Restaurant is rated one of the best in Canada, as is its Ancient Cedars spa, which overlooks the beach. 1-800-333-4604, www.wickinn.com

■ **Long Beach Lodge Resort** is a luxurious lodge-style beachfront hotel on Cox Bay, famed for its monster surf. 1-877-844-7873, www.longbeachlodge.com

■ **Whale watching:** Numerous operators ply the waters off Tofino, including West Coast Aquatic Safaris. 1-877-594-2537, www.whalesafaris.com

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