

Tofino: West Coast wonder

Tofino has almost everything: tranquility, dramatic landscapes, towering trees and the pounding surf that has earned it rave reviews

BY MHAIRRI CUTHBERT
Special to The Okanagan Sunday

For a quintessential Canadian west-coast experience, there is no better destination than Tofino, on the northern tip of Vancouver Island.

Rated as the Best Surf Town on the continent by U.S. Outdoor Magazine, Tofino offers a wide assortment of athletic and eco-activities, which are complemented by delicious locally-inspired cuisine and extraordinary scenery.

Protected by the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, the Tofino area is both tranquil and dramatic with a landscape of towering coastal spruces and firs, rocky shorelines and seemingly endless beaches.

A wonderful way to experience Tofino's majestic beauty and familiarize oneself with the area is by taking a scenic seaplane tour with Alteo River Air. The lush green rainforests, abundance of small surrounding islands, jagged shoreline cliffs and incredible turquoise waters of Clayoquot Sound are simply amazing from an aerial perspective.

Shallow seas and temperate rainforests support a plethora of wildlife, which adds to the magic of the Tofino area and is a large draw for tourists.

Depending on the season visitors might see black bears, black-tail deer, marmots, bald eagles, various seabirds, otters, sea lions, harbour seals, and killer, gray, sperm, hump-backed and blue whales.

Browning Pass Charters, operated by long-time Tofino resident Captain Mike, offers a variety of leisurely Bear and Wildlife Watching boat cruises that explore the calm inlet waters of Clayoquot Sound. Cruises depart only once daily, with times depending on season and tides, so it is recommended to reserve in advance as seats are limited and fill up quickly.

Guided whale watching tours are another hugely popular activity in Tofino in the spring, summer and fall months. West Coast Aquatic Safaris departs three times a day to the open waters in search of Gray and Killer whales in March through October, and Humpback whales in the summer.

A more active option for exploring Clayoquot Sound is by kayaking through the numerous inlets and bays. Guided and self-guided tours, as well as lessons, are available through Remote Passages Marine Excursions and Tofino Kayaking.

Surfing has become ingrained in Tofino's culture and it is nearly impossible to walk on the beach without seeing someone clad head to toe in black neoprene with a board tucked under arm. For the courageous who wish to brave the cold and try out this somewhat addictive sport there are numerous



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The beautiful bays and coastlines around Tofino on Vancouver Island become clear from a float plane. Driftwood litters tranquil Chesterman Beach in Tofino, right.

surf shops offering rentals and lessons for all ages. If the icy cold waters are not appealing, bundle up, grab a beach chair and enjoy the show.

The exceptional culinary scene is yet another reason to visit this quaint surf-town that is big on fresh local seafood and mouth-watering cuisine.

SoBo, defined as sophisticated bohemian, could well be the best restaurant in Tofino. House favourites are the Vancouver Island Shrimp Cake with Crab, and the beautifully flavoured Bouillabaisse, a saffron tomato based broth overflowing with locally caught seafood.

For an intimate environment with seasonal and local fare, the dining room at Shelter Restaurant offers an extensive wine list and scrumptious dishes including Seafood Yellow Thai Curry and Macadamia Nut Crusted Pacific Halibut.

Another wonderful option is to take the scenic 20-minute drive to Ucluelet to dine in the cozy wine bar atmosphere of Norwoods. Highlights of the restaurant's flawless cuisine include the Local Seafood Trio of Crab Chowder, Grilled Octopus and Tempura Prawns, Pappadam Crusted Pacific Albacore Tuna with Ponzu Vinaigrette and the sinfully delicious Pumpkin Crème Brulee. There are also many grab and go options in Tofino, including Tuff Beans, Breakers Deli, and Common Loaf Bakeshop, which all serve fast, fresh and reasonably priced breakfasts and lunches.

Accommodation options in the Tofino area range from pup tents to five-star West Coast luxury living, and everything in between. Booking beachfront accommodation is a must as there is nothing better than early morning beachcombing with coffee in-hand.

The Pacific Sands Resort deluxe oceanfront villas, with kitchens equipped to prepare gourmet meals, offer expansive ocean views and are steps from the

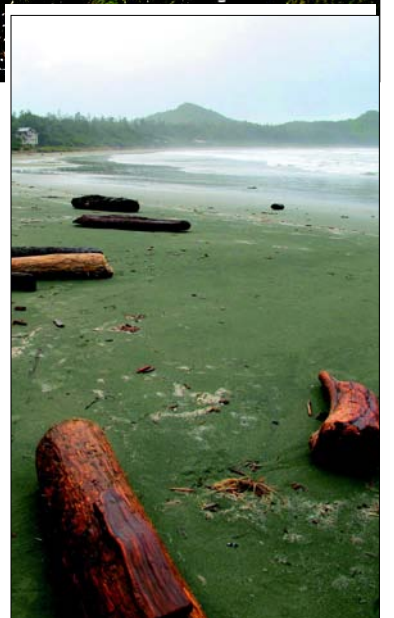
romantic boardwalk stroll to Sunset Point. If five-star beachfront accommodations with cozy home comforts are more appealing, the Long Beach Lodge, which includes a scrumptious complimentary breakfast with house-baked granola and gooey cinnamon buns, is perfect.

A uniquely urban alternative is found in neighbouring Ucluelet at the ultra-modern Black Rock Oceanfront Resort. Perched on a jagged point overlooking the crashing waves of the Pacific,

Black Rock features chic decor, the award-winning Drift Spa, and artisan-inspired fine dining restaurant Fetch.

Tofino provides year-round appeal, and spring and fall offer better pricing without having to sacrifice too much in terms of weather and available amenities.

Weather can change on a dime, in any season, so be sure to pack warm clothes and rain gear, although most of the higher-end properties provide bright yellow slickers if you forget your own.



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