

THE PERFECT 10 TOFINO, CANADA

Beauty
and the
beasts

Wildlife meets the good life on the west coast of Vancouver Island

CHRISTINE McCABE



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Clockwise from above, the TacoFino truck; bear-spotting is a highlight; Eagle Aerie Art Gallery; the spectacular setting of the Wickaninnish Inn; on the water with Remote Passages Marine Excursions



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1 BEARS OUT THERE

GETTING up close and personal with black bears is a highlight of any visit to the little town of Tofino on the west coast of Vancouver Island, in British Columbia. Cruising the spectacular forest-cuffed fjords and bays of Clayoquot Sound aboard a Remote Passages Marine Excursions inflatable Zodiac, it's possible to manoeuvre almost ashore to watch black bears fossick for food among the rocks, tossing aside hefty boulders as if they were pebbles. Early morning is the best time to head out (late spring, summer and into October is the prime season) and if you're lucky you'll see several cubs or perhaps, as we do, a hair-raising *National Geographic* vignette as two enormous males stage a territorial spat. Bears or no bears, the scenery is unforgettable, the dark forest reflected in the still waters with such clarity the world seems upside-down. More: remotepassages.com.

2 TACOS AND POUTINE

BRITISH Columbia has a thriving food-truck scene and Tofino is where it all began for TacoFino, a highly visible presence in downtown Vancouver. The wheels have come off the original truck, but it's still serving great tacos at the back of the Live to Surf parking lot just off the Pacific Rim Highway. Try the Tuna Ta Taco with seared Albacore tuna, wasabi mayo and seaweed salad. Nearby is the quaint Wildside Grill with tables set beneath a driftwood gazebo. Opened by a couple of fishermen and offering seafood straight from the boat, Wildside also dishes up chowder, gumbo, wild shrimp or panko-fried oyster burgers and the curious Quebec specialty, poutine, which is fries with cheese curd, doused in gravy. More: tacofino.com; wildsidegrill.com.

3 IN A SECRET GARDEN

TOFINO has one of the finest small botanic gardens in the world, carved from forest on the shores of Clayoquot Sound. While most gardens are a haven for birds and insects, here you might spy a bear or two noodling for shellfish on the shore or a sea lion cruising the bay. Narrow paths meander through the towering virgin forest, snaking around sentinel hemlocks and red cedars, with little pockets hewn from the undergrowth housing rare plants, including the ravishing Himalayan lily, and quirky sculpture celebrating the peoples of Tofino from the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations to the hippies who flocked here in the 1960s. A brightly painted abandoned Kombi sits as happily among the forest as the rhododendrons. More: tbgf.org.



ALAMY

4 WOLF IN THE FOG

NOT as scary as it sounds, this is a newly opened downtown restaurant from Vancouver Island-raised Nick Nutting and it's already created a buzz in BC. Local and foraged fare is served from a lively, two-storey eatery with large upstairs deck. The cool fit-out includes a looming wolf fashioned from driftwood guarding the lavishly stocked bar specialising in Canadian and American whiskeys and wild cocktails fashioned from cedar-infused rye or salmonberry bitters. The menu features plenty of local seafood and share plates. Oysters smoked over alder wood and wrapped in string potatoes before being flash-fried are fantastic. And there are half-price, happy-hour cocktails from 5pm-7pm. More: wolfinthefog.com.

5 EAGLE AERIE GALLERY

TUCKED away on Campbell Street, Roy Henry Vickers's gallery is one of Tofino's leading attractions. Built in the style of a traditional cedar plank-clad longhouse and headquarters for this acclaimed First Nations printmaker, painter and carver, the gallery is the best place in BC to pick up one of his striking framed prints (the gift shop also has a great selection of art cards and mementos). Vickers's storytelling sessions held around the gallery's fire pit are hugely popular (check website for dates). More: royhenryvickers.com.

6 WHALE TAILS

TOFINO is a whale-watching mecca and West Coast Aquatic Safaris operates a fleet of all-weather 12- and 36-passenger vessels with heated cabins and outdoor seating. You don't have to travel far to see grey whales feeding near the shore or colonies of enormous Steller sea lions sunbathing on the rocks. Boats often head far out into the bumpy ocean to track humpbacks, so be sure to bring your sea legs. If you're lucky orcas will also be on the agenda. More: whalesafaris.com.

7 LOCAL NOSH

THE town's best-known paddock-to-plate eatery began life as a food truck but SOBO now has its own downtown locale and cookbook. Founded by American blow-ins Artie and Lisa Ahier, the restaurant is all about local fare, with suppliers listed on the front of the menu, such as mussels, clams and oysters from Quadra Island, prawns from Ucluelet; and sockeye from Barkley Sound. Get here early — SOBO takes no bookings and it's always busy — for a table on the terrace by the enormous fireplace and order the wild fish chowder, also available in takeaway tubs. More: sobo.ca.

8 SURF'S UP

IT is not just for the girls, but the all-female crew of instructors at the well-known Surf Sister school is on a mission to have more women discover the exhilaration of surfing. Mixed and women-only lessons are available year-round with no more than five participants in a class. Drop into the so-called shedquarters on Campbell Street or book online. More: surfsister.com.

9 COFFEE, BEER AND ICE CREAM

YOU'LL find the best coffee on the outskirts of town opposite Shelter Restaurant at the Tofino Coffee Roasting Company, a small cafe geared to cyclists and hikers on the hop. If you'd rather a beer, Tuff Session Ale, from the eco-savvy Tofino Brewing Company, is available at the brewery door or at bars and restaurants around town. For a divine homemade lavender or salted caramel ice cream, drop by the teeny-weeny Chocolate Tofino in the Live to Surf parking lot; perfect to savour after a spicy bite at TacoFino or Wildside. More: chocolatetofino.com.

BEST BEDS



10 ALL IN THE FAMILY

FEW hotels are as entwined with their community, or as beautifully situated, as the Wickaninnish Inn. Owned and built by Charles McDiarmid, whose doctor father was lured to the town in 1955 before there was even a road on this part of the island, the family-run beachfront hotel opened in 1996 to widespread scepticism given its remote locale but just a year later was signed up by Relais & Chateaux. This luxe imprimatur has a lot to do with that singular location, on a rocky point beneath towering forest overlooking the lovely Chesterman Beach. All guestrooms make the most of the wild outlook, with bathtubs and armchairs set beside picture windows while large stone fireplaces add a cosy note to the soundtrack of crashing waves. Ground-floor rooms in the Beach Wing open on to the sand. Clad in western cedar, the resort all but disappears into the forest, and the interior timber trim, including towel rails, air vent covers, even luggage trolleys, are fashioned by a talented in-house carpentry team. The restaurant affords incredible views (and a brilliant chowder); the day spa lies hidden in the garden. In summer look forward to crab cookouts on the beach; during winter, don raincoats and galoshes for a spot of storm watching, a low-season niche tourism product that's proved a winner on this wild coast. More: wickinn.com.

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