

TOFINO

[**BY** JOE WIEBE] MAIN IMAGE COURTESY OF TOURISM TOFINO. PHOTO BY SANDER JAIN
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Gazing out over the crashing waves of the wild Pacific Ocean, I can feel cool spray carried up to my windswept perch on a rocky crag above the shore. Over to my left, some drysuit-clad surfers attempt to get upright on the fast-moving waves of Middle Beach. The winter storm season is prime time for Tofino's surf scene, but watching them get dunked in the chilly water makes me shiver.

Dead ahead of me again, the orange sun flattens out against the horizon. I watch, mesmerized, as the sky rapidly shifts through a kaleidoscope of gorgeous colours over the next few minutes. Then, as the air begins to chill, I step back into the warmth and relative quiet of my beachfront room at the Middle Beach Lodge. Thanks to the wrap-around windows the view from inside is almost as good as the one I have just been enjoying on the deck, but with a fire to keep me warm.

I first visited Tofino a few times in the early 1990s, camping right on the sand of Long Beach back when that was allowed. (Today, you can still camp near the beach, but not on the sand itself.) Over the intervening years, I have not managed to return to the west coast

of Vancouver Island and now—finally back nearly 20 years later—I can't believe it's taken me so long to return to this spectacular place.

Admittedly, Tofino isn't that easy to get to. It takes most of a day to get there by car from Vancouver: after the two-hour ferry ride to Nanaimo, it's a three-plus-hour drive on winding roads. Flying there is the best option if you can afford it—but if you enjoy driving, the snaking highway does offer a challenging, exciting ride, especially in the off-season when you won't be stuck behind a row of slow-moving RVs and camper trailers the whole time. There is regular daily bus service from Vancouver through Nanaimo, too.

It's definitely worth the inconvenience of travel, though, any time of the year. Located atop the Esowista Peninsula above Pacific Rim National Park on the extreme west coast of Vancouver Island, Tofino began as a frontier logging and fishing community and soon earned the nickname 'Tough City' because of its ferociously rainy and windy winters. That legacy has evolved into 'Tuff', an adjective which adorns many businesses in the village's small downtown area—from Tuff Beans coffee house to Tuff City Sushi. The flagship craft beer from Tofino Brewing, which just opened

last summer, is called Tuff Session Ale.

Tofino became a popular destination for hippies and surfers in the 1960s and '70s and also acted as the flashpoint in the Clayoquot Sound protest clashes between environmentalists and loggers in the early '90s. While the hippie vibe is still pungent in the air, so is the smell of fish guts and fresh-cut timber—as well as espresso-roasted coffee and fresh-brewed craft beer. Tofino seems well-balanced that way and seems to attract young families who want to raise their children in a small community close to the wilderness.

In the summer, the year-round population of about 1650 swells with tourists, cottagers and campers who go there to enjoy perhaps the best beaches anywhere in Canada. Long Beach, the centrepiece of Pacific Rim National Park, is a place you should visit at least once in your lifetime—just to wiggle your toes in the fine, white sand that extends hundreds of metres to the water's edge and gaze out at the horizon with nothing between you and Japan. You can also take surfing lessons, go on a whale-watching tour, go fishing, hiking or scuba diving, or just shop and eat in one of the many excellent gourmet restaurants in town.

One such restaurant is Shelter, which features

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- SEVERAL FLIGHTS PER DAY FROM YVR SOUTH TERMINAL DURING SUMMER, AT LEAST ONE PER DAY YEAR-ROUND.

TOFINO AIR:

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- ONE FLIGHT, THREE DAYS A WEEK FROM YVR/VANCOUVER HARBOUR.

TOFINO BUS:

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- DAILY DEPARTURES FROM VANCOUVER (VIA GREYHOUND TO NANAIMO) OR VICTORIA.

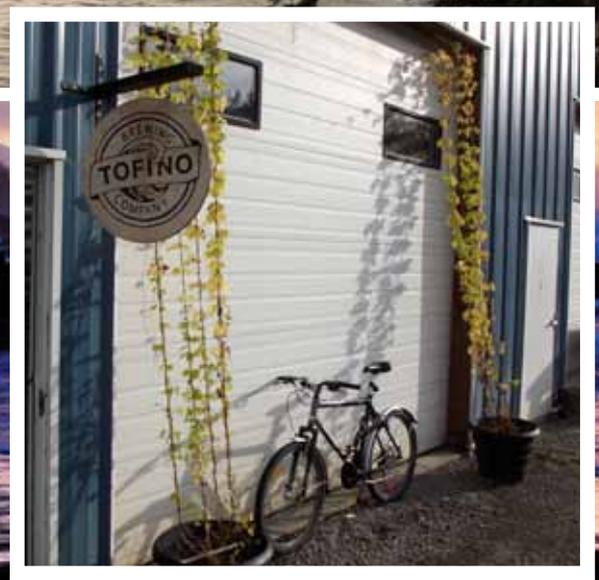
WHERE TO STAY:

MIDDLE BEACH LODGE:

WWW.MIDDLEBEACH.COM

WHERE TO EAT:

SHELTER: WWW.SHELTERRESTAURANT.COM



a sophisticated menu in a beautifully converted old house that was originally constructed with posts and beams salvaged from WWII hangars at the Long Beach Airport. The focus is seafood, all very local—the waters of Clayoquot Sound are less than a hundred metres away—supplemented by a nice ribeye steak, as well as pizza, burger and pasta options. Along with a great wine list, Shelter serves the local brewery’s excellent beers. In the downstairs lounge area, beer is on special on hockey nights.

Staying in one of the town’s many waterfront lodges is ideal, especially in the winter ‘storm-watching season’ when you can curl up with a good book or—even better, a certain someone—in front of a roaring fire and watch the massive waves crash onto the rocks below your sturdy window. There are also plenty of camping, B&B, vacation rental, motel and hotel options and even a hostel, depending on your preferences and budget.

And be sure to explore the village of Ucluelet, 40 km south on the other side of Long Beach. Boasting small-town charm and extraordinary eco-friendly advancements, Ucluelet is a perfect destination to enjoy fishing, kayaking, scuba diving, storm watching, hiking and other outdoor adventures. While there, visit the oceanfront Black Rock Resort which combines a contemporary atmosphere with the organic energy of the rugged west coast. Relax at Drift Spa, rated the #2 Spa in BC by Spa of America in 2011, and enjoy the ocean views and mouth-watering, West Coast cuisine at Fetch Restaurant, featuring fresh island ingredients.

Be careful, though: the longer you stay, the more you will find yourself ‘living on Tofino time’, and it will be that much more difficult to return to real life! w

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