



Clueless in Ucluelet

Besides bears and whales, Vancouver Island has plenty to offer tourists, discovers **Anne Z Cooke**

THE SHINY “Michael Jackson”, popular lately with fishermen, isn’t Ed Jordan’s first choice. Even the pink and yellow “Disco Party” ranks higher on his list of hoochies. But after hearing that another Campbell River fishing guide hooked a 32-pound king salmon on it, he’s reconsidering.

“Take a look,” he tells me, idling the motor and rummaging through the tackle rack beside the wheel. Shaking his head, he unhooks a blue and green hoochie with silver sparkles and a tail like a hula dancer’s skirt. “Nope,” he says, after a long look. He puts it back and pulls out a Tomic Plug 602. This lure, five inches of ivory iridescence with a mean-looking hook, “swims” when you drop it overboard. “It’s old but it never fails,” he says.

Sure enough, the Tomic does the job. By mid-afternoon we’ve hooked and landed two kings (chinook) and a silver salmon (coho). To sweeten this sunny August day we’ve followed Quadra’s ragged coastline, watched sea birds diving for dinner and spotted a pod of dolphins. Pleased, pumped and anticipating grilled salmon for dinner, we ask ourselves what took us so long to get here.

Vancouver Island, 480 kilometres long and 80km wide, lying off the southwest coast of British Columbia, is just over a 13-hour direct flight from New Zealand; add an hour to rent a car and you’re on your way. Give yourself a week and you can tour most of the lower half of the island, especially Ucluelet (you-clue-let) on the southwest coast. This is a place we knew nothing about but the name alone is tantalising enough to get our attention. And so the adventure began.

In Victoria, we track a pod of killer whales, explore the lively harbour scene and sample the city’s impressive new world of food. We spend a day as Canadian postmen, flying with mailman and pilot Mike Farrell on CorilAir’s six-seater DeHavilland Beaver out of Campbell River. Farrell not only delivers letters, packages and emergency supplies to residents of six emerald-green islets, but he plays travel guide to sightseers

along for the ride, pointing out tidal currents, celebrity mansions, hidden harbours and apple orchards.

Following Route 19, between Victoria and Campbell River, harbours, inlets and towns dot the eastern shore, some more scenic than others, but each with its fishermen’s dock, sailboat slips, kayakers on the water and inviting green islets beyond.

Wandering through Nanaimo we eat lunch at Troller’s Fish and Chips, a guidebook-recommended restaurant that takes us 20 minutes to find but that more than lives up to its reputation. Heading west toward Tofino and Ucluelet on Route 4, we stop to explore Cathedral Grove, walking among the park’s 300 to 800-year-old douglas firs, ancients that have been spared the loggers’ saws.

The biggest surprise is the abundance of farm-fresh food, sold or served everywhere. When icecream shops beckon, we stop to sample their homemade flavours: Peach, blueberry, funky chocolate, pumpkin nut, sassy cherry. Stalls in open-air farmers’ markets, set back under shade trees near the highway, display piles of vegetables, fruit, cheeses, breads, fish, cuts of meat and specialty jams and sauces.

For a week we hustle, going 16-7. But we shift to neutral in Ucluelet, taking time to wander along the Wild Pacific Trail and to tour the town’s unique learning-focused aquarium. Even our lodging, at Black Rock Resort, is a poster child for the latest in minimalist design, instantly soothing. Ensnared among white walls, plate glass and monochrome upholstery, watching the tide surge and ebb is almost obligatory.

In fact, the longer I watch the breakers rolling in, the harder it is to look away. As each wave rises, crests, curls over into a wall of foam, roars onto the rocks and slides in among the tree roots beneath the window, the easier it is to breathe deep.

Our most memorable evening in Ucluelet is at the resort’s Fetch Restaurant, where we sit on the outdoor deck overlooking the ocean. We order wine, fresh halibut and a steak, then linger over dessert, watching the twilight fade into night. But the reverie is short. At 6.30am the next day we

Water world: Kayakers head out of the harbour in Ucluelet.

Photos: Steve Haggerty/ColourWorld/MCT)



Rugged: The tide pounds the shoreline near the Wild Pacific Trail, Ucluelet.

And those huge trees with the clumps at the top? Those are eagles' nests in 700 to 800-year-old trees. The birds reuse and rebuild the nests every year, which get bigger every century. They can weigh up to a ton."

Closer to shore it is MacDonald who spots the first black bear. For five minutes we bob on the water, watching him digging and chewing. Finally he looks up, sniffs the air, catches our scent and gallops away through the trees. "I'm glad to see he's wary," says MacDonald. "It's too easy for poachers to move in and get off a shot." Nearby a harbour seal suns on a rock, unafraid.

Cruising into the shallows we spot blue herons wading. In some places, huge rafts of bull kelp float, long green strands supported by swollen air pods.

Pointing to a group of cottages in a grassy opening, MacDonald says it is a Toquaht village named Macoah, which occupies a traditional First Nations coastal site. Spotting a second bear prowling between a heap of fallen logs, the photographers screw on their long lenses and snap away. This bear sees the boat but keeps on digging.

"See those fallen logs in the water and washed up on the beach?" asks MacDonald. The giant logs are all about the same length, and washed into back water inlets. "Most of those fell off commercial ships. I built my house out of those things."

Back in Ucluelet, MacDonald apologises for finding just two bears, and at a distance. That's OK, says somebody. Seeing the coast, the dozens of tiny islets, the kelp, the seals, the eagles' nests, was an unforgettable adventure.

"But you know," says MacDonald. "The sad thing is that nature tours don't sell. Nobody signs up just to see nature. We've got to show them bears and whales. But once they're out there, they'll see what keeps us coming back. And that's what's worth it."

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When the tide is out, exposing the muddy inter-tidal zone, the black bears come out . . . to feed



Bird's-eye view: Flying low over the Discovery Islands, east of Campbell River.

check into Jamie's Whaling Station for a bear-watching excursion.

Why so early? When the tide is out, exposing the muddy inter-tidal zone, the black bears come out of the forest to feed. Digging in tide pools and among exposed rocks and logs, the bears are easy to see. So with the sun still barely above the horizon our group of 12 is already cruising the bay, heading for the archipelago known as the Broken Islands. Soon the sun crests the trees, casting an eerie silver sheen over the bay.

"Keep an eye out for green swales along the shoreline, open places between the trees," says our guide, Scott MacDonald, standing at the wheel. "Most are the sites of ancient Indian villages, but a few mark early homesteads.

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