

[« Back](#)

TOFINO : Surf's up on the West Coast

Rediscovered Country

Posted 5 hours ago

The catchphrase today is the Staycation — vacations in your backyard. Thus, the County Market continues with this bold biweekly

column by well-known and respected

journalist Pamela Irving as she rediscovers the hidden, and not so hidden, gems of Western Canada. Through her local adventures, she may rekindle that adventurous spirit in you, the reader, and the realization that you don't have to travel far to have a real adventure in your backyard.

TOFINO — The last blast on the west coast of Vancouver Island -a mecca for surfers and soul searchers looking to find themselves amid the eclectic mix of bakeries, B&Bs and beaches. Ride the wave out of your comfort zone with the Surf Sister!

Are you looking for something a little more local and challenging than lying on a beach drinking Margaritas for your late fall outings? I 'surfed the web' last November and caught a wave to the Surf Sister —a surfing school in Tofino on Vancouver Island. I had never surfed before; it was November, in one of Canada's coldest most northerly beaches. So why not a road trip to Tofino?

I began my sojourn in Victoria with a 'bird's eye' view of the Inner Harbour from the Empress Hotel at dawn. The opulent hotel spa was blissfully empty and the perfect way to start a road trip.

First pit stop on the Malahat Highway north is Goldstream Provincial Park.

November is salmon spawning time. Cars pile up along the highway to catch a glimpse of the waters teeming with salmon fighting for their lives to get upstream and spawn. The water is thick with sluggish or dying fish, the air an acrid stench of the life and death struggle. It puts your daily quibbles in perspective-whether it's balancing your checkbook or staying healthy, it all seems do-able after witnessing the salmon 'run'.

I drove cautiously up the foggy highway to Aerie Resort perched above the fog, just 25 minutes from Victoria. I met up with Doug Makaroff of Living Forest Communities at Elkington forest, a planned eco-community combining village living, organic gardening and wildlife preservation at the top of a mountain, overlooking the Gulf Islands and the Saanich Peninsula. Much of the Island was once logged by large corporations, and the Island is transforming these logging roots to tourism and eco-living. After a steep hike through the forest to one of the oldest living Douglas fir trees at 700 years old, a chakra-balancing visit at the Aerie Resort Spa was in order and a refreshing preliminary to a culinary evening of exquisite wild salmon prepared by head chef Castro Boetang. The Aerie's seasonal fresh cuisine was voted best food in the Americas by Conde Naste magazine-well deserved.

Day 2 began with a traditional English breakfast Aerie style before I drove west to meet up with a friend to hike to two beach destinations-Botanical Beach, to putter among its rich tidal pools; and Sombrio Beach, to watch surfers like giant cormorants in black wetsuits amid the grey mists. Surfers clamour to these waters fearless of the large rocks and cold waters.

Port Renfrew, historically a logging town, is now building its reputation as a getaway destination with Three Point Properties overlooking the water.

Day 3 I passed through Nanaimo, while listening to hometown girl Diana Krall on CD. A short stop in Cathedral Grove, an old growth forest, where I briefly meditated in the sacred ancientness of the forest and stretched my legs, and the rest of the day was driving. Rounding a sharp corner, I braked just in time for a black bear and cub to cross the road. After the harrowing hairpin drive on the ex-logging road, Long Beach Lodge was a welcome sight. Nestled between Pacific Rim National Park and Clayoquot Sound, the resort consists of a 40-room beachfront lodge and 20 two-bedroom rainforest cottages, including eight new cottages. Tumbling into the personal hot tub with views overlooking Cox Bay beach, the driving kinks melted away. I took to the beach for a long wander at sunset amid surfers and beachcombers.

Traditionally, November is storm-watching month, but we had sunshine every day — both an anomaly and a blessing.

Later, I relished fresh mussels and a single glass of Chardonnay in the resort's famous large Great Room perfect for watching surfers and sunsets, and chatting with other travellers.

Day 4, began with more beachcombing, and a few short trails through Island forests. Pacific Rim National Park has many interpretive trails that keep your body moving and your mind learning. I met with wolf prints on the beach, but no wolves.

After salad at the Wildside Café, I hung my hat at Surf Sister for my pre-arranged surfing lesson. Surf Sister has been specializing in teaching women (and men) to surf using simple techniques since 1999. We stretched into wet suits and learned the basics of equipment, water safety and surf etiquette from Steph Wightman, our instructor registered with British Columbia Association of Surf Instructors.

We learned the "Pop-Up" technique required to stand on the surfboard. First you do a push-up, go back into downward dog (yoga asana), and then jump forward, landing so that your feet face side ways and legs are spread.

The Pop-Up is essential, as standing on the board is half the battle.

We took it to the beach, practicing more Pop-Ups, and then the real thing in the white water. Surf Sister trains in white versus green water because this is the only authentic way to make the transition to deep-water waves.

When a wave hits, you paddle three times, then do the Pop-Up. Waves will only pick up moving objects, so paddle paddle paddle. It is tempting to pop-up right away, but don't give into temptation.

Facing the whitewater waves, it took all I had in upper body strength to pop-up at the right time. After several attempts, I managed to stand and surf for short spurts before diving into the frothy foam, while some of my peers shot by me. I reminded myself that this was not their first lesson and that my personal challenge was to find my edge by going out of my normal zone of activity not become a surf pro in one lesson.

After all, the day was grand, the water and company fun, and I will definitely do it again on my next visit to this enchanting area-with so much more to explore — Meares Island, whale watching, and loads more beachcombing.

Meanwhile, back at the lodge, I worked on my upper body strength by lifting sea sweet sushi, cracked crab and the odd glass of lovely local wine with award-winning chef Jason Ankur.

I left while still dark for the long drive back to Comox Valley the next morn for the flight home where all my surfing is, regrettably, deskbound.

MORE TO DISCOVER

Victoria The Empress Hotel www.fairmont.com/empress/

Mid-Island Aerie Resort www.aerie.bc.ca

Tofino Long Beach Lodge www.longbeachlodgeresort.com

Tourism Vancouver Island www.vancouverisland.travel/

Surf Sister www.SurfSister.com

Information about green developments on Vancouver Island

Melinda Jolley Melinda@tartangroup.ca

Pamela Irving Living Communications-Where lifestyle meets your style.

COMING UP in December Do you have a product or event you would like to recommend for the festive season? Contact Pamela at livingcomms@telus.net

Copyright © 2009 County Market