

# The New York Times

TRAVEL SECTION

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## The Pacific From Sea Level



Bayne Stanley for The New York Times

Jordan Musto leads the way on a kayak trip through Clayoquot Sound to Vargas Island.

**By CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON**

You may spend your summer vacations dodging marmots on a mountain bike at Whistler and your winter holidays skiing in the Purcells and Selkirks. You can't claim to know British Columbia, however, until you've spent time exploring its spectacularly splintered Pacific coast from the rocking cockpit of a sea kayak.

There, on the windward side of Canada, earth meets ocean in such an uneasy truce that seaweed tinsels the branches of firs and bears swim fjords along with salmon. Paddling these waters is a wet safari through some of the planet's most diverse marine life.

On a coastline of superlatives, western Vancouver Island, Canada's 280-mile breakwater, is a world-class destination for sea kayakers. From June through September around the town of Tofino, the sun emerges (usually). The sea calms (mostly). And even novice kayakers can paddle comfortably around the jigsaw of islands and reefs of Clayoquot Sound, a United Nations World Biosphere Reserve.



Kim Crosby for Wild Heart Adventures  
One of many deserted sand beaches on Vancouver Island's West Coast.

The driest weather arrives in July, but so do the tourists, so my friend Laurie and I, novice kayakers both, arrived in early June to take a two-night guided trip. Tofino, population 1,500, was still half awake after a winter's slumber. A surfer walked across the street in evening's slanted light, carrying his longboard, without worry of traffic.

The next morning at the waterfront, we and three other paddlers met Kim Crosby, owner of Wildheart Adventures, one of countless kayaking outfits running trips around this area. We stuffed our clothing in trash bags to keep them dry, then wedged them into the holds of the slender, two-person sea kayaks. Our lead guide, Jordan Musto, a capable and affable 29-year-old, gave the group a five-minute primer on how to paddle and what to do in an emergency.

We donned life jackets and spray skirts that keep waves and splashes of 50-degree water out of the cockpits, and shoved off. Wetsuits, however, aren't necessary.

A confession: I'm no great fan of the ocean. Any water without a lap lane unnerves me. But in my few outings in sea kayaks I've learned to trust them. They are deceptively stable, even in the hands of a beginner battling a three-foot chop. We had superb weather and calm waters, however, and there was too much to look at to sweat about capsizing.

Clayoquot (pronounced CLACK-wit) Sound, covering 1,011 square miles, nearly the area of Rhode Island, is a sea captain's nightmare but a kayaker's dream, with peekaboo reefs to skirt, fog-shrouded islands, deceptively shallow channels and humped headlands so heavily forested that special trails had to be cut for use by shipwrecked sailors. Then there's the sea life: Beneath the tides is a queer bestiary of many of the coast's 325 species of marine fish, 20 species of whales and more than 70 kinds of starfish - quite possibly more than anywhere else in the world.

Within an hour we had paddled across Templar Channel and along the shore of Wickaninnish Island. "Beyond these islands," said Kim, "the next ones are Japan and Hawaii."

We were suddenly on the Pacific. The ocean rolled more noticeably beneath us. The effect was Lilliputian, as if we had clambered atop a slumbering giant and were rising and falling with its respirations. I breathed a little faster. Clayoquot is an Anglicization for the native term for "changing," and despite the still, cloudless day, the monster felt as if it could awaken and shake us off at any moment.



Kim Crosby for Wild Heart Adventures  
Gray whale giving a "show" just meters away from the bow of my kayak.

Twenty-thousand gray whales pass here each spring on their way to summer feeding grounds in the Arctic, and Laurie desperately wanted to see a whale. Jordan reached into the water, cut free the hollow stipe of a bull kelp, and sliced off half its bulbous head. "This is how we call the whales," he said, joking, and blew the trumpet.

The grays didn't appear; their migration was finished. Dolphins soon did, though, followed by a sea otter and then two sea lions that followed us briefly, poking their slick heads out of the water.

We crossed open water to Vargas Island, one of the sound's larger islands and home to a provincial park, and pulled our kayaks onto Medallion Beach. The uninhabited crescent of bright sand and

coral water seemed like something out of a brochure for a cooler Antigua.



**Bayne Stanley for The New York Times**  
**Lunch on one of the many gorgeous beaches in Clayoquot Sound.**

Jordan prepared lunch on a massive driftwood log. We explored, walking on rocks so smothered with living things - California mussels, acorn barnacles, limpets that every footstep seemed cruel, almost illicit.

"Is it O.K. to walk on this stuff?" I said.

"Not if you're a Buddhist," Kim replied, and crunched onward.

The wolves that live on the island were scarce, but I was surprised to find scarlet paintbrush, wild strawberry and yellow violet flowers I usually see in Northwest mountains. We dozed on the sand after a big lunch, welcoming the summer's first sunburn. A bald eagle dove for its own lunch in the tide.

I was starting to understand why Kim, a colorful former banker, bought a kayak after a 1986 trip to nearby Barkley Sound and started his company four years later.

Some kayak trips along Vancouver Island's west coast are self-sufficient expeditions in which kayakers sleep in tents and cook on the beach. Those kayakers go even farther up the coast and away from civilization, but are exposed if heavy weather steamrolls in from the Gulf of Alaska. We chose a lodge-based trip that kept us around Vargas, which is about three miles northwest of Tofino but feels much farther away. The island has only a few waterfront homes, a tribal site for members of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations, no real roads and the Vargas Island Inn.

The inn is a Tudorish manse operated for decades by Neil and Marilyn Buckle, who built it with cedar and fir boards cut from their property. It is "funky rustic," in the words of a fellow kayaker. An old ship's hatch, complete with porthole, is the front door.



**Bayne Stanley for The New York Times**  
**Morning beach on Vargas Island.**

Inside, it looks as if Granny decided to decorate a whaling ship. Heavy beams and nautical charts mix with flowered sofas,

decorative plates and musty copies of National Geographic. Seven, small cabinlike rooms with shared toilets and tubs have mismatched sheets and 1950's wallpaper. Retired buoys and glass Japanese fishing globes dangled from beams and trees around the property. A dirty dog named Florence Margaret wandered around with a dirtier tennis ball. The only showers are 50 yards from the rooms, on the beach.



Kim Crosby for Wild Heart Adventures  
The Vargas Island Inn on Vargas Island, Clayoquot Sound.

The whole place has the peeling charm of a handed-down beach house. It is not for the fussy guest, and if we'd had to share the inn and its common kitchen with other groups, as can happen during high season, mid-June to mid-September, the place would've felt too much like a hostel for my liking.

Paths radiating from the house led to other quirks. At an honor-system store in the woods, campers and guests can buy canned peaches or cold beverages. Down another path, the inn's Man Friday, a carburetor-voiced old salt named Larry, keeps his gallery of curios ("By App't Only," warns the sign), like a wristwatch that says the time in a Chinese accent. A mysterious woman wandered the grounds, scarcely speaking.

The whole place exuded a "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" feel that made for good conversation over a simple dinner of salad, bread and Dungeness crabs that the Buckles had pulled from

traps in their cove that day and steamed for us. I ate them plain, unwilling to disgrace such good meat with butter or, worse, cocktail sauce.



**Bayne Stanley for The New York Times**

**Kim with some of the delicious Dungeness crab pulled up from the “crab pots” in front of the Inn.**

Each day we paddled about six miles, usually along the coast of Vargas Island. Our second morning, Jordan led us on a paddle along the island's eastern shores. Seeing the world from sea level, at the speed of a paddle stroke, brings small things into focus, and reinjects wonder into a harried life.

At Rassier Point, our kayaks drifted through forests of bull kelp. Jordan told us this seaweed was one of the fastest-growing things on earth, extending up to two feet a day. We pinched leaves of eelgrass between our fingers in shallow Maurus Channel to see the pinpoint-sized copepods that live on the blades and that salmon love to eat. Trying to count bald eagles as they flew across the 6,000-foot peaks that are the backbone of Vancouver Island was futile.

We could also see that extensive logging had taken place. The area's rainfall, eight feet a year, supports the largest lowland temperate rain forest on earth, forest of such hoary grandeur that in the summer of 1993, more than 12,000 people protested the provincial government's decision to open up much of the sound to clear-cut logging of the ancient hemlock, cedar and Sitka spruce. More than 800 people were arrested.

With changes in law, timber companies have greatly reduced their cutting, with 34 percent of the area protected, the government says. Logging continues, mostly of old-growth forest, but regulated.

Each afternoon on returning to the inn we intended to walk the two-mile path of crosswise logs, a former lifesaving trail, to the reputedly grand Ahous Beach. Each afternoon we instead climbed out of kayaks and right into deck chairs and cold beers.



Our last night, with shoulders aching a bit from paddling, we rallied enough to stoke the fire of the home-built cedar sauna that the Buckles built on the water's edge. When the sauna's heat felt like it might blister us, we dove into the icy cove, hoping to stir up the bioluminescence that often blooms on summer nights.

Our last morning, we pushed away from the island for a final paddle back to Tofino. Bereft, Florence Margaret paced the beach with a chunk of slobbery driftwood. Luckily for her, high season was coming. She'd have to wait only a few days for her next playmates to arrive.

## Travel Information

### Getting There

**BC Ferries**, (250) 386-3431 or [www.bcferrries.com](http://www.bcferrries.com), runs daily service to Vancouver Island from city of Vancouver to Nanaimo or Victoria, taking about two hours. From Nanaimo, the 155-mile drive to Tofino is about three hours; from Victoria, it takes a couple of hours more.

One-way passage for an automobile in summer is about \$25, plus \$7.40 a passenger, at the rate of \$1.36 Canadian to the U.S. dollar. A reservation, recommended on summer weekends, costs an extra \$11.

**Tofino Air**, (250) 725-4454 and [www.tofinoair.ca](http://www.tofinoair.ca), charters floatplanes between Vancouver and Tofino for \$740 for up to three people, one way. **North Vancouver Air**, (800) 228-6608, [www.northvanair.com](http://www.northvanair.com), and **Canadian Western Airlines**, (866) 835-9292 [www.cwair.com](http://www.cwair.com), have daily service to Tofino from Vancouver for about \$100 one way.

To go to Victoria, **Helijet**, (800) 665-4354, [www.helijet.com](http://www.helijet.com), has daily helicopter service from Vancouver, from \$99 one way.

For information about the area, contact the **Tofino-Long Beach Chamber of Commerce**, (250) 725-3414 or [www.tofinobc.org](http://www.tofinobc.org); or the **Pacific Rim Tourism Association**, (866) 725-7529, [www.pacificrimtourism.ca](http://www.pacificrimtourism.ca).

## **Kayaking**

Our three-day trip with **Wild Heart Adventures**, (877) 722-3683 and [www.kayakbc.com](http://www.kayakbc.com), with kayak rental, two nights at the Vargas Island Inn and all meals (not alcohol), cost \$465 with tax.



Kim Crosby for Wild Heart Adventures  
Clayoquot Sound Beach Sunset over Flores Island.

## **Where to Stay**

In Tofino, the **Whalers on the Point Guesthouse**, 81 West Street, (250) 725-3443, fax (250) 725-3463, [www.tofinohostel.com](http://www.tofinohostel.com), has 65 beds, in both private and shared rooms. Rates are \$16 a person in a shared room, and \$48 for a double room.

Also in town, **Penny's Place**, 565 Campbell Street, (250) 725-3457, [www.island.net/~pennyspl](http://www.island.net/~pennyspl), is a bed-and-breakfast on two acres with a pond. Two of the three rooms share a bathroom. Doubles, \$60 to \$81.

On Cox Bay outside Tofino, the **Long Beach Lodge Resort**, (877) 844-7873, fax (250) 725-2402, [www.longbeachlodgeresort.com](http://www.longbeachlodgeresort.com), has a dramatic setting. The 41-room, cedar-shingled lodge has an open-kitchen restaurant serving local seafood. Summer rates are \$168 to \$330.

Down the road, the **Wickaninnish Inn**, (800) 333-4604, fax (250) 725-3110, [www.wickinn.com](http://www.wickinn.com), a 76-room Relais & Châteaux property, perches on a promontory surrounded by old-growth forest. Its restaurant offers 240-degree views. Summer rates are \$250 to \$735 a night.

## Where to Eat

At the **Vargas Island Inn**, meals are prepared by the guides.

The **Common Loaf Bake Shop**, 180 First Street, Tofino, (250) 725-3915, can provide a quick coffee and bun. Breakfast for two is \$6 to \$7.

**Schooner Restaurant** on Second, 331 Campbell Street, (250) 725-3444, serves oysters from nearby Barkley Sound and entrees like a hot pot of local halibut, blue mussels, prawns, scallops and Dungeness crab. Dinner for two, with wine, about \$90. Reservations recommended.

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