



TOFINO

by Carolyn Camilleri

CHRISTOPHER POUGET



Vancouver Island's WILD, WILD west coast

In the summer, it's crazy busy. People from all over the world come to surf, hike, kayak, and explore Clayoquot Sound. They browse art galleries and gardens, relax at opulent spas and in natural hot springs, dine on amazing food, and enjoy luxurious accommodation.

But wait – you can do all that in the winter. The difference? It's quieter, even mellower – and locals have time to share stories. Sure, it gets stormy sometimes, but people love that, especially when they're warm and dry and watching the natural theatrics from a fireplace-warmed room.

The secret's out: *Tofino is spectacular in the winter, too.*



Looking out at Cox Bay from my room at Long Beach Lodge, I see two empty beach chairs. There is a light drizzle — nothing that would keep an Islander inside. After a few minutes, a couple wearing raincoats and gumboots appears, their two dogs following close behind. They settle into the chairs and take out a thermos and a ball for the dogs. A few others pass by, exchanging greetings with the couple and the dogs. The beach is smooth and shiny, the pounding waves erasing foot and paw prints. It could be a postcard, except that I can hear waves and smell the salty ocean air.

Long Beach Lodge is Tim Hackett's dream come true. The Brentwood Bay resident fell in love with Tofino in the 1960s, when he and his friends used to camp on the beach. A builder and developer, Hackett — along with his brother Tony — designed the *Architectural Digest*-featured property on the same beach, opening in 2002. The 41 rooms in the lodge are gorgeous

and complete with fireplaces, handcrafted Douglas fir furnishings, soaker tubs, and cosy robes. The 20 two-bedroom cottages have all that plus kitchens and a semi-private outdoor hot tub. Luxury, but with that laid-back, all-natural, West Coast ambience that makes Tofino, well... Tofino.

Room with a View

Hackett's favourite room — and you quickly see why — is the Great Room. With its huge windows overlooking Cox Bay, massive fireplace, and "living room" arrangements of sofas and chairs, it is the perfect place to read a book, play a game of scrabble or chess, or just gaze at the ocean.

The Great Room is also the dining room, where executive chef Ian Riddick and his team turn the bounty of Vancouver Island into masterful culinary creations. Riddick's resume lists the King Edward in Toronto and several Delta properties, including, most recently, the Delta Lodge at Kananaskis. He came to Long

Above: The Great Room at Long Beach Lodge Resort is owner Tim Hackett's favourite room. With its huge windows and "living room" arrangement of furniture, it's a popular spot to watch the waves, especially during winter storms.

Right: Tofino is a surfing destination, recognized for the year-round consistency of its surf. In fact, it is said that every single day in Tofino, you can catch a wave. Twice Tofino was selected for the O'Neill Coldwater Classic (one of just five destinations in the world) and, every year, the Rip Curl Coldwater Classic is held here.





VINCE KLASSEN

Beach Lodge in January 2013 and, shortly after he arrived, hiked the 16-kilometre return trip from Florencia Bay to Halfmoon Bay.

“Not a footprint on the beach the whole way,” he says. “At that time of year, you get king tides that wipe the palette clean every day. Not footprint. In the summer, you don’t get that. Millions of people come here in the summer, but in the winter, you’re laying down fresh tracks. It’s awesome.”

Being in Tofino appeals to Riddick’s foraging nature, especially in the winter.

“In January, there are mushrooms growing. I can pick chanterelles,” he says. “February, dandelions are going to seed, so if you want to make dandelion wine, you can do that. I bought a \$21 fishing license and my daughter and I collect mussels. I love that.”

In his kitchen, Riddick’s suppliers are local, but sometimes he doesn’t know what is coming in until the morning of that day. “It really keeps us on our toes, and it’s fun, too,” he says. “I certainly missed that working in the Rockies where you get three deliveries a week and everything is planned and organized. Here, we have the ability to be more improvisational and creative.”

These daily deliveries often become the

“Millions of people come here in the summer, but in the winter, you’re laying down fresh tracks.”

day’s special, the ever-changing complement to the regular menu, which changes three times a year. But always, a great deal of seafood is served.

“Oysters, mussels, and clams from the area. The salmon is a big deal, halibut is a big deal, sable fish comes from a little farther out, but a lot of those big boats are docked in Ucluelet,” he says.

Other ingredients are also sourced locally. “I buy the greens 12 months a year from the Island — 12 months a year!

And without a cold frame!” says Riddick. “I didn’t expect that. I thought maybe I would get nine or 10 months.”

Breads and desserts are another special feature. Pastry chef Ron Weeks is a local legend, who makes everything from scratch, including croissant, starting every morning at 4 am. “It starts smelling really buttery good

between 5 and 6 am,” says Riddick.

The kitchen at Long Beach Lodge is more than just a kitchen though. Like everything else in Tofino, it plays a part in the local surf scene. As Riddick explains, there is a pillar in the kitchen with a phone on it. Three to five times a day, local surfers call to get the “surf report” from the chefs, who are also surfers.

“It’s the best view from any kitchen I have ever been in,” he adds, laughing.

The Surf Club

Speaking of surfing ... first, erase from your mind any pre-conceived notions you may have when you think “surf club,” whether that be something from *Baywatch* or — more in line with this part of the West Coast — a group of hipster-surfer types gathered around a campfire with a vintage Volkswagen van loaded with surfboards in the background. Just erase all that.

Instead, think luxurious change rooms with showers, spa soaps and lotions, and big, cosy towels. An outdoor hot tub, sauna, and coffee bar that serves real coffee. Lovely, helpful staff who provide surfboards, wet suits, lessons, and encouragement. That’s the Long Beach Lodge Surf Club, the first facility of its kind in Canada.

Instructors Ryland and Laurie are great: patient, clear, and fun. The lesson starts on the beach, giving us the “theory” and allowing a little practice on solid ground.



CHRISTOPHER POUGET

Then, instructors by our sides, we filed out into the waves. (If you are concerned about water temperature, don't be: the wetsuits, once they get wet, are surprisingly warm.)

Did I stand on the board? Nope, but I did manage to kneel on it... sort of. The others in the group fared far better than I. Did I enjoy myself? Immensely! It was amazing to be out in the waves and such fun to try.

On the Water

Clayoquot Sound is one of the most beautiful places on the Island and a marine experience really is a "must-do." Designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2000, this 350,000-hectare area of coastal temperate rainforest, inlets, beaches, islands, and rivers is also the location of the famous anti-logging protest in 1993 when 800 people were arrested.

Naturalist Josh Lewis,

who has been a local marine guide for 15 years, takes passengers from Long Beach Lodge on 3.5-hour boat tours (the 31-foot boat is covered and heated). He's also a wealth of information about the area and knows where the wildlife is likely spotted.

Kayaking is another way to get out in the water year-round. Tours, including overnight tours, are available and recommended, unless you have lots of experience.

Tofino Spas

Tofino's reputation as a luxury destination is derived in part from the decadence of its spas. The most renowned is the Ancient Cedars Spa in the Wickininnish Inn. We're talking oceanfront treatment rooms and something called the Hishuk Ish Tsawalk Awakening Treatment, which uses techniques derived from the First Nations.

The Sacred Stone Spa is another beautiful property

offering massage treatments that span the globe in style along with organic facials and body scrubs.

For something very personalized, the Hearts Garden Temple Spa is very "Tofino." Located in the forest that edges the beach on Cox Bay, this beautiful spa has a wonderful room for yoga (and just "being"), as well as a wood-fired sauna and outdoor, chemical-free hot tub. It's a labour of love for owner Dion Olin, who specializes in adjusting her program according to individual needs. She has a website (theHeartsGarden.com) but it is better just to call and talk to her.

Storm Watching

Roaring winds, raging surf, stinging, salty spray — coastal storms happen between November and March and they are awesome! If you are lucky enough to be here during a storm — and people really do consider that lucky — you have a couple of options. You can hunker down in a comfy chair in front of a big, ocean-view window, warm drink in hand and fireplace keeping you toasty, and watch Mother Nature release her wrath on the coast.

Good to Know

CLAYOQUOT OYSTER FESTIVAL

From November 15 to 17, foodies shuck and slurp between 8,000 to 9,000 oysters at this annual event.

UMBRELLAS

Locals don't use 'em. They don't scorn people who do, so go ahead, but you will be identified as not being from around these parts.

ONE "TUFF" CITY

That's what locals call Tofino and you will see "Tuff" or "Tough" used in a variety of ways: Tuff Session Ale, Tuff City Skate Park, Tough City Sushi, Tuff Beans, Inn at Tough City. Now you know.



Tacofino serves gourmet food truck fare at its best.



MELISSA HARTIEL

Culinary Tofino

SHELTER RESTAURANT

Fresh, top quality, local, house-made from scratch, creative, exceptional – it's super hard to decide what to have because it is all so good! shelterrestaurant.com

SPOTTED BEAR BISTRO

Small, intimate restaurant with an open kitchen and a local focus. Weekend brunch menu looks incredible (next trip...). spottedbearbistro.com (Check out the video.)

SOBO

It stands for "sophisticated bohemian." Sustainable, local, and sometimes wild ingredients – "Tofino food." They close for a bit in the winter, so ask around before you go. sobo.ca

WILDSIDE GRILL

A casual, order-at-the-counter kind of place with excellent fish and chips and seafood burgers. wildsidegrill.com

TACOFINO

It's a food truck and it's gourmet! The website (tacofino.com) is all about Vancouver and Victoria (probably because no one in Tofino needs to look them up).

The other option is to put on a raincoat and go out in it. Yes, people do that, but only in designated-safe areas, like Kwisis Visitor Centre in the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. (Hotel staff can tell you where it is safe to be, but be sure to heed any warning signs.) A stroll in a storm is guaranteed to blast away any lingering stress you may have brought with you.

For locals, winter storms are normal and they take them in stride (they are also fully prepared). If you aren't used to it, it is a thrilling, unforgettable experience.

More To Do

Fishing is year-round in Tofino. September and October are great for ocean and river fishing. In December, January, and February, the best fishing is in rivers for steelhead. Charters are available.

Bird watching is a big deal here, especially at the Tofino Mudflats. (The Tofino Botanical Gardens borders the Mudflats if you want to cover two activities at one go.)

Hot Springs Cove is a year-round hot spot — literally. These natural geothermal hot springs are accessible by boat in a little over an hour or by seaplane in 20 minutes. After docking or landing, as the case may be, an easy 30-minute walk on a cedar trail takes you to the hot springs.

Just imagine the photos you can take on

a flight tour! Charters are available from Atleo Air or Tofino Air.

Pull on some hiking boots (or gumboots) and hike the trails in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve or the Lighthouse Trail by Tonquin Beach. You can also take a water taxi to Meares Island and walk the Big Tree Trail or hike the Lone Cone.

Tofino Brewery makes the local brews and is open for visits (they even have refillable growlers). Try the Tuff Session Ale: it's great!

Getting Here

You can fly to Tofino from Vancouver with K.D Air or Orca Airways. From Victoria, fly with Orca Airways or Island Express Air. Chartered floatplane service with Tofino Air and Atleo Air is another option.

By car, it takes about three hours from Nanaimo to Tofino. Travel north on Highway 19, then take Exit 60 onto Highway 4 and head west. Note: this road really winds and can be slippery. Stick to the speed limits. Yes, surfboard-laden vehicles will pass you — just let them go.

When you get to the Tofino/Ucluelet junction, turn right (north) toward Tofino. Pacific Rim National Park Reserve and Long Beach is on your left. Believe me, you'll want to stop and look — it will set the tone for a spectacular stay in Tofino. ☺