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Vancouver Island is ready to celebrate the gray whales' return

By ANNE MULLENS
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

TOFINO, B.C. -- They move like silent submarines, encrusted with patches of white barnacles, just below the surface of the water. Although Pacific gray whales are not as showy or playful as their cetacean cousin, the orca or killer whale, catching sight of a telltale blow or a quick flash of a gnarly back still inspires awe.

And from now until mid-May, one of the best places to spot the huge marine mammals is along the west coast of Vancouver Island, particularly in the 30-mile stretch between the scenic, touristy fishing towns of Ucluelet and Tofino, about 200 miles northwest of Victoria.

At least 20,000 grays will be gliding close to shore over the next 10 weeks, heading north from their winter calving grounds along Mexico's Baja coast to the waters of Alaska and the Bering Sea, where they feed all summer.

Whether you choose to go out in a whale-watching boat or simply look from the many viewing platforms along ocean-side paths and hiking trails, you are sure to see a gray whale -- or 20 -- in a single afternoon.

The rugged Tofino-Ucluelet corridor, which takes in Pacific Rim National Park and world famous Long Beach, is one of B.C.'s most popular tourist destinations, hosting more than a million visitors each year. It is known for its beautiful, long, misty beaches with crashing surf, its tall fir trees and scenic islands, and the unparalleled natural beauty of the region called Clayoquot Sound.

Tofino, population 1,700, is the more popular and tourist-oriented of the two towns, with more stores, services and restaurants; Ucluelet, population 1,600, still retains its working-class fishing and logging roots.

This dramatic coastline has many charms: dramatic storm-watching in winter, surfing almost year-round, kayaking in secluded coves, fishing and bear watching, hiking on dozens of trails, camping in the park, or simply beachcombing along huge expanses of sandy shores.

These attractions -- along with a selection of fine hotels, good restaurants and interesting art galleries and stores -- bring visitors back year after year.

The gray whale migration is an inspiring natural phenomenon. Each year the region celebrates it with the Pacific Rim Whale Festival, a weeklong event that features everything from scientific talks by whale experts, nature walks and a First Nations blessing of the whale-watching fleet, to whale-themed art shows and even a kids' parade.

The 22nd annual festival runs March 15-23, corresponding to the British Columbia spring break for elementary and high schools. Many of the activities are kid-oriented: nature-themed scavenger hunts, kids' boat-building workshops and daily storytelling hours. But adults won't feel left out as there is also the annual martini night, an all-you-can-eat dessert reception, chowder luncheons and a traditional salmon barbecue among other events.

Don't worry, however, if you can't make it during the festival. You have at least eight to 10 weeks of optimal viewing of the whale migration, which at 14,000 miles round trip is the longest mammalian migration in the world.

Pacific gray whales -- you'll find it spelled grey in Canada -- are baleen whales, with no teeth but long thick bristles that filter food. They feed by diving down to the ocean floor close to the coast, then scooping up sediments and sifting from the silt small crustaceans, particularly tiny shrimplike creatures called amphipods. Somehow that muddy diet can help the whales grow into enormous creatures up to 52 feet long and weighing almost 60 tons.

Since they need to come up for air at least every 15 minutes, all you need to do is scan the ocean with your naked eye and you are sure to see regular vapor clouds of spouting whales, one after another.

Over the years, I've watched gray whales both from the deck of a rolling whale-watching boat and from the steady, dry viewing platforms built along the Pacific Rim coast. Both are highly recommended.

One warning to the easily seasick: the open Pacific along this part of the west coast can be rough. One time I got very woozy on a boat out of Ucluelet, especially in a rolling swell while trying to sight and snap the whales through my camera viewfinder. (The night before, I had feasted on a sumptuous dinner at the famous Wickaninnish Inn, complete with aperitif and bottle of wine between two of us. Take it from me: Keep alcohol consumption to a minimum the night before whale watching.)

Yet going out on a whale-watching boat is a hugely popular activity for the thrill of seeing a whale up close. Some 15,000 people take whale-watching trips in the region each year. Together the two towns have more than a dozen whale-watching outlets to choose from, ranging from open boat zodiacs to covered aluminum cruisers. You also are apt to see sea otters, which have made a dramatic comeback in this region, plus seals, sea lions and countless bald eagles.

Sighting grays from shore also is rewarding, and the region has built a number of observation platforms. One beautiful choice is along the Wild Pacific Trail, a seven-mile, easy-grade hiking trail that skirts the dramatic cliffs and shoreline around Ucluelet.

Every few feet there's another postcard view of spectacular scenery overlooking Barkley Sound and the Broken Group Islands to the south and the Pacific Ocean to the west. The trail was spearheaded by "Oyster" Jim Martin, an Ucluelet entrepreneur. One of the best viewing spots is Amphitrite Point Lighthouse on the southern tip of the Ucluelet Peninsula.

From the platform, it's possible to see whales less than 300 feet off shore. The third phase of the trail, still under construction, eventually will go all the way to the Long Beach section of Pacific Rim National Park.

Another place to whale watch from land is the Wickaninnish Centre -- the interpretive center for the park at Wickaninnish Bay. It has observation platforms with telescopes, as well as a hall with films, exhibits, murals and a restaurant.

Don't confuse the Wickaninnish Centre with the famed luxury hotel and spa about 10 miles north in Tofino. Both are named for an 18th-century chief whose name meant "having no one in front of him in the canoe," but only at the hotel can you stay in one of its dramatic rooms that hang over the ocean or relax with a hot stone massage or one of its many sea-themed treatments.

IF YOU GO

Getting there -- Tofino, Ucluelet and the Pacific Rim National Park are on the west coast of Vancouver Island about three hours west of Nanaimo and five hours northwest of Victoria. Take Highway 4 just south of Parksville toward Port Alberni and Tofino. At the T-Junction with the Pacific Rim Highway, turn right for Tofino, or left for Ucluelet.

Accommodations

Wickaninnish Inn, Tofino -- The "Wick" is the most luxurious accommodation in the region, right on the headlands by Chesterman Beach with a noted restaurant, "The Pointe," and the famous spa. Through March prices start at \$220 a night. wickinn.com; 800-333-4604

Middle Beach Lodge, Tofino -- Another regional favorite, for its Ralph Lauren-inspired rustic charm, prime location on the headland by a secluded beach, and great food. Along with two lodges, it has 20 self-contained cabins. Rates start at \$99 a night in spring. middlebeach.com; 866-725-2900

Terrace Beach Resort, Ucluelet -- Owned and operated by the family of actor Jason Priestly, the new waterfront resort is designed to look like an exclusive 1920s fishing camp, with either self-contained beachfront cabins or lodge-based rooms. Rates start at \$99 in the off-season for a bachelor suite. terracebeachresort.ca; 866-726-2901

Pacific Rim National Park -- Open for camping March 15-Oct. 14. Rates start at about \$20 a night. Reservations are recommended and can be made at pccamping.ca or 877-737-3783.

More information -- For a wide range of accommodations, restaurants, whale-watching outfits and other activities around Tofino, visit tourismtofino.com or the Tofino and Ucluelet sections of hellobc.com.

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