

KAMLOOPS THIS WEEK

Ucluelet's walk on the wild side

Kamloops This Week. Kamloops, B.C.: Mar 30, 2007. pg. 41

It takes a short, scenic drive to get there from Vancouver Island's populated east side cities. About halfway there, shoulders relax and tension flies away.

After being on the road a little while longer, it comes to you -- this is an enchanted journey on the Pacific Rim Highway, through twisty, misty roads, with trees standing sentinel and birds circling above. Relax, and it has the feel of something magical.

What, then, can the town of Ucluelet be like? It has been neatly defined as one of the most beautiful places you will ever see -- and when the sun shines, it's paradise, and when the storms hit, it's spectacular.

You have to see it yourself for a full appreciation. Pounding surf, blustery winds, craggy trees, soaring eagles, roving mists and the open Pacific Ocean; the wild, west coast of Vancouver Island is an unforgettable adventure.

And nowhere is that adventure more accessible and spectacular than on the Wild Pacific Trail near the town of Ucluelet.

Very friendly and just as proud of their emerging visitor mecca and all the attractions nature has placed there -- along with all the lovely creature comforts humans have created in this-once-rough logging and fishing town turned excellent visitor attraction -- the locals call their town Ukee, like an old friend.

Ucluelet and its environs are a mystical place -- you can feel a different type of energy in the air as soon as you arrive. The proximity of the road to the ocean allows you to breath in fresh salt air as soon as you arrive.

Rocky out-croppings and millennium old cedars give an ancient atmospheric charge to the surroundings.

And it is an ancient place. Its fascinating cultural history was created by aboriginal, Asian and European peoples and they are happy to share it with visitors.

Ucluelet takes its name from the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation phrase, Yu-clutl-ahts, "the people with a good landing place for canoes."

For decades it was a "good landing place" for fishermen. Add forestry and you have the two mainstays of the Ucluelet economy for as long as most can remember. But both of these industries have waned, and now tourism is the bright light of the economy.

Salmon fishing, hiking, cycling, kayaking, surfing, float plane tours, boat tours, whale watching, storm watching and eco-touring are now the modern by-words.

The town already offers everything from great B&Bs and luxury cabins to discount motels. More hotels, lodges and eateries are currently under construction with even more planned.

But this is still a town where you'll get maximum value for your money and where \$125 a night is going to get you a lot more than just a hole in the wall with a toaster.

The common thread knitting the visitor-based influences to this ancient village is the inextricable connection to the wild and untamed west coast environment.

And nowhere is that thread better exemplified, or the wild maritime world better accessed, than by the remarkable Wild Pacific Trail.

The trail curves round the rugged and rocky shoreline of the Ucluelet Peninsula with astonishing views of the expansive Barkley Sound, the Broken Group Islands and the open Pacific Ocean.

Originally the idea of 'Oyster Jim' Martin, a long-time local oyster farmer, the trail has been developed through private, business and government contributions to the Wild Pacific Trail Society.

Oyster Jim says he knew at the onset of the project that it was indeed a national treasure that was being created.

Now with more than half the trail complete, he says what is being developed is a "world treasure."

It looks like Oyster Jim is right. The gravel pathways and boardwalks create what many have called one of the finest trails on the west coast. It winds through ancient spruce and cedar rain forests and along meandering rock promontories with stunning ocean vistas that are unrivalled anywhere in the region.

The trail is accessible to those of all ages and abilities. It is a testament to the hard work and generosity of those who live in and around Ucluelet.

In creating this trail they thought from the start about making this untamed part of the world available to all. So anyone can sit in the sun and watch as seabirds soar overhead - or brave 75 kilometres-plus winds during a winter storm and truly experience nature's uproarious power from the safety of the trail.

No bikes, horses or motorized vehicles are permitted on the park's beaches or trails. The hiking trails are designed to expose visitors to the miles of shoreline while preventing any damage to the fragile environment.

Wildlife is plentiful. The indigenous bald eagles, osprey, herons, oyster catchers and ducks circle in the sky, forage on the beach and dive in the water. Sea lions and seals bellow while basking on the rocks, and otters and minks scamper through the brush.

In late winter/early spring migrating grey and humpback whales and orcas pass by a few kilometers off-shore. In mid-March, the Pacific Rim Whale Festival honours the annual arrival of the Gray Whale.

The scenery is breathtaking. Waves constantly pound the shoreline, spraying sea mist. Cedar and spruce-framed platforms constructed on the best headlands along the route are great viewing areas, especially for the sunsets or sunrises, worth the price of the trip alone.

When completed, the trail will stretch 14 kilometres. The first part of the hike is a 2.7-kilometre loop past Amphitrite Point Lighthouse, ending at He-Tin-Kis Park.

The second stretch extends the length to 8.5 kilometres and travels from Big Beach Park to the bike path just outside of Ucluelet.

The final section will extend the trail to Halfmoon Bay in Pacific Rim National Park.

The Wild Pacific Trail is a walk on the wild side that most never forget.

Jamie Gripich is a freelance writer, editor and communications consultant living in Victoria.