

The Province

Game for a hike on Ucluelet's wild side?:; [Final Edition]

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The Wild Pacific Trail is your path to a West Coast-style adventure

It takes a short, scenic drive to get to Ucluelet from Vancouver Island's populated east side. Shoulders relax and tension lifts along this twisty, misty Pacific Rim Highway, with trees standing like sentinels and birds circling above.

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

With 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.

The friendly folk call their town Ukee and are proud of its new role as a visitor mecca with all the attractions nature has placed there -- along with the creature comforts humans have created.

Ucluelet takes its name from the Nuuchah-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 these industries have waned and now tourism is the bright light of the economy. Salmon fishing, hiking, cycling, kayaking, surfing, float-plane and boat tours, whale-watching, storm-watching and eco-touring are the new by- words.

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

The common thread tying the visitor-based influences to this ancient village is the inextricable connection to the wild coastal environment. And nowhere is that thread better exemplified, or the wild maritime world better accessed, than by the Wild Pacific Trail.

The trail curves round the rugged and rocky shoreline of the Ucluelet Peninsula and offers great views of the expansive Barkley Sound, the Broken Islands Group and the open 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 of 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 rainforest and along meandering rock promontories with stunning ocean views.

When completed, the trail will stretch 14 km. The first part of the hike is a 2.7-km loop past Amphitrite Point Lighthouse, ending at He-Tin-Kis Park. The second stretch extends the length to 8.5 km 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.