

Ucluelet: a truly wild experience

GLENN WERKMAN
Sun Media

The moon tells the ocean tide to either thrash the rocks or simply lick them with salt.

The bell cries from the harbour, calling to a fishing boat that needs to moor before dark, which falls fast when you're at the farthest reaches of the West Coast.

Ucluelet – Emily Carr called it home for a while en route to the Queen Charlottes. It is a place, she said, where the wind, rain, forest and sea meet the sunshine. Eagles grace the trees while bears forage on the beach and whales surface to exhale before disappearing once again below the surface.

Transformation

Ucluelet is really a place of art and ingenuity, transforming itself from a sleepy fishing village to a travel destination where protection of the unique environment is paramount.

In fact, Ucluelet is destined to become one of the most environmentally aware communities on earth.

"There are no malls and barely an environmental footprint," said Mayor Diane St. Jacques, who, along with her husband Dennis, is owner and operator of Fletcher's Cove Bed & Breakfast.

Her business and home is nestled on the beautiful and awe-inspiring Fletcher's Cove, just minutes from Long Beach and around the corner from downtown Ucluelet.

"People from Alberta can come and do all the outdoor stuff," she says.

"There is whale watching, bike rentals, so many beaches, body surfing – which I like to do – kayaking lessons, boogie boarding and walks along the Wild Pacific Coast Trail."

As mayor for the past nine years, St. Jacques has worked to make Ucluelet a designated resort community/municipality, which means a portion of the hotel tax goes towards marketing and tourism infrastructure.

It's about keeping a balance between growing the tourism industry while making the community more interesting to visitors.

Ucluelet had a fantastic base to start with. As Dennis St. Jacques says, "I don't have to worry about whether I'm going to heaven, because I've had my heaven on earth."

One has only to explore the great outdoors to understand his meaning.

Stunning views

The Wild Pacific Coast Trail curves around the rugged and rocky shoreline of the Ucluelet Peninsula, providing an astonishing vista of the expansive Barkley Sound, the Broken Group Islands and the open Pacific Ocean.

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 forest and along meandering rock prom-

ontories with stunning ocean views that are unrivalled anywhere in the region.

The trail is accessible to those of all ages and abilities. 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 a bike path just outside of Ucluelet. The final section extends the trail to Halfmoon Bay in Pacific Rim National Park.

A lot of wild living happens along the shore.

Whale and bear watching tours are available in the spring and summer. Bird watching is unavoidable, with bald eagles, osprey, herons, oyster catchers and ducks circling in the sky, foraging on the beach and diving in the water.

Sea lions and seals bellow while basking on the rocks, and otters and minks scamper through the brush.

Abundant to the West Coast of Vancouver Island, the black bear makes its presence known when the tides are low. They roam the shores in search of their favourite delicacy, the rock crab.

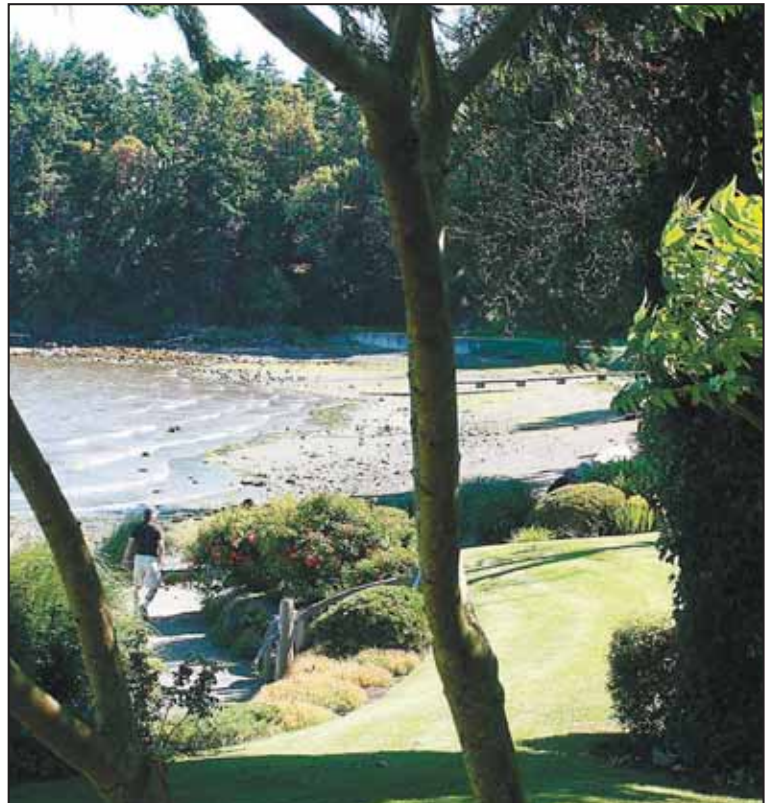
One of the best-kept secrets is the Ucluelet Mini Aquarium. What could be the world's smallest public aquarium is at the moment housed in a building about as big as a small garage, perched on the shore of the Ucluelet harbour.

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Tourists who take any number of wildlife watching trips based in Ucluelet, B.C., are bound to see families of eagles perched near the tops of trees.



Perched on the shore of Craig Bay, north of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, Pacific Shores Resort and Spa features mature trees and beautiful sandy beaches.



A starfish is pulled from the water for a close-up look at Pacific Shores Resort and Spa, north of Nanaimo, B.C. Aquariums in The Landing West Coast Grill are a feature attraction at the spa.

The sea creatures and fish live in water pumped directly from the inlet and all are housed in their natural environments.

Created by a local crab fisherman with a penchant for the scientific side of sea life, the mini aquarium has a most unique assortment of specimens.

The staff have excellent knowledge and encourage questions about individual traits and habits. Be sure to see the very smart baby octopus.

Watch the cockle clam, swimming scallops and the purple sea urchin escape from the sea stars at the predator demonstration. Plans are to build a permanent building by 2010.

The Ucluelet Mini Aquarium is part of the Main Street Waterfront Promenade (near Whisky Dock). Like any big fish, catch it before it slips away or dip into it online at www.uclueletaquarium.org.

Small-town charm

Affectionately called Ukee by the locals, the town has no fast-food restaurants or big box stores.

Instead, there are an assortment of small shops like Pina Studio & Boutique, which boasts handmade crafts and eco-friendly clothing, an ideal place for those who love shopping for original works of

art or browsing for gifts to take home.

The food is beyond compare, whether you try the Ukee Dog Eatery (open for breakfast and lunch), the surf-side cafe at the Delecado's or any one of the locally owned and operated restaurants.

The Ucluelet Co-op is a one-stop shop for groceries, deli-foods, camping supplies or advice about the weather.

There's a different mentality on the wild West Coast. Rain doesn't stop anyone.

"Just wear your sandals out on a day like today," Diane St. Jacques says on one blustery morning.

"Shoes just get wet, but in sandals, your feet can dry faster."

In Ucluelet, they just don't reside on the edge, they participate - they "live life on edge." They hit the waves, hike the trails, raise their families and proudly share their precious way of life.

"We are really an all-season place to visit," St. Jacques says. "So when you come, be prepared for the weather and have clothing for the rain."

In a nutshell, it has been defined as one of the most beautiful places you will ever see.

When the sun shines, it's paradise, and when the storms hit, it's spectacular.

Ucluelet continues to develop and build on its rep-



GLENN WERKMAN/SUN MEDIA

Working fishing boats remain a common sight near Ucluelet, B.C., although the area is evolving from traditional occupations to adventure tourism and resort development.

utation as a first-class resort town without the pretense.

Its small-town charm and respect of its heritage are apparent throughout.

And the tradition is bound to continue. St. Jacques says the town is working with global energy leaders to use wave energy to generate electricity.

Investigative permits have been awarded to develop technology so the town can become even more self-sufficient.

Using the power

"We are working with a few scientists on harnessing the power of the waves for energy," St. Jacques said.

Efforts are also underway to build a water desalinization plant, essentially removing the salt from sea water and creating fresh water for human consumption.

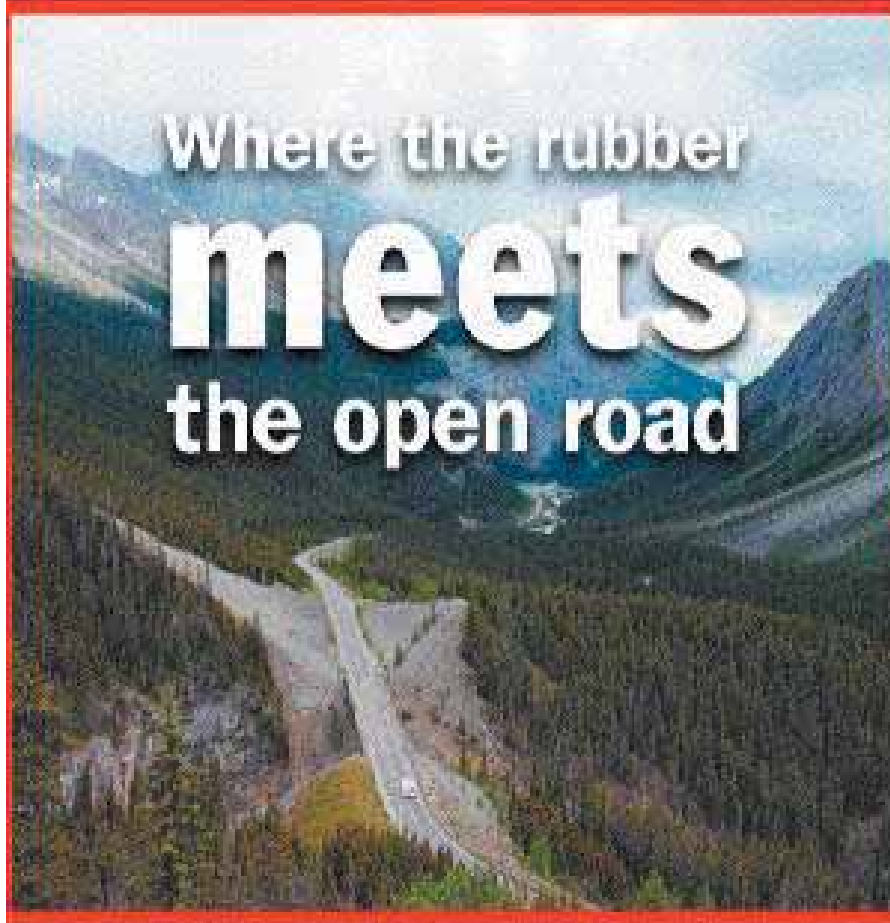
The town is also passing a bylaw to allow electric cars, with a top speed of 40 km/h, to travel on residential streets.

"It just seems more respon-

sible to look after yourself," St. Jacques said.

To find out more about the place of pounding surf, blustery winds, craggy trees, soaring eagles, roving mists and the open Pacific Ocean, go to www.ucluelet.ca or www.uclueletinfo.com.

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