

Penticton Western News

Ucluelet is heaven on Earth

Penticton Western News. Penticton, B.C.: Sep 6, 2006. pg. 20

(Copyright (c) 2006 Black Press Group Ltd.)

It's been said of the central west coast of Vancouver Island, that on any day of the year its one of the most beautiful places you've ever seen -- and when the sun shines it's paradise.

Both of course are true, and you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who doesn't view their home in this part of the province as the just this side of heaven.

You can take a quick helicopter or small plane ride from Victoria of Vancouver. But if you want to truly experience all that there is to see in this part of the country, you need to drive. On the island of Maui they have the famous Road to Hana, and on this part of Vancouver Island they have the Road to Ucluelet.

The spectacular journey starts after you head due west from Port Alberni. While there have been considerable improvements to the road in recent years, it still has plenty of twists and turns and spectacular scenery at every one of them. You'll see inland pristine lakes like Sproat Lake and Kennedy Lake, wild rivers, waterfalls, forests and finally the rugged west coast of the island.

Ucluelet became a "good landing place" for fisherman for decades; add in forestry and you have the two mainstays of the Ucluelet economy for as long as most can remember. But both of those industries have waned, and now tourism is the bright light in the economy.

The town already boasts some lovely resorts, hotels, eateries and lodges with more currently under construction and even more on the horizon. Salmon fishing, hiking, cycling, kayaking, surfing, float plane tours, boat tours, whale watching, storm watching and eco- touring are now what keep most busy here. And as with any town that has been around so long, this is a tight-knit community that's been through a lot with the downturn of their two biggest industries, but still welcomes visitors with open arms while at the same time as other tourist spots have become over-developed and impersonal.

The common thread knitting together the tourism influences to this ancient village are the inextricable connection to the wild and untamed west coast outdoors. And nowhere in thread better exemplified, or the wild better accessed, than by the remarkable Wild Pacific Trail.

While access to the famous beaches in the area like Long Beach have always been easy access the wild and rugged terrain which is so much part of a trip here has not been as easy or safe. That was until the the residents of the town of Ucluelet put their shoulder behind creating the Wild Pacific Trail.

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

Originally the idea of 'Oyster Jim' Martin, the trail has been developed by private, business and government donations to the Wild Pacific Trail Society. Oyster Jim says he knew on the onset

of the project, that it was indeed a national treasure that was being created. Now with over half the trail complete, he says what has been developed is "a world treasure."

Oyster Jim is right. The gravel pathways and boardwalks create one of the finest built wild trails I've ever come across. It winds through through ancient spruce and cedar rain forest with access unrivaled anywhere. It is accessible by all ages, and it is a testament to the fine local people that created this trail that they are planning on making the trail accessible for all. Throughout the walk are observation areas where you can watch as eagles soar overhead, or brave winter gales and truly experience nature's power from the safety of the trail.

The natural surroundings are being preserved, as 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 the mixture of rocky and sandy shoreline while preventing any damage to the fragile environment.

Like a page from a Tolkien novel, the walk through the old growth forest is filled with thickets of twisted trunks, limbs and roots, gigantic nurse-logs, raised root systems, mosses, fungi, lichens and ferns as though designed, rather than produced by, nature. Wildlife is plentiful. The indigenous Golden Eagle and resident Bald Eagles, herons, oyster catchers and ducks forage on the beach and dive in the water. Sea lions and seals bask and bellow on the rocks, and otters and minks scamper through the brush.

In late winter and early spring migrating gray whales and orcas pass by a few kilometers offshore, Grey whales, Humpback and Killer whales migrate the coastal waters, and porpoises, seals, sea lions, and elephant seals are all easily spotted and viewed from the trail. In late March, the Pacific Rim Whale Festival honours the arrival of the whales.

The first part of the hike (phase one and two) is a 2.7- kilometre loop past Amphitrite Point Lighthouse ending at He-Tin- Kis Park.

The lighthouse's light and horn can be seen and heard for over 25 miles. The original Amphitrite Lighthouse was built in 1906. It was destroyed by a tidal wave in 1914 and replaced by the current structure. Phases three and four of the Wild Pacific Trail extend the length to 8.5 km and travel from Big Beach Park to the bike path just outside of Ucluelet.

The scenery is breathtaking. Waves constantly pound the shoreline, spraying sea mist. Cedar and spruce-framed viewing platforms constructed on the best headlands along the route are great viewing areas especially for the sunsets or sunrises, which, if you haven't seen before, are worth the trip alone. During the winter months the trail provides safe harbour if your adventuring nature beckons you to experience a winter storm. Up to 150 km/h winds, massive crashing waves and pelting rain are the invigorating trio characterizing a winter storm -- and you're never going to get closer to nature's power and remain safe.

The final phases five through seven will extend the trail to 14 km to Halfmoon Bay in Pacific Rim National Park.