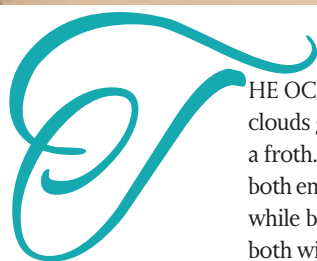
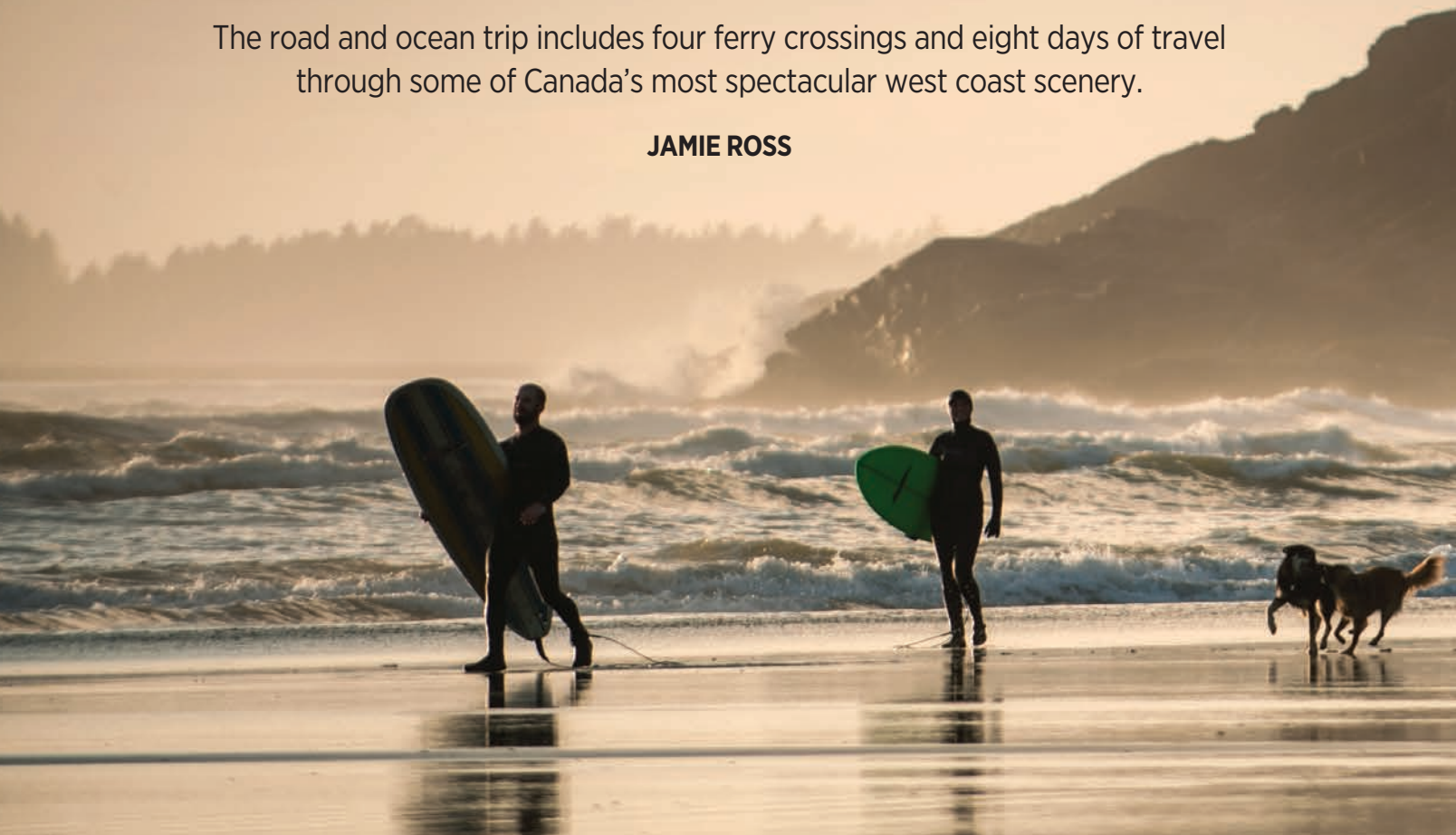


THE *Ultimate*
BC FERRIES
COASTAL CIRCLE TRIP

The road and ocean trip includes four ferry crossings and eight days of travel through some of Canada's most spectacular west coast scenery.

JAMIE ROSS



THE OCEAN IS VISIBLY UPSET this morning. Ominous grey clouds gather on the horizon as the wind whips the sea into a froth. Huge waves pound on the rock outcrops that hedge both ends of Cox Bay, shooting spray ten metres into the sky, while big rollers send beachcombers scrambling inland. It is both wild and wonderful. The problem? I have booked a surf lesson, and envision myself out in the turbulent seas, a sophomore surfer getting tossed and broken by the angry waves.

“Sorry mate” says the bearded Surf Club attendant at Long Beach Lodge Resort. “All lessons cancelled!”

I am immediately thankful, while pretending to be upset, saying something inane like, “No chance to go ride some curl then?” I am in Tofino on the wild west coast of Vancouver Island – and when in Tofino you must sling the surfer slang.

Utilizing the marvellous BC Ferries' system, my road and ocean trip itinerary began by flying with my wife to Vancouver, picking up her folks (and more importantly their car), sailing across the Straight of Georgia to Nanaimo, and meandering 208 kilometres westward along an arduous route that twists through sheer cliff faces and jagged shorelines, before coming to the final stop on the Trans-Canada Highway at Tofino.

Tofino is for travellers seeking a wild refuge, an end of the road enclave of lush forests, sweeping silky beaches and a rugged coastal landscape, a tiny town on the continent's westernmost edge that transformed itself from stormy outpost to revered eco-tourism destination. Year-round, surfers slip into wetsuits, grab their boards, and splash into



BRIAN CAUSSE / DESTINATION CANADA

the frigid Pacific. While many surfing hotspots tend to be pretentious, Tofino offers a quiet welcome that makes it the perfect place to try surfing for the first time. Just not, apparently, for me. Not today.

There is an extensive trail network in the nearby Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, so in lieu of playing in the surf, we grab some electric bikes to check out the reserve's new cycling trail. Parks Canada, in collaboration with local Indigenous groups, recently unveiled the 25-kilometre pathway whose name translates to "going the right direction on the path." Our plan is to bike from Tofino to Ucluelet and back, so I wonder if we will be going the wrong direction half of the time?

The new trail winds its way through old-growth

forests, over salmon-filled streams, and past breathtaking ocean views. We detour off the trail, peddling down to remote beaches. Slanting pine trees shaped by the relentless wind protect empty stretches of sand strewn with driftwood. You feel you are the first explorer to discover this piece of ragged paradise, standing on the edge of the world.

Tofino is a paradox, a place to both unplug and recharge, a place of relaxation and adventure. The town's growth is limited by its location on a rocky peninsula, but its reputation depends on preserving the wilderness and solitude that has long drawn nature lovers and hippies. While it has grown, Tofino remains a small town at the end of the highway.

Surfers in Tofino's Cox Bay.



JAMES ROOS

Hiking to huts at heavenly heights

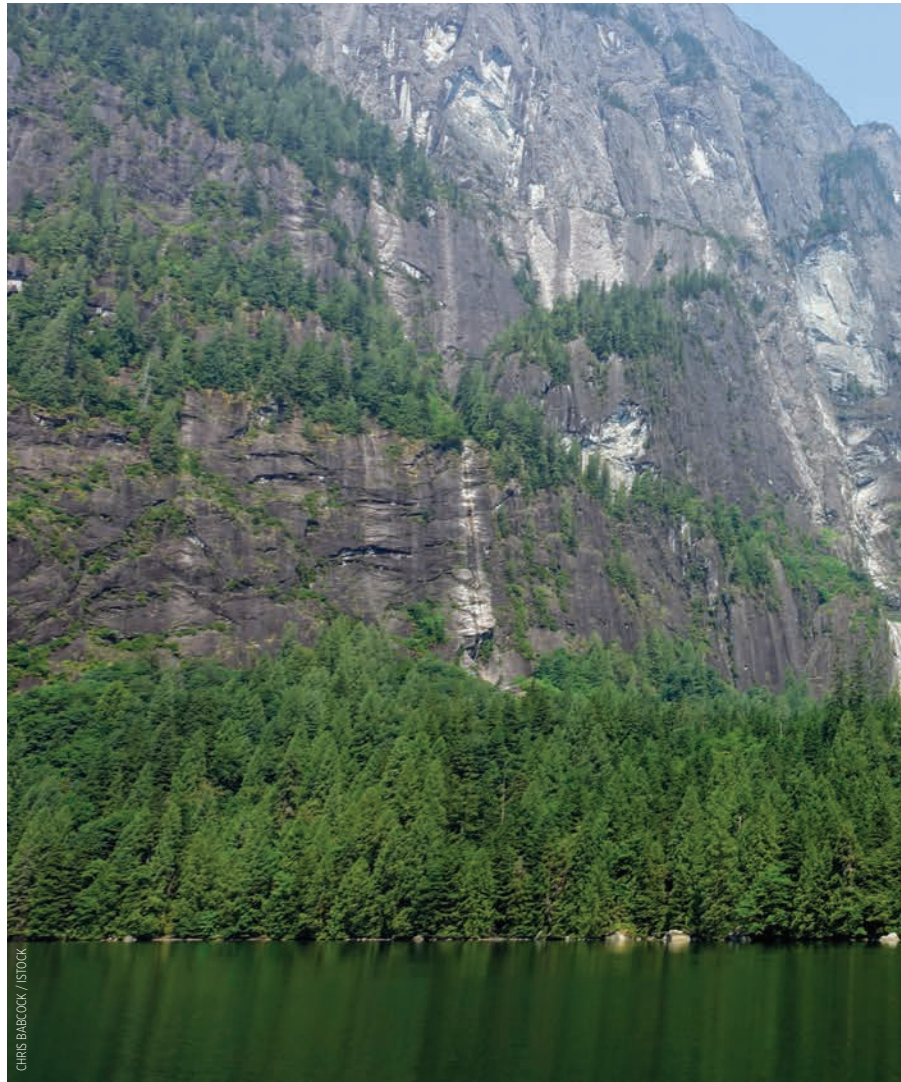
It is time to continue on down the road and across the Salish Sea on a pleasant two-hour ferry voyage from Comox to Powell River. Like Tofino, this end of the highway town, long known for the world’s largest pulp and paper mill, has sneakily reinvented itself as the coast’s hottest new adventure destination, offering hiking, canoeing, kayaking, boating, rock climbing, fishing, and even scuba diving.

After a night in Lund, my wife and I hike the north-western leg of the Sunshine Coast Trail, climbing gradually skyward to the Manzanita Hut for splendid views out over the Sound. The Sunshine Coast Trail is Canada’s longest hut to hut hiking trail, spanning 180 km from Sarah Point in Desolation Sound to Saltery Bay.

A sailor’s sentimental return

My first and only experience along this secluded section of BC’s coast came shortly after I was married, when my father-in-law decided to make a sailor of me on an adventure up the inside passage to Desolation Sound. Now, just past his 80th birthday, I have brought him back to reminisce. No, it wasn’t just for his car.

Desolation Sound, so named in 1792 by Captain Vancouver, who obviously had no eye for beauty (claiming “there was not a single prospect that was pleasing to the eye”), had literally taken my breath away when I sailed into it 30 years before, with its towering rock bluffs and idyllic islands, all back-dropped by spectacular fjords and snow-capped mountains. It struck me the same way on this trip. We hired a Zodiac from Terracentric Coastal Adventures for an afternoon tour of Desolation Sound Marine Provincial Park to explore its



CHRIS BABCOCK / JUSTOCK

(Clockwise from top left)

Manzanita Hut on the Sunshine Coast Trail.

View of Princess Louisa inlet and Chatterbox Falls,

Taking in the incredible views from the deck during a trip on BC Ferries.

Kayaking in Skookumchuck Narrows, one of the world’s biggest tidal rapids.

more than 60 km of shoreline and protected bays, skirting past orca pods, flocks of surf scoters winging over the water, and sea lions basking on the rocks.

The following morning, we caught the ferry from Saltery Bay to Earl’s Cove and then continued our marine adventures at the tiny fishing village of Egmont with a day trip up Princess Louisa Inlet. Sailing up the magnificent six km fjord many years before had been a two-day journey. This time, on a high-powered and versatile 32-foot landing craft with Coastland Marine Charters, we took in the inlet at 30 knots. Incredibly steep carved granite walls rise to 2000 metres from the narrow fjord while Chatterbox Falls, at the very end of the inlet, plunges 40 metres into the sea.

Returning to Egmont, we have one more fascinating spectacle to behold. Twice daily, the Sunshine Coast is witness to an incredible display of the ocean’s power. As the tide changes in the Skookumchuck Narrows (‘strong water’ in Chinook), the water rushes through at 30 km/hour, creating one of the world’s biggest tidal rapids. We play in the huge waves, boils, and dangerous whirlpools, thankful for our skilled skipper, Kane Rushton, and his twin 250 outboards.



Hidden harbours, beautiful bays and a bit of beachcombing

The Sunshine Coast is made up of a north and south coast, and while part of British Columbia's mainland, the region maintains an isolated, island-like feel, only accessible by ferry or flight. The drive is a meandering route of 180 km, tracing coastal curves and lakes, and weaving through old-growth forests broken occasionally by laid-back fishing villages, artists' studios, breweries and cideries, and lonely beaches. We skirt around places with their own stories, Smuggler's Bay, Half Moon Harbour, and Molly's Reach, an iconic restaurant that takes me back to when a Canadian television drama introduced us to "Beachcombers" on this delightful stretch of coast.

A scenic, 40-minute cruise takes us from Langdale to Horseshoe Bay in West Vancouver, and our enchanting coastal circuit comes to an end. ■

Sailing on BC Ferries is a quintessential part of the coastal experience. As one of the largest and most sophisticated ferry systems in the world, BC Ferries has played a vital role in life on Canada's west coast for over 50 years. BC Ferries Vacations offer over 100 travel packages, including ferry travel and accommodations.

www.bcferrries.com

Tourism Tofino – www.tourismtofino.com

Sunshine Coast Tourism – www.sunshinecoastcanada.com

We always suggest using a travel advisor for your bookings.

