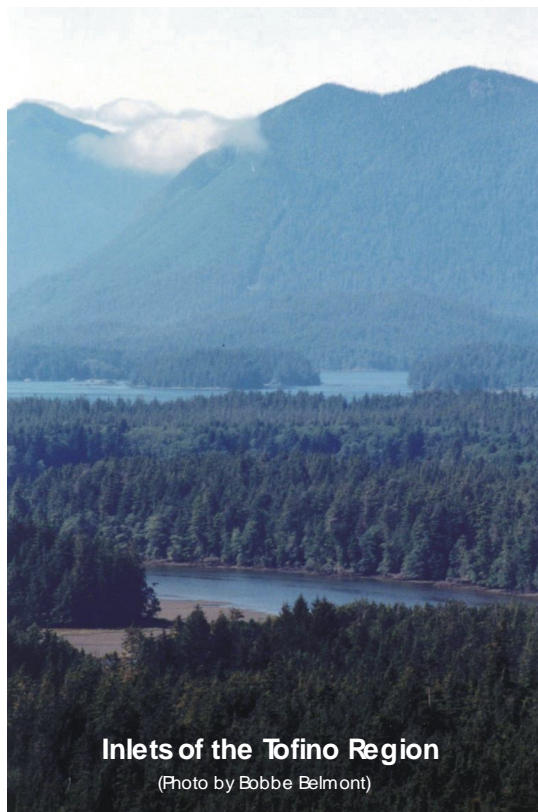


A Whale of a Good Time

By Bobbe Belmont



Inlets of the Tofino Region

(Photo by Bobbe Belmont)

The vacation winds blew us out to Vancouver Island, BC, kayaks atop the truck this summer. The ferry from Twassassen just south of the city of Vancouver proved to be much less expensive than its American counterpart due to the favorable exchange rate, so we crossed the border and took the Canadian line, passing the San Juan Islands (US) and the Gulf Islands (Canadian).

On our drive up the East Coast of the island we had a grand view of the notorious Seymour Passage. 4 billion liters of water pass through Johnstone Strait north of the passage every hour. (If we've reckoned correctly, that is 40,000 CFS.) Seymour Narrows, 1 km wide, is the narrowest spot along the southerly end of the Inside Passage. At the peak of both low and high tides (between slack), an astronomical volume of water is forced through the passage, causing whirlpools the size of yachts, tide rips, tidal waves, tidal rapids and general hydraulic havoc. One tide-ripped navigational hazard-Rippie Rock-

claimed at least 120 ships and 114 seamen before it was reduced in size by 1,375 tons of high explosives in 1958. We were told that even the enormous luxury cruise liners time their routes to enter Seymour around slack. We were hoping to see the water at its worse (from the overlook, of course), but happened upon the view when the waters were wind-blown but viable.

Our first destination was Tofino, renowned for its long, rainy, tempestuous weather, earning itself the nickname "Tough City." In 1995 a location 24 km from Tofino measured 21.5 feet of rain in that

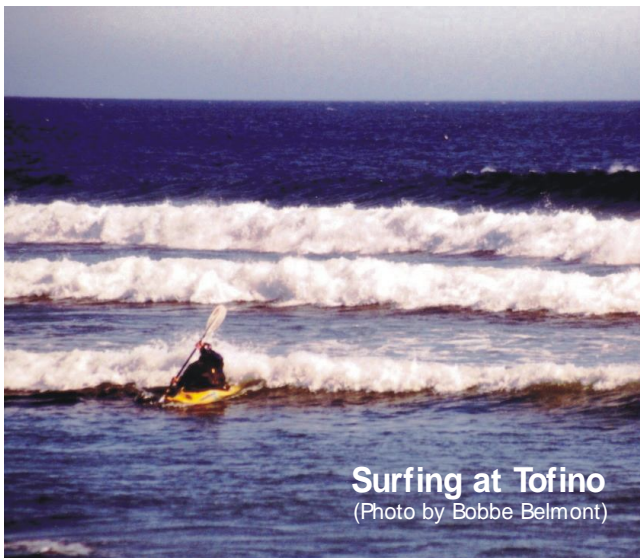
year, making it one of the wettest places in North America. We saw not a single raindrop on our entire trip! The Pacific Northwest has been suffering a serious drought. The price we paid for this lovely weather were strong winds, sometimes gale force. Tofino is located at the tip of the Esowista Peninsular on Clayoquot Sound where the Nuu-chah-Nulth First Nations People have made their home for several thousand years. The SW side of the peninsular greets the Pacific Ocean as it encounters the continent with long

sandy beaches (all part of the Pacific Rim National Park) popular with surfers, whitewater play boaters and the occasional sea kayaker. We watched at Long Beach with envy as the owner of an "Ocean Kayak" sit-on-top, self-bailing surfing kayak played in the waves. In fact, we checked out all possible resources that afternoon trying to find rentals of such a craft, figuring that swimming a bit in the 55 degree F water and getting bashed by some pretty big waves wouldn't be so bad in our neoprene suits, wearing whitewater helmets. Unfortunately, no one rented such boats (a good business opportunity waiting for the right entrepreneur!)

We checked out a second, smaller beach, just at the edge of town, Tonquin Beach. 20,000 gray whales summer outside Tofino and sometimes venture in to this specific beach to rub their bodies free of barnacles and parasites on its fine, white sand. No sightings for us that day. By the way, upwards of a million human visitors visit Clayoquot Sound annually.

On the leeward side of Tofino is a plethora of large and small islands, creating inlets and passageways ideal for paddling. One must, of course, become versed with tide and current charts and be weary of the tidal rapids and tide rips, which can form quickly in such interesting waters. We found ourselves there at new moon and experienced little of these dangerous places. Yet the locals assured us that at full moon there were serious passages to be reckoned with.

We frequently saw harbor seals, their large, black eyes curiously checking us out before disappearing beneath the water. Orcas are not indigenous to this area, although a transient may occasionally be



Surfing at Tofino

(Photo by Bobbe Belmont)

(Continued From page 1)

sighted. We hoped to paddle beyond the islands and reefs and out into the Pacific to look for the summering Grays. Unfortunately those gale force winds and one wild ocean prevented us from that adventure each day. While we chose day paddles (expecting rain regularly and wanting a warm place to come to), it is possible to plan multi-day trips through the islands. There are several hiking trails to add to the variety of a paddle. One of these leads to a grove of 1,000 year-old, red cedar, the canopy topping out at around 300+ feet. Truly awe inspiring! We laughed at raccoons "clamming" at low tide but failed to see any of the bear inhabitants (all blackies/no grizzlies) or mountain lions (more per square mile than any other place on the continent). Of course, there were eagles everywhere. And the tidal pools were aglow with colorful life. From town you could look out at the high peaks of Strathcona National Park in the interior with its imposing Mariner Glacier.

Tofino itself is definitely a tourist town with docks for commercial fishermen, whale-watching companies, sports fishing outfits and three kayak tour and rental operations. We chose to work with Tofino Sea Kayaking. They were very knowledgeable, helpful and BUSY, "guiding" loads of tourists in doubles around the harbor area all day and into the evening. (Ask for Sarah if you are looking for the best information.) In the mornings when the wind had not yet come up, the waters were awash with kayaks. But on our last day in gale force winds, we were the only ones out, flying across the waters in big waves with following seas. Wow, was that a thriller day!

Across from Tofino on Meares Island is the Tla-o-qui-aht Village of Opitsat, standing in its simplicity in stark contrast to the tourist town. After a First Nation water taxi heading for the village purposefully aimed its bow directly at our boats, full throttle, veering at the last moment, we de-

ecided not to visit. Perhaps they had a good laugh at our fear, but we found that incident to be the most dangerous of the trip. Their behavior underlies an apparent animosity toward kayakers or more probably toward the million tourists in general who come here each year to eat their fish and crab and live in some pretty posh lodgings while they dwell in government manufactured homes on a 5-thousand year old native site.

Our second destination was historic Telegraph Cove. This tiny cove very near the northern end of Vancouver Island provides an outlet to Johnstone Strait and the world of the Orcas. The cove is split down the middle. One half contains the renovated and remodeled buildings of the past, a fantastic restaurant (good thing too, it is the only one) and a whaling center where one can learn everything about the many whales of this region and even "adopt" a particular whale for life (all whales in the 6 resident Orca pods are identified by number and personal name and stats are kept on them throughout their lifetimes). The other half of the cove is a not-too-attractive condominium complex, RV and camping park with new docks. Strange visually, but one gets used to this quickly because Telegraph Cove is the closest accessible location to the Orca research location, called Robson Bight. Although NO boating traffic is allowed in the bight, it is possible to paddle quite closely to it along the many "rubbing beaches" where the Orcas come in summer to rub their bellies on the smooth round stones found on these beaches. Why? No one is sure.

Telegraph Cove

(Photo by Bobbe Belmont)



Once again we chose to get a room because of the inclement weather we expected and did day trips up, down and across the Strait. (We saw kayakers camped along the rubbing beaches, waiting for the whales to come to them.) When not indulging themselves at the rubbing beaches, the Orcas hunt the abundant salmon of these cold (45F), nutrient-rich waters. They make a triangle around Hanson Island, which is across from Telegraph Cove. "Killer Whale" is actually a misnomer for the Orca. The resident pods eat only salmon. It is the transient whales, seldom seen, that will attack seals and dolphins. Locals claim that when all the seals are up on the rocks, they know transients are in the Strait.

In our paddles we were honored to see two pods of hunting residents, porpoises swimming and jumping in unison and a single mother Orca with a newborn who swam with us briefly until mamma called. The greatest stroke of luck for us was being able to rent hydrophones at the kayak center and listen to these marine mammals as we watched them. There is simply no way to describe the experience of watching a 6-foot fin heading straight for your boat and veering away at the last moment or being surrounded by a pod of Orcas while listening to them speak. "Is this heaven" I asked Casey. We also heard porpoises clicking away in their language, but missed a pair of humpbacks frolicking with all those



Casey searching for whales at the rubbing beach.
(Photo by Bobbe Belmont)

well cared for. There are nearly 300 Orcas in the north (and only 3 whale-watching boats) but only 84 in the southern pods, declining in number as the 55 whale-watching boats and heavy boat traffic in general put immeasurable stress on them.

Johnstone Strait, opening into Queen Charlotte Strait, is inherently a busy place as well, not just for whales, dolphins and porpoise, seals and walrus, but also for boating traffic. The two luxury liners that passed us each day gave us an added thrill as we positioned ourselves to paddle through their wakes...a HIGH wave with a crashing curl! Unlike Tofino, paddlers do wear neoprene here, just in case... We also were immeasurably entertained by an Onassis-size yacht, barreling down the Strait full throttle with two giant, male Orcas, one on each side of the yacht's wake - SURFING!

speed, should they find these marine mammals surfing behind their boats.

This story could not be ended without mentioning Debbie Erikson, who was born here and owns the North Island Kayaking Center. This is a first-class operation: competent and serious guides; water taxis to more remote reaches in the Strait; fiberglass rental boats (!) with several models from Seaward Kayaks, Current Designs and Necky; and, of course, hydrophones! Debbie also plans and assists in planning kayak tours to the many, intriguing areas around the North Island, with or without a guide. We are hoping to take a two or three week trip in the Broughton Archipelago to the east and north of Vancouver Island next summer planned with Debbie's expert assistance.

In fact, we fell in love with Vancouver Island and are hoping to spend a good part of the summer there, both in the interior mountains and on the sea. Of course, we keep trying to remind ourselves that endless days of sunshine and sparkling waters are not the norm!!!

{Please feel free to contact Bobbe Belmont by phone (719-539-9170) or email (bontheroad@chaffee.net) with questions if you are thinking of heading north this fall or next year.}

whale antics (breaching, broaching, fin and tail slapping) at the mouth of Telegraph Cove while we were out paddling. We are happy to report that the many kinds of whales who pass through Johnstone Strait are thriving and being

They sure know how to have fun. We were told this is not an uncommon game for Orcas and their smaller cousins, the dolphins. In fact, at the harbor instructions were posted for boat owners to slow their crafts to a wake-free

Paddle Nebraska - Are you insane!!!!

By Larry Kline

Picture this. Rolling, grassy hills interspersed with clusters of trees. Ahead of you sits an old 91 van topped with 2 shiny new fiberglass sea-kayaks stopped in the middle of a mildly rutted, narrow dirt road. Not a piece of water in sight. It is surrounded by a "flock" of cattle being driven straight towards the van by Nebraska "cowboys" on ATV's. Now that's Rocky Mountain sea kayaking if you ever saw it. Too bad Paul did not have a camera for this Kodak moment!!!

BUT you all did miss a great one... Nebraska's hidden Niobrara River valley is a "little Missouri" just 6 hours from Denver. Tree covered bluffs, waterfalls cascading into the river every 2 miles or so. NO other paddlers (NONE) on this notoriously crowded stretch of National Scenic Riverway. Empty state parks waiting for our tents. A simply fantastic steak dinner at the Peppermill in Valentine both before and after the trip. Oh, yes, there were six sets of class I rapids

that added to the excitement. Ask us sometime about the trip... We just may tell you some more. Like, for instance, the "gold miner" and 6ft cowboy who was all legs at the Sparks General Store who didn't even know that the large Cornell Dam at the put in some 10 miles away even existed. And the cowboy claimed he'd lived here all his life!!! Sorry, no pictures to document these tales. It just may be a hoax!!!!