

Storm **WARNING!**

WHEN THE BAROMETER PLUNGES, COASTAL
PEOPLE FIND ACCOMMODATION WITH NATURE
BY DANIEL WOOD

Storm watching
on the Wild Pacific
Trail in Ucluelet.

Sean Porter, 46, knows all about British Columbia's worst weather. Not because he's a commercial pilot, nor because he lives in coastal Tofino where storm winds gust to hurricane force and headlands are pounded with 10-metre waves. He's reconciled to the fact that his wife Sarah—like her father and grandfather before her—wakes up when their Tofino windows are rattling and the wind is raging and announces they have to go searching the beach for Japanese glass floats that get driven ashore during West Coast storms. "It's evil outside," says Porter. "But she's obsessed. It's an adult treasure hunt."

Each October in the Pacific Northwest, weather patterns change and—with monotonous regularity—powerful low-pressure systems develop in the Gulf of Alaska and collide with the ragged coast of British Columbia. The worst of these storms are called "Maritime Bombs." Waves offshore have been measured at 30 metres. And rain falls in prodigious amounts, producing a rainforest ecosystem and coastal life ruled by its abundance. On a single day in 1997, for example, Henderson Lake—located in the mountains above Tofino—received 43 centimetres of rain. The total rainfall for the lake that year—and a record for North America—was nine metres, or 29.5 feet. (Yes, you read that right.) Historically, these Pacific storms have contributed to the 484 known shipwrecks that punctuate Vancouver Island's west coast, and led, in 1984, to the sinking of seven fishing boats and death of five fishermen caught in one of these fast-moving storms.

AT 62, JOE MARTIN is a celebrated Nuu-chah-nulth wood carver and a descendent of 4,000 years of native occupation of this storm-wracked place. Sitting in his Tofino carving shed on a blustery



Japanese glass fishing floats were once a common sight on west coast beaches, but are now a rare and exciting find.



December morning—with a cast-iron stove blazing and a half-finished whaling canoe nearby—he talks about a traditional world shaped by nature, and today largely lost to modernity. His grandfather was a hunter who'd go offshore in pursuit of humpback whales, he explains, but when the late autumn storms began, his people would drag their boats ashore and turn to the rituals that would sustain them through the seemingly endless winter. There'd be potlatches—with masked dancing and songs. There'd be feasting and instruction by elders in the mythologies depicted on village crests and totem poles. All these lessons were focused on cultivating respect toward community and nature.

"You'd learn to read nature: when storms are coming; when a cougar's near; and what's taboo and hurtful to the Earth. You'd learned not to fear. If you fear, you only know *this much*," says Martin, his thumb and forefinger a half-inch apart. "If you understand nature and your place in it, then it's *this much*." And he spreads his arms wide apart. Storm season, he's saying, is a time for spiritual growth.

And to a real extent, that holds true for today's storm-watching adventurers who want to face nature unafraid. Biologist Josie Osborne, 45 and Tofino's popular mayor, understands what it means to live on the edge. She has worked for years with local First Nations people, trying to bridge two often-conflicted cultural views: nature as a source of lessons in inter-connectedness; or nature as a commodity to

be harvested—fish, forests, furs and all. Seated in Darwin's Café in Tofino Botanical Gardens, a place she runs with her 72-year-old husband George Patterson, she can see outside newly fallen branches from the preceding weekend's storm.

"I love storms," she says. "I go to South Beach. There's no sand there. Just rounded pebbles and cobbles. The wind's blowing. The surf rumbles the stones. You get in touch with the fundamentals. You're just a speck. You stand on the edge of the continent and look out and feel very alone."

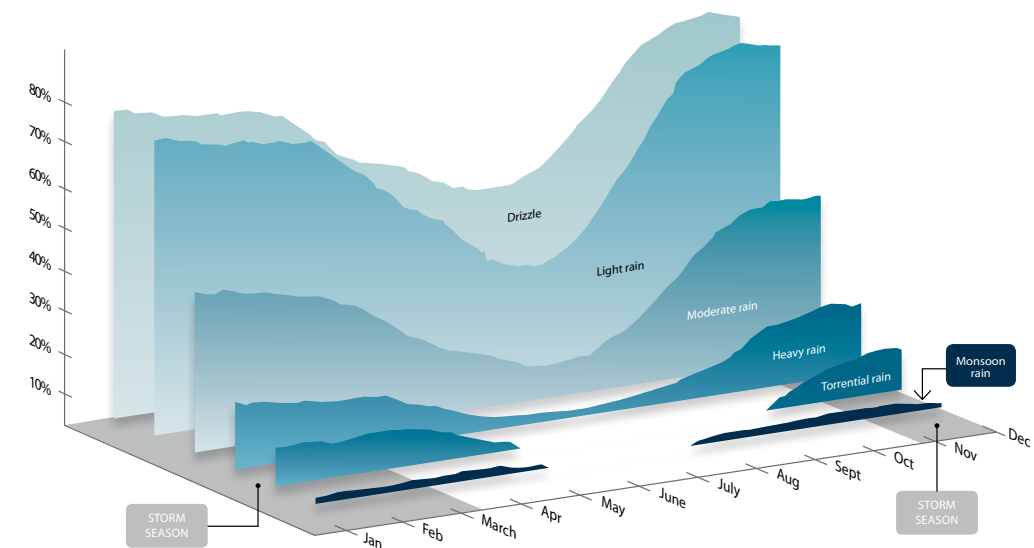
This is, of course, the essence of storm-watching. It provides a chance to escape one's comfort zone for a while: to witness air liquified with spindrift; to feel rocks reverberate beneath the impact of house-high waves; to walk through a dripping, moss-draped forest with boot-sucking mud underfoot; to feel vulnerable and small and wind-whipped, and yet strangely thrilled.

TO FULLY UNDERSTAND life along the westernmost edge of Canada requires absorbing this essential fact: it's one of the wettest and stormiest places on Earth. Its ecosystem is based on apocalyptic volumes of rain. Monsoon-like amounts hit the rainforest cedars and firs and drip onto the deer ferns, huckleberries and deadfall below, where moisture-loving mushrooms and fungi thrive. The water flows through the interstices in the perpetually damp soil and turns tiny rivulets to streams and streams to whitewater ▶

TOFINO PRECIPITATION GUIDE

PROBABILITY OF PRECIPITATION THROUGHOUT THE DAY

The percentage of days in which various types of precipitation are observed. If more than one type of precipitation is reported in a given day, the more severe precipitation is counted. For example, if light rain is observed in the same day as a thunderstorm, that day counts toward the thunderstorm totals.



creeks. Which in turn dump huge amounts of organic nutrients into the coastal sea, producing there some of the most fecund marine habitat on the planet, from run-off to ocean to plankton to salmon. Then later, from spawning salmon to hungry bald eagles and black bears. The nutrients first produced by descending rainfall return to the forest—as foraging eagles and bears drag dead salmon from the creeks’ gravel bars into the adjacent forest. Where, in time, the nutrients ascend almost 100 metres skyward—to the tops of the region’s towering redcedars, Sitka spruce and Douglas-firs. And the natural rainforest cycle is completed. As the Nuu-chah-nalth like to say: “Everything is one.” Or as Osborne says, “Stick your finger into the ground here anywhere, anytime. An inch

The Wickaninnish Inn is located in a prime storm-watching area.



IF YOU GO

BEST STORM WALKS

- The southern end of Wickaninnish Beach receives some of the largest surf in Pacific Rim National Park. Incoming waves get trapped in the surge channel at Quisitis Point, located south of the Kwisitis Visitor Centre, then shoot skyward in thunderous aerial explosions.
- Ucluelet’s spectacular Lighthouse Loop Trail follows two kilometres of ocean-side cliffs—with clanging bell-buoys offshore and the Amphitrite Lighthouse nearby.
- The one kilometre Schooner Cove Trail leads through dense rainforest to offshore islands—accessible at low tide—and mist-filled beach walks.

BEST WINTER SURFING

A half-dozen Tofino surf shops provide rental gear for the intrepid. Twenty-four year-old Adam Tory, a local surfing expert, reports Chesterman Beach is his favourite with rideable storm waves reaching five to six metres. And during high-wind days, numerous

kite-surfers use adjacent Cox Bay for their furious tacking amid winter’s frequent southeast gales.

IF THE WEATHER’S GOOD

A half-dozen Tofino boat operators offer whale- and bear-watching charters—both offshore to Clayoquot Sound, and into the sheltered waters of Fortune and Tofino channels.

Some of these boats—and **Tofino Airlines** float-planes—provide daytrips to Hot Springs Cove where a series of hot oceanside pools flow into the sea.

Flight-seeing charters can be arranged to view nearby 440-metre Della Falls, one of the highest waterfalls in North America, and get an overview of the rugged, island-dotted west coast of Vancouver Island.

With a dozen kayak rental/kayak touring possibilities in Tofino and Ucluelet, there are terrific sea-kayaking opportunities amid the scores of offshore islands and islets in Barkley Sound’s Broken Islands Group.

A number of fishing charters provide daytrips for Pacific Ocean salmon and halibut.

EAT

- **Shelter**, with its timbered design, busy lounge and big fireplace, is a local favourite, serving everything from burgers to Thai coconut curry. shelterrestaurant.com
- **RedCan Gourmet** has superb take-out picnic lunches. redcangourmet.com

STAY

During the late autumn/early winter storm-watching season, there are a number of accommodation choices, both in Tofino and along the three-kilometre stretch of beaches and headlands between the village and Pacific Rim National Park. But the standout is **Wickaninnish Inn**, with its elegant Pointe Restaurant and 75 deluxe rooms overlooking Chesterman Beach’s waves and storm surf. wickinn.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Read about the region’s natural history in *Chasing Clayoquot*, David Pitt-Brooke, Raincoast, 2010
- Tourism Tofino: tourismtofino.com

down, it’s wet.”

Charles McDiarmid spent his youth in Tofino where his father was the town’s physician. He recalls Christmas shindigs in the family’s rustic cabin near today’s Wickaninnish Inn where everyone would gather and hope for a raging winter storm. When one hit, they’d head outdoors to the forested promontory above Chesterman Beach and watch massive Pacific waves roll over the offshore rocks, bearding them with white sea-foam, then exploding against the 15-metre-high bluff where they sat. First, a visceral *Kaa-Boom!* as water hits bedrock. Then icy, airborne salt spray and laughter. Then excitement about the next big wave. “Storms, wind, waves,” says McDiarmid, searching for a word to express the ineffable, “it’s... it’s... it’s *magical!*” In time, his father bought the promontory. And discussions began—based on the famous *Field of Dreams* dictum “Build It And They Will Come”—about constructing an oceanside hotel there. Twenty years ago, McDiarmid, as managing director, opened The Wickaninnish Inn on the precise site

where the family had sat years before. Today, The Wick—as it’s popularly known—is famous, widely considered one of the premier adventure resorts on the planet. The old dictum proved correct.

“What’s lost in urban living,” say McDiarmid, as lingering storm waves roll ashore in the darkness beyond the Inn’s windows, “is that natural forces put life in perspective. Urban people forget these things. They’re focused on tasks and plans. You walk on a stormy beach—rain in your face, the sound of big surf, the smell of the sea—and your senses become alive again. You leave the mundane. It’s good for your soul.”

WHAT’S GOOD FOR Sean Porter’s soul is agreeing—as he has for over 20 years—to his wife’s early morning requests that, despite the wind and the power outage and fallen branches on the roads outside, he join her in beachcombing for the exquisite and increasingly rare Japanese glass floats that big Pacific storms can still, on occasion, produce. As a pilot familiar

with weather protocols, he’ll check the latest transmissions from the La Perouse Buoy, one of 16 weather buoys located off Vancouver Island, to get updates on local wave heights and wind speeds. He’ll also check tide tables. Then at dawn, the two will head out to do what his Tofino in-laws have done for three generations. They scour the shoreline littoral where big, storm-propelled driftwood logs are heaped in Pick-Up-Sticks jumbles.

Fifty years ago—after a Maritime Bomb had struck—there might be a few dozen Japanese glass bouys lying on the beaches south of Tofino amid kelp and ocean flotsam. In 2015, they found just two. Most are green and translucent, the colour of old Coke bottles. Some are the size of baseballs. Some the size of beach balls. And the floats used for octopus-nets are shaped like rolling pins. Over the years, they’ve collected 100—in all sizes and shapes and colours. These glass visitors have, they know, ridden the Japanese Current for years on their transit of the Pacific, and are gem-like mementos of another

culture and—increasingly nowadays—of a time before glass was replaced by plastic.

BY THE TIME the Porters return home later those mornings, the power in Tofino has been restored. Carver Joe Martin has stoked the fire—just as his predecessors have done for millennia—in preparation for another day of turning rainforest cedar into Nuu-chah-nulth art. Josie Osborne stops, coffee in hand, on her way to the Mayor’s Office to speculate with muffin-eating friends how soon the west winds will shred the clouds and reveal new December snowfall on the summits beyond Meares Island. Charles McDiarmid is fielding a question from the Wick’s clients about the best vantage points for storm-watchers. And late-arriving surfers stand amid their aging Westfalia vans at the Chesterman Beach parking lot, wrestling with cold neoprene in order to indulge in the six-metre waves half-visible through the shoreline pines. A bald eagle passes, riding the onshore breeze. But no one notices. Another winter storm has come, and soon will be gone. 🌩