

Every winter, lovers of outdoor drama and indoor comfort flock to Tofino, on the west coast of Canada's Vancouver Island.

wet *and* wild

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Visitors who come when days are short and the southeasterlies blow find extra thrills in crashing surf and pelting rain.

here on Vancouver Island’s pristine west coast, winter draws avid seekers of something most of us try to avoid: bad weather. And with seasonal patterns stoking a steady parade of low-pressure fronts, storm chasers rarely have long to wait.

Like 19th-century Romantics, they feel exalted by the primordial power of wind and waves. (Unlike 19th-century Romantics, they wear advanced rain gear.) Here on the continent’s edge, they contemplate majestic swells, perhaps born in a

tempest on the far side of the Pacific. They take long walks, measured in breaths of damp, tangy air. If this seems eccentric, consider that the ocean moderates winter temperatures and you’re never far from a blazing fireplace. Absent rogue waves and slippery slopes, even a blustery day can be delightful. With all that in mind, I decide to join the storm chasers this year.

The main town, Tofino, straddles the tip of a peninsula on this 280-mile-long island off mainland British Columbia. As the “Pacific Terminus,

Trans-Canada Highway” sign attests, this is the end of the road. Once the main tourists here were whales, especially the migrating grays that stream past in spring and fall. But with its abundance of natural beauty and outdoor recreation, Tofino couldn’t stay undiscovered. It’s the main base for exploring the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, almost 900,000 acres of dense forest, deep inlets, and scattered First Nation settlements. To the south stretch miles of beach. No wonder this remote village of around 1,700 swells

to more than 20,000 on a busy summer day.

But in winter, Tofino again becomes a little outpost of mellow individualists, from aging hippies to ardent environmentalists to surfers, who have good reason to like the season. “This is when the waves are best and our classes are smaller,” says Krissy Montgomery of Surf Sister, a surfing school with an all-female staff. “The Tofino coast has great water access and the best surf for beginners.” After dry-land

Winter attracts surfers from all over. Pacific storms thousands of miles away generate waves that end their journey here. At low tide, Tofino’s beaches become broad, glistening avenues perfect for strolling.



instruction, she guides me into the churning breakers. Leashed to a 9-foot longboard, I quickly discover two things: A full wet suit renders

the water surprisingly comfortable—refreshing rather than frigid. And it gives me the sleekness of a seal but none of the grace, making it doubly hard to “pop up” and stand on the moving board. Still, it’s a great excuse to get intimate with the ocean. Later a local surfer tells me, “Surfing is like a boxing match with nature.” I may





storm chasing

Visit hullobc.com and tourismtofino.com. B.C. Ferry and air carriers serve Nanaimo, a 2½-hour drive from Tofino. Orca Airways flies from Vancouver to Tofino; 888/359-6722 or fyorcaair.com. Lodging: The Wickaninnish Inn (from \$799 Canadian for a two-night stay); 800/333-4604 or wickinn.com. Long Beach Lodge (from \$199 Canadian) 877/844-7873 or longbeachlodgeresort.com. Pacific Sands Beach Resort (from \$170 Canadian); 800/565-2322 or pacificsands.com. To overnight at Hot Springs Cove, stay at The Innchanter (from \$120 Canadian); 250/670-1149 or innchanter.com.

Tofino, I enjoy sampling trails that lead from near-empty parking lots through forests dripping with moisture to beaches where breakers come in endless, echoing salvos.

Those who like to view nature from the lap of luxury have a choice of beachfront resorts. The top-rated Wickaninnish Inn was the first to spark off-season interest. “We designed this to be the best place to watch storms between Mexico and Alaska,” says manager Charles McDiarmid. “The Wick” provides slickers and boots for guests, and pipes surf sounds into its window-wrapped dining room. Its artful

regional cuisine and decor set a high standard for other upscale hideaways, such as the cozily elegant Long Beach Lodge Resort and family-friendly Pacific Sands Beach Resort.

Most area accommodations offer packages that cater to storm buffs. But many would come regardless, to revel in the season’s stirring spectacle. “We aim to bring the outside in,” Charles says. He’s referring to design elements, not the bald eagle I watch as it flies straight for my open balcony door. At the last minute it swoops up, out of sight—a sharp reminder that this verdant coast may be mild, but it’s also unforgettably wild. 🌩

have lost the first round, but I can’t wait to get back in the ring.

The bracing air whets the appetite, and for its size Tofino offers remarkably good dining, at restaurants such as Raincoast Café, Shelter, and Schooner. The quirkiest must be SoBo, which serves smoked-fish chowder and other savory fare from a purple catering truck anchored at the Tofino Botanical Garden. In this 12-acre waterfront garden, whimsy flourishes. Along its winding paths I find sculptures, a hobbit-style gazebo, and plots dedicated to four groups of local



In The Wickaninnish Inn’s coffee bar (top), guests fuel up to explore the outdoors—or simply to marvel at it while cocooned inside. The lodge’s dining room serves dishes such as this medley of West Coast seafood with local vegetables in a flavorful broth.

settlers: First Nation peoples, Europeans, Japanese fishermen, and (marked by a gaudy, painted van) hippies.

I kayak across Browning Pass to Meares Island. It’s a short trip for a memorable walk among the ancient cedars and spruce that cloak this misty preserve, rallying point for a landmark 1984 anti-logging protest. The next day, for another Edenic

experience, I head northwest to Hot Springs Cove (reachable only by boat or floatplane). A 1.2-mile-long boardwalk leads to a secluded beach, where I soak like a happy clam in rock-bound thermal pools. Back in

