

Things To Do in Tofino, Canada's Storm-Watching Capital

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Most hotel closets are blank slates, save for a luxurious bathrobe or two. But inside the one in my room at the [Wickaninnish Inn](#) was a heavy-duty orange raincoat and pair of equally sturdy black rain pants. There was also a small sign, inside a wooden frame, telling me to contact reception with my rubber boot size to have a pair delivered.

“After all, on the true West Coast,” the sign gently confided, “there is no such thing as bad weather, just poor clothing choices.”

On my bed, a card from housekeeping dated March 11, 2020, wished me a good night and pleasant dreams, and provided the weather forecast and tide schedule for the next day. Sunrise would be at 7:45 a.m., sunset at 7:22 p.m. and in between, temperatures would climb to 46 Fahrenheit. The tides would unfold like this: High at 2:37 a.m., low at 8:48 a.m., high at 2:53 p.m. and low at 9:03 p.m. At the bottom of the card were six weather icons — sun, wind, clouds, rain, fog and snow. I remember being somewhat devastated to see that the one for a sunny day had been highlighted in neon yellow.

Out of the closet & into the COVID storm



Storm watching from Wickaninnish Inn, with views of Lennard Island Lighthouse (credit: Jeremy Koreski)

I had journeyed to [Tofino](#), on the western coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, for storm-watching season. And I was at the [Wick](#), a Relais & Châteaux property on the Pacific Ocean, because it has been working steadfastly since 1996 to entice people to travel here between November and March to embrace “gale force winds, giant swells and lashing waves.”

I had been fantasizing about strolling Chesterman Beach fighting wind and rain, hanging the “Watching the waves from my window, please come back later sign” on my door knob, and then snuggling up in an iconic Hudson’s Bay blanket (also found in the closet) by my fireplace or on my private deck to watch 20-foot waves roll in.



Wickaninnish Inn Queen Deluxe Room (credit: Wickaninnish Inn)

But Mother Nature had something else in mind. As the sunny icon foretold, there was no winter storm brewing — just a little wind and lots of loveliness. I didn't realize it yet, but a global storm was brewing. In just one week, the Wick would shut down to grapple with Covid-19, and the border between the United States and Canada would close to nonessential travel.

Now, I will forever remember Tofino as the place I was when the pandemic became real. It's where I was when Tom Hanks revealed he and Rita Wilson had COVID, the NBA suspended its season, my Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau announced his wife Sophie had tested positive, and I learned my children's schools wouldn't reopen after March break.

Coastal getaway with a resident carver



Visiting with artist George Yearsley at the Wickaninnish Inn Henry Nolla Carving Shed is one of the many things to do in Tofino (Credit: Jennifer Bain)

I tried to make sense of these things as I put on that orange raincoat and my new purple Xtratuf ankle deck boots and made my way to Chesterman Beach at sunrise two days in a row. En route, I passed a sign that warned: “Danger: The nearby rocks and surrounding beaches are subject to EXCEPTIONAL tidal surges!” I sloshed around the wet beach and barnacle-crusted rocks at low tide, kicked at driftwood and bull kelp, and glowered, foolishly, at blue skies.

I chatted with Feather George (George Yearsley), the Wick’s resident carver, in Henry Nolla’s Carving Shed, where the beach meets forest. Along the shore, I looked for sandpipers, plovers and whimbrels.

And, I feasted on sunchoke gnocchi and roast chicken with watercress and black garlic sauce at the Wick’s rusticly elegant Pointe Restaurant, not knowing it would be my last restaurant meal for months.

Feast on outdoor adventurers and local food



Wickaninnish Inn owner and managing director Charles McDiarmid, 63, surfs several times a week (credit: Michael Becker)

Tofino — population 2,000, give or take seasonal fluctuations — is much more than just a winter storm-watching mecca. It offers surfing, ocean kayaking, whale watching, birdwatching, hiking and salmon fishing.

In addition to luring outdoor adventurers, Tofino satiates culinary travelers. Texan-Tofitian chef Lisa Ahier's famous smoked salmon chowder at SoBo (short for "sophisticated bohemian") demands attention. When I lunched there, Ahier was keeping mum about the fact she would soon appear on a TV show called *Dragons' Den* and land a deal to help fund a frozen chowder sideline.



Don't miss checking out Tofino's food scene. (all photos credit: Jennifer Bain)

Other delicious finds: the renowned Tacofino food truck, with its Baja-style fish tacos and chocolate diablo cookies; the artful poke bowl at Shed; and fork-tender braised beef chuck flat topped with crispy onions at Shelter. Pair them with old growth cedar gin at Tofino Distillery, kelp stout at Tofino Brewing Co. or a Dark and Stormy cocktail at 1909 Kitchen, while praying for an actual storm.

A memorial bench adorned with a steel orca, located by the town docks, has an aging sign declaring it the Pacific terminus of the Trans-Canada Highway. The real "Mile 0" sign is in Victoria. Decades ago, Tofino lost the battle to have the national highway stretch this far north on Vancouver Island. But, the sign defiantly remains.

Soaking in one of Tofino's highlights



Hot Springs Cove boardwalk through the rain forest. (credit: Jennifer Bain)

Tofino can, however, rightfully boast that it's in the province's rare, coastal temperate rainforest. Temperate rainforests aren't as well known as the warm, tropical rainforests found close to the equator, but both kinds have an abundance of rain that creates lush forest canopies.

So, while mourning the powerful storm that was not to be, there were plenty of things to do in Tofino. I treasured a day-long outing through the forest to [Hot Springs Cove](#), the highlight of the other half of my visit while staying at the [Tofino Resort + Marina](#), which has a Marine Adventure Centre. The centre arranged to ferry me 30 nautical miles northwest of town — past sea otters, harbour seals, sea lions, grey whales and orcas — to a natural hot spring.



Hot Springs Cove big tree along boardwalk (credit: Jennifer Bain)

From a small wilderness dock, I meandered down a 1.2-mile boardwalk in Maquinna Marine Provincial Park. Here, I communed with majestic old growth trees, their trunks too large to hug, their ancient branches laden with lichen. At the hot spring, located at the mouth of a bay, water cascaded down a waterfall to a series of treacherous rocky pools. Each pool progressively cooled as the water moved from shore towards the ocean.

I read up on the area's geography to visualize the way the hot spring was created by surface water flowing through a "fault" to a depth of three miles, where it was geothermally heated to 228 Fahrenheit before hydrostatic pressure forced it back to the surface and discharged it through the fractured rock at 122 Fahrenheit.

There, among astounding trees and geothermal wonders, with the thrill of that embarrassment of whales still fresh, I donned a bathing suit instead of raingear, gratefully absorbed the warmth of the March sunshine and was relieved to be wet at last, no storm needed.



Soaking in Hot Springs Cove is one of the numerous outdoor adventures and things to do in Tofino (credit: Jennifer Bain)

What's appealing to the over-50 luxury traveler?

The Wickaninnish Inn, a Relais & Châteaux property, in Tofino with a fine-dining restaurant and award-winning spa, is a luxurious base to explore Pacific Rim National Park and Clayoquot Sound. Sculptures and local art figure prominently throughout the inn.

Tofino Resort + Marina is a newly renovated 63-room hotel and marina with a pub and restaurant located in the heart of Tofino. Its Tofino Adventure Centre offers activities including whale watching, bear watching, surfing, paddleboarding, fishing and on hot springs outings.

Take note

Hot Springs Cove has steep cliffs, slippery surface and wave hazards.

If you come for storm watching, be sure to stay as long as possible as the weather is unpredictable.

You can usually get to Tofino by small plane from Vancouver, Victoria and Nanaimo, or on charter flights from Seattle. The weather is unpredictable.

I was taken from Nanaimo to Tofino and back by Pacific Rim Navigators, a private vehicle and shuttle service. If time allows, ask to stop at Cathedral Grove, a stunning forest of Douglas-fir trees within MacMillan Provincial Park.

A COVID-19 update: What you need to know

Take note of temporary closures, travel advisories and other restrictions put in place because of the pandemic.

The Wickaninnish Inn is temporarily closed because of the government's request to significantly reduce social interactions and travel. It is accepting future reservations from areas allowing non-essential travel (photo ID required), and hopes to welcome back guests from outside of Canada when the government rules change.

The Tofino Resort + Marina is open and has its safety protocols outlined [here](#).

Read about British Columbia's restrictions [here](#).

Read about Canada's COVID-19 restrictions [here](#).

IF YOU GO

- [Wickaninnish Inn](#)
 - [Tourism Tofino](#)
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Disclosure: The author was hosted by Destination British Columbia, Tourism Tofino, the Wickaninnish Inn, and Tofino Resort + Marina.

Read more

- [A Perfect Weekend in Tofino, BC](#)
 - [Nature Beckons at Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Spa Resort on Vancouver Island](#)
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So Many Things To Do in Tofino: Canada's Storm- Watching Capital



