

SCOUTING FOR



BY LOUISE BOURBONNAIS

Vancouver Island

BRITISH COLUMBIA'S PACIFIC COAST

Paradise. Perfection. Postcard picturesque. Until I landed on Vancouver Island, I never believed in these P words thrown around in tourist brochures like tired clichés. But now, along with the Coho salmon and other Pacific coast delicacies, I must eat my words.

“The mountains or the sea?” asks my hydroplane pilot, standing by idly and fixing his gaze on my camera, while I struggle to hoist myself into his tiny plane. “If I were you, I’d choose the ocean. The whales are migrating now.”

His suggestion is enticing, but with only 30 precious airborne minutes to capture all of this island’s spectacular panoramas of sea and mountains, I must be practical. Making the most of this pitifully short flight, I insist on dividing the time between soaring over the landscape of lush green mountain summits and the Pacific coast fringed with a multitude of wild islands.

The pilot, who is also my guide, is a native of the Okanagan Valley nestled between the Coastal chain and the Rockies. Although he flies his air taxi over this island nearly every day, a huge smile lights his face as soon as the plane banks towards the magnificent white sands of Long Beach in Vancouver Island National Park. This 11-kilometre-long crescent is great

for clam digging, strolling and beachcombing for treasures washed up all the way from Japan! From the air, Tofino, on Vancouver Island’s wild west coast, seems completely isolated from the rest of the world. No wonder they call it the “Wild Coast.”

The mountains of Clayoquot Sound, towering majestically behind the village, thrill me. The green is so intense that a mere glance is enough to invigorate me. Nearby is the 105-kilometre-long Pacific Rim National Park, where the word nature takes on a “super” natural meaning. Dense forests, bridges of stone sculpted by the wild winds and weather, impressive wildlife and extraordinary hikes along the West Coast Trail, which winds towards sea caves with their gaping mouths swallowing the waves. Gazing down below makes me long to be on the ground, exploring these rugged surf-carved caverns and tidal pools and inhaling the fresh salt air. But when my guide explains that the route is extremely difficult, that the trail is treacherous and

abrupt; that certain sections of it are not passable at low tide—I bless his little plane for carrying us above it all.

There’s so much to see! I can’t dwell for too many minutes on the gorgeous white sugar sands of Long Beach. Nor can I lose myself in contemplation of the peaceful bays and the maze of islands scattered all along the coast of Tofino.

The pilot, accustomed to transporting tourists to the bay of Clayoquot Sound or the Vargas Islands, isn’t surprised when I bargain for more air time. He is only too delighted to extend my pleasure ride—in exchange for a few more dollars.

“There they are!” he exclaims, pointing out the whales breaching down below us. He seems to have a penchant for flying at low altitude, angling the plane at 45 degrees so that I can gape at these giants of the sea close up, and capture some postcard perfect shots.

...WHERE THE WORD NATURE TAKES ON A "SUPER" NATURAL MEANING. DENSE FORESTS, BRIDGES OF STONE SCULPTED BY THE WILD WINDS AND WEATHER, IMPRESSIVE WILDLIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY HIKES ...



© Tofino, Vancouver Island, Tourism British Columbia



© The Skeena of VIA Rail, Tourism British Columbia



Tofino, Vancouver Island

It is truly an impressive show. Every year a colony of 22,000 gray whales migrates north from Mexico's Baja peninsula to the Arctic Ocean, passing by Alaska and the Bering Sea. Between March and May you can spot their parade from Tofino and Ucluelet. Known for their acrobatic talents, gray whales are very demonstrative and a delight to behold.

As I peer through my viewfinder, lost in rapture scanning the whales below, the pilot tries to draw my attention to the colours lighting up the sky. "It will soon be sunset. You're incredibly lucky. Long Beach is usually shrouded in fog. But today is clear. You'll see. You won't believe it. You'll be dying to return."

Just south of Long Beach, sprinkled in Barkley Sound along the entrance to Barkley Bay is a 100-island archipelago called the Broken Islands. The landscapes are breathtaking. And the shores can be perilous for ships. Divers flock to explore the many sunken vessels, hoping to find the fabulous treasures said to be still hidden here.

Returning to Tofino as sunset fades into night, I remark on the very strong Amerindian presence here. For the inhabitants, sunrise and sunset are the spectacles that frame each day. Today they remark on the beauty of the fogless sunset.

In the village of Tofino, the art gallery exhibits diverse sculptures by various local Amerindian artists. Each of the works is accompanied by a legend and its meaning.

Besides the many whale-watching excursions, Tofino's organized tourist attractions may be few, yet its restaurants are excellent. The highly reputed Wickaninnish Inn offers an exceptional cuisine featuring the staple of the region—the famous Pacific salmon.

Tofino, now celebrated as a whale-watching destination extraordinaire, annually attracts thousands of tourists ready to travel far to gape at these magnificent creatures. Tofino's principal operator and a pioneer in sea excursions, Jamie's Whaling Station, operates a fleet of seven boats, from a small Zodiac to a large 40-passenger boat. The company offers several options, including a land-sea combo featuring bear observation and whale-watching. And what's more, the company offers its clients a formal guarantee they will see whales.

As impressive as these northern whale migrations are, you can observe these sea giants throughout the summer and even into November. Every year during their migrations north, certain whales leave the group to take up seasonal residence in Barkley Sound and Clayoquot Sound near Tofino. These cold waters and bays abundant in enticing seafood make an excellent feeding ground for the whales. And whales need a lot of food! The 14-metre-long adult gray whale weighs 40 tonnes and consumes two tonnes of crabs, clams, shrimp and krill a day. (On its journey south, it does not feed and it loses approximately one-third of its weight.) Many whales remain in the region to feed until November, allowing whale-watchers a prolonged

period of observation. These wayward cetaceans then rejoin the migrating group as they make their way south, reaching Mexico by late December to mate and reproduce. In early January the males begin their voyage north, leaving the gestating females to give birth in the warm lagoons.

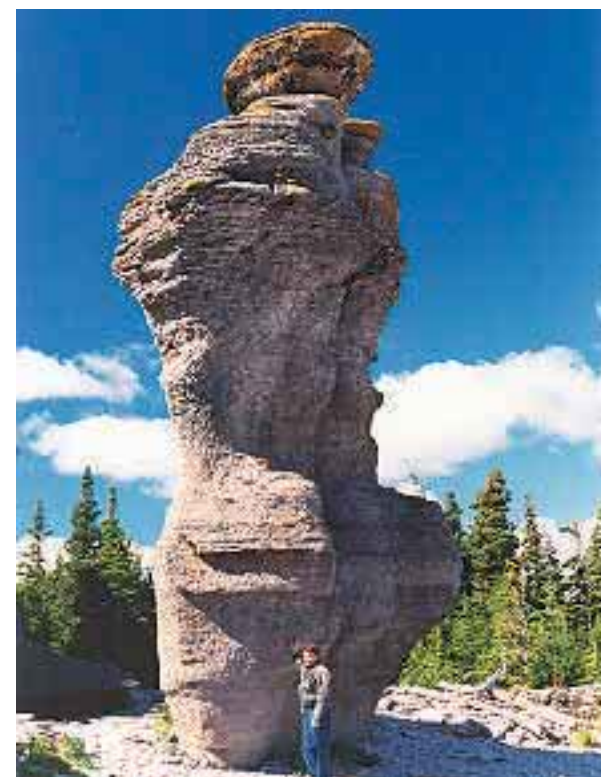
Beyond Tofino, Vancouver Island also has great whale-watching opportunities at the extreme northeastern end of the island, at Telegraph Cove near Port Hardy where cruises depart for the Queen Charlotte and Prince Rupert Islands. Here is a large concentration of orcas, or killer whales. This formidable giant of the sea is smaller than the gray whale, averaging only eight tonnes. Near Prince Rupert Island, and all along British Columbia's north coast, resides one of the Pacific's largest populations of humpback whales. The best season for observation is between August and October. From Prince Rupert you can opt for a rail excursion aboard VIA Rail's The Skeena to Prince George, then go on to Jasper in the heart of the Rockies.

If you prefer, from Tofino you can traverse Vancouver Island to the east, to catch one of the many ferries running daily between Nanaimo and Victoria across the Georgia Strait to the mainland. On your way, be sure to stop on the road east of Port Alberni to see the gigantic Pacific Coast conifers at Cathedral Grove in MacMillan Provincial Park. These Douglas firs, red cedars and Sitka spruces can be 800 years old and over 100 metres high.

Québec's whale route

IN THE GULF OF THE ST. LAWRENCE

Sensational whale-watching abounds along Québec's north coast, from Tadoussac to Blanc-Sablon, in the Manicouagan and Duplessis regions. You can spy these leviathans by sea and from land along the Whale Route that skirts Québec's Highway 132. From June to October the shallow waters at the confluence of the Saguenay and St. Lawrence, and the St. Lawrence Gulf, practically swarm with 13 species of marine mammals. From the gigantic blue whale to the fragile white beluga (the Arctic porpoise), Québec's waters are migratory highways for minke, fin, killer whales and playful porpoises and dolphins. After the whales have migrated north, the St. Lawrence entices them to stay all summer long with a veritable supermarket of whale food. The most delectable commodity is the krill. Whales scoop up these tiny shrimp-like creatures by the ton.



© Monclith at Mingan, Association touristique régionale de Duplessis



© Harrington Harbour, Association touristique régionale de Duplessis



© Croisières AML

TADOUSSAC

Tadoussac is not only postcard scenic but interesting historically as the site of Canada's first trading post, established in 1600, and the oldest chapel in North America, built in 1747. Now the trade is in whale-watching, and various excursions draw tourists from around the world during the summer season. Croisières AML cruises depart from Tadoussac at the mouth of the Saguenay, and Baie-Sainte-Catherine, at the junction of the tourist regions of Charlevoix and Québec's North Shore. Some cruise boats even accommodate up to 600 passengers with all the amenities and comforts.

Before embarking on an excursion, visit Tadoussac's Interpretation Centre for Marine Mammals (CIMM). You'll enjoy exhibits and documentaries on these fascinating endangered mammals—their biology, behaviour and habitats—and eavesdrop on broadcasts of whale calls from beneath the Saguenay. Landlubbers, don't worry if you don't have your sea legs; there are many land-based whale-watching opportunities. In Manicouagan there are several sites which are ideal for whale-watching. Grandes-Bergeronnes and Cap-de-Bon-Désir are superb places to observe whales from the coastline.

MINGAN

Québec's Côte Nord, the north shore of the St. Lawrence, is sparsely populated and most haunting. Vistas of misty beaches, colourful clapboard fishing villages, bogs, forests and foaming waterfalls are never far from Highway 138, which winds through Sept Îles to the Mingan Archipelago, Havre-Saint-Pierre, and on to Natashquan, where the roads ends. If you dream of whale-watching off the beaten tourist track, communing close-up with these mysterious mammals, then head to Longe-Pointe-de-Mingan in the Duplessis region. Mingan's eerie landscape of sea-beaten monoliths evokes all the mystical associations with whales throughout ancient history. Cross your fingers to see a giant blue or amazing sperm whale flashing its stupefying tail as it dives...

At the Mingan Islands Research Station you can visit the Interpretation Centre, take a guided tour of the station with the marine biologists, and even join them in a day-long scientific excursion. It's not exactly a luxury boat ride, but it is a fascinating eight-hour learning experience.

Farther out in the Gulf, in the Mingan region and Anticosti Island in the St. Lawrence Estuary, dwells a large

population of blue whales, the largest living creature on the planet. Up to 30 metres long, this mammoth can weigh 100 tonnes, and when it blows watch for a spout up to 12 metres high. The blue whale is a very rare species and it's quite a privilege to see one. Sightings are not guaranteed, but even if you miss this veritable titan of the seas during your excursion, other gargantuan spectacles are always on the program. During September visitors are especially impressed to watch the whales preparing for their southern migrations to the warm Caribbean waters to mate. Males unabashedly show off with acrobatic jumps, flips and songs—anything they can do to catch the attention of the females, who must select their mates once they arrive in warmer waters. The confetti of sea birds accompanying this mating parade adds brilliant luminosity to the spectacle.

The archipelago region offers a spectacularly scenic setting for a myriad of adventure tourism and prime hunting and fishing experiences. The hundreds of islands and islets of the reserve of the Parks Canada Mingan Archipelago Reserve are in themselves worth the trip. This fantasy landscape of sea and mysterious wind-carved stone pillars will haunt you forever.



© Right whale, Tourism New Brunswick



© Hopewell Rocks, Tourism New Brunswick



© Bay of Fundy, Tourism New Brunswick



© Grand Manan Island, Tourism New Brunswick

NEW BRUNSWICK'S

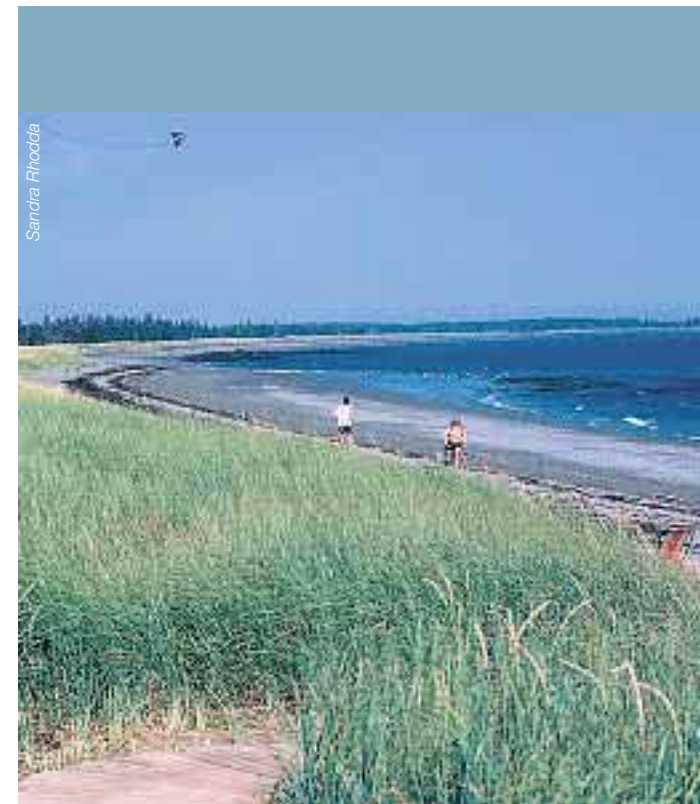
Bay of Fundy

The most impressive whale-watching site in Eastern Canada is in a protected natural site of astonishing seascapes. The Bay of Fundy is renowned for the highest tides in the world—something to impress even the most blasé “been there, done that” traveller. The 14-metre-high tides and the grottoes are extraordinary, yet in my opinion, they’re nothing to rival the mystical boulders of Hopewell Rock, which are worth the detour in themselves. Gigantic monoliths sculpted by the tides, they show the effects of the tremendous forces of nature. At high tide, these stone pillars with their green carpeted peaks are transformed into islands. Admire them up close aboard a kayak or with a stroll along the shore at low tide.

Between June and September a variety of sea excursions depart from St. Andrews, a tiny coastal village on the Bay of Fundy offering some 70 different package tours. You can scout for 15 different species of cetaceans aboard sea kayak, Zodiac, traditional boat or catamaran. And to increase your whale count, consider a day-long excursion aboard the schooner

D’Sonoqua with a marine biologist who will reveal all the secrets of these extraordinary leviathans. You might be lucky enough to spot the rare North Atlantic right whale that frequents the Bay of Fundy.

Your sojourn in the Bay of Fundy region is hardly complete without a jaunt to Grand Manan Island, the Fundy isle that has attracted passionate birdwatchers and ornithologists, including an awed John James Audubon, for nearly 200 years. Tens of thousands of gulls and songbirds nest here, along with Arctic terns, gannets, black guillemots and razorbills. Over 245 bird species have been sighted on this musical island. Drive along the Fundy Trail to spy whales feeding along the coast, and to inhale the invigorating salt sea spray. Then stop at Fundy National Park at Alma long enough to enjoy a hike or bicycle ride. The lazier among you might prefer to beachcomb along the rugged coastline or frolic in the sand dunes. The more ambitious can stretch their legs and absorb some local history with a walking tour of the old Loyalist seaport of St. John, dating from the 1780s. And certainly every visitor to the area must savour one of the famous local lobster dinners—only one of the many delicious ways to meet the locals!



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BRITISH COLUMBIA

Ferry service between Vancouver and Vancouver Island: **BC FERRIES**, (250) 386-3431, www.bcferries.bc.ca.

TOFINO: The best excursions for observing gray whales and bears, Jamie's Whaling Station, 1 800 667-9913, www.jamies.com.

Best hotel in the region: **WICKANINNISH INN**, 1 800 333-4604, www.wickinn.com.

TELEGRAPH COVE: Best excursion for observing killer whales: Stubbs Island Charters, hydrophones are available for listening to the whale songs. You can also combine whale-watching with observation of grizzly bears, 1 800 665-3066, www.stubbs-island.com.

BRITISH COLUMBIA TOURIST OFFICE: 1 800 HELLO BC, www.hellobc.com.

VIA Rail Service The Skeena, 1 888 VIA-RAIL, www.viarail.ca.

**QUÉBEC / CHARLEVOIX AND CÔTE-NORD**

AML CRUISES: 1 800 563-4643 www.croisieresaml.com.

DUFOUR GROUP CRUISES: 1 800 463-5250, www.groupefour.com.

INTERPRETATION CENTRE FOR MARINE MAMMALS: www.baleinesendirect.net.

MANICOUAGAN TOURIST ASSOCIATION: 1 888 463-5319, www.tourismecote-nord.com.

CHARLEVOIX REGIONAL TOURIST OFFICE: 1 800 667-2276, www.tourisme-charlevoix.com.

Excursion: **MINGAN ISLAND CETACEAN STUDY**, www.rorqual.com.

MINGAN ARCHIPELAGO NATIONAL PARK NATURE RESERVE: 1 800 463-6769, www.parcscanada.gc.ca.

MINGAN ARCHIPELAGO CRUISES: 1 866 538-2865

DUPLESSIS REGIONAL TOURIST OFFICE: 1 888 463-0808, www.tourismecote-nord.com.

QUÉBEC TOURISM: 1 877 BONJOUR (1 877 266-5687) www.bonjourquebec.com.

NEW BRUNSWICK / BAY OF FUNDY

MONCTON TRAIN station about a one-hour drive from the Fundy coast, 1 888 VIA-RAIL, www.viarail.ca.

Whale-watching excursion: **FUNDY TIDE RUNNERS**, www.fundytiderunners.com.

Best hotel in the region: **THE FAIRMONT ALGONQUIN**, St. Andrews, 1 800 441-1414, www.fairmont.com/Algonquin.

GRAND MANAN TOURISM: www.grandmananb.com.

NEW BRUNSWICK TOURIST OFFICE: 1 800 561-0123, www.tourismenouveau-brunswick.ca.



Brian Atkinson

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