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UNTAMED IN UCLUELET

By Anne Z. Cooke Photos by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

UCLULET, Canada- When you're a gypsy by choice, ever searching for new horizons, seeing it all seems possible. Until last August, that is, when I discovered that however foreign Canada may seem, Vancouver is practically next door. Early-morning flights from Los Angeles and Denver – for example – arrive in B.C.'s capital city, Victoria, around lunch time. Add an hour to rent a car and you're on your way. Give yourself a week and you can tour most of the lower half of the island. Or – shock and awe – spend a four-day weekend in Ucluelet, on the southwest coast (you-CLUE-let). We knew absolutely nothing about the place, but like Timbuktu and Zanzibar (and hot buttered popcorn), the name alone was irresistible.



Islets here, islets there, and everywhere in the Broken Islands, Ucluelet, Vancouver Island, B.C.

At first glance, Ucluelet looks like any other end-of-the-road fishing village. But a walk along the road, past little homes, around the lighthouse and along the Wild Pacific Trail, reveals what may be the Pacific Coast's most spectacular scenery. Residents jogging for exercise take it for granted, breezing past each rocky cove and swirling pool. But newcomers, over-awed by untamed nature, slow down to a crawl. I know I did.

After checking into a unit at the Black Rock Resort, I stepped out on the balcony and putting my feet up on the railing, sat back to watch the tide surge landward. And the longer I sat, the harder it was to look away. The constant swelling of the world's largest ocean, each wave rising, cresting, and rushing onshore over the rocks, made everything else feel small.



A kayakers heaven awaits in Ucluelet Harbor and the Broken Islands, Ucluelet, Vancouver Island, B.C.

That night's meal, a dinner on the outdoor deck at the resort's Fetch Restaurant, was similarly memorable. Whether it was the fresh air, or the fresh halibut and salmon that kept us lingering at the table, it was the sky, pink and gold then fading to twilight, that sticks in my memory. And it was just the beginning. Early the next morning, while the tide was ebbing and kayakers were launching their craft from the pier, we checked into Jamie's Whaling Station, for a coastal cruise and bear watching excursion.

Why so early? When the tide is out, the bears emerge from the forest to look for food in the exposed inter-tidal zone. Digging in tide pools and under rocks and logs, they're dark brown and black coats are easy to spot. So before the sun was over the tree tops, our group of 12 was already beyond the harbor, speeding toward the coastal archipelago

called the Broken Islands.

“Keep an eye out for green swales along the shoreline, open places between the trees,” said our guide and boat Captain, Scott MacDonald, alternately steering and looking through binoculars. “Most are the sites of ancient Indian villages, but a few mark early homesteads. And those huge trees with the clumps at the top? Those are eagles’ nests in 700 to 800 year-old trees. The birds reuse and rebuild the nests every year, which get bigger every century. They can weigh up to a ton.”

Moving into toward shore, MacDonald spotted the first black bear, digging among the rocks. For five minutes we bobbed on the water, watching him move from one log to another. Finally he looked up, sniffed the air, caught our scent and galloped away through the trees.

“I’m glad to see he’s wary,” said MacDonald. “It’s too easy for poachers to move in and get off a shot.” Nearby a harbor seal sunned on a rock, unafraid. Blue herons waded in the shallows. Huge rafts of bull kelp floated by, long green strands buoyant on swollen air pods.

“See those logs washed up on the beach?” asked MacDonald. We’d seen them, giant tree trunks, all about the same length, floating near the shore. “Most of those fell off commercial ships. I built my house out of those things,” he explained. Back in Ucluelet, MacDonald apologized for finding just two bears, and those at a distance. No problem, I told him. The trip itself was the adventure, the dozens of tiny islets, the kelp, the seals and the eagles’ nests, all part of the larger picture.

“But you know,” he added. “The sad thing is that nature tours don’t sell. Nobody signs up just to see nature. You’ve got to show them the big stuff, bears and whales. Once we’re out there, they get it. They see what keeps us coming back. And that’s worth it.”

TRAVEL TIPS: Fly to Vancouver and on to Victoria, at Vancouver Island’s southern tip. Ucluelet is north and west, about three hours by car. Good roads, ample lodging and frequent shopping areas make travel easy. Visitors need a passport to enter Canada, and to re-enter the U.S. For more information, see www.hellobc.com; or to tourismvictoria.com.

Writer-traveler Anne Z. Cooke is currently hatching another British Columbia trip.



Black bears count on a meal at low tide, in the intertidal zone, Broken Islands, near Ucluelet, Vancouver Island, B.C.



Pilot Mike Farrell delivers the mail to Refuge Cove, W. Redonda Isl., near Campbell River, Vancouver Island, B.C.