

GAS STATIONS

Canadians able to pay at the pump again in U.S.

AMBER DAUGHERTY

Canadians who have had difficulty filling up on gas in the United States can rejoice.

A security tool that prompts people to enter their zip code while fuelling up at pay-at-the-pump locations did not previously recognize Canadian postal codes, which include letters as well as numbers.

The feature is part of the Address Verification Service, which ensures the digits match that of the billing address of the credit card being used to pay for the transaction.

MasterCard has rolled out a fix for Canadians. When prompted, Canadians can now enter the three numbers in their postal code, and two zeroes.

So, if your postal code is A2B

3C4, you enter 23400.

But MasterCard cautions there is no guarantee this will work at every gas station. It will only be effective at spots where the pump works in a prepay scenario that requires a zip code to authorize the transaction.

"This tip does not apply to gas stations without the zip code prompt, so consumers should be prepared to pay inside the station if necessary. Since this tip can't be used at 100 per cent of gas stations in the U.S., consumers should consider this an option to try rather than a guaranteed solution," a MasterCard representative said.

"Just as you plan to pack your passport, check the weather and plan your travel budget, keep this tip in mind for when you're driving south of the border."

NATURE

Searching for sea otters by kayak

SUZANNE MORPHET
NUCHATLITZ INLET, B.C.

"Don't leave me," I cried out to my paddling partners while kayaking in Nuchatlitz Inlet, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. "I'm stuck."

I wasn't exaggerating. My kayak was firmly lodged in wide strands of bull kelp, a brown seaweed that forms a thick canopy on the ocean surface and is often referred to as forest. "You could walk on water here," was how David, one of my companions, had put it moments earlier. After rocking my kayak sideways and digging in hard with my paddle, I finally managed to work myself free.

Kelp forests can easily trap kayakers – they've even been known to stop large ships in their tracks – but where there's kelp, there's usually a rich marine life. Fish seek it out for shelter during storms and to escape prey. And sea otters – which I've come in search of – attach themselves to kelp fronds when eating.

I've wanted to view otters in the wild ever since meeting YouTube stars Milo and Nyac at the Vancouver Aquarium 10 years ago. (I was smitten by their whiskered faces, black noses and human-like behaviour – the way they floated while holding "hands.") One of the best places to do so is Nuchatlitz Inlet, where otters have been reproducing successfully after 89 adults were relocated from Alaska in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This part of the coast is about as isolated today as it was in 1778 when Captain James Cook landed here and began trading with aboriginal people for otter skins. The thick fur was so popular in Europe that the small mammals were hunted almost to extinction. While Sheldon, our guide from Spirit of the West Adventures, prepares dinner over a campfire, the rest of us explore Island 44. I'm so bedazzled by the lime green and pink tipped sea anemones in a rocky tidal pool that I don't immediately notice the "raft" of sea otters that has formed in the kelp about 30 metres offshore.



Nuchatlitz Inlet near Vancouver Island offers great opportunities to view sea otters in the wild. NATHALIE CERCLE

IF YOU GO

Spirit of the West Adventures (kayakingtours.com) offers six-day paddling and camping expeditions to Nuchatlitz Inlet. Cost of \$1,295 includes kayak, camping gear and meals. The inlet is protected from the Pacific surf by islands, so novice kayakers are welcome. Trip dates this summer include: July 28 to Aug. 2, Aug. 2 to 7 and Aug. 7 to 12. Tours leave from Gold River, a 350 kilometre drive from Victoria.

When I finally see the jumbled mass, all bobbing on their backs, webbed paws sticking out of the water, I laugh out loud. No wonder they're called the "clowns of the ocean." I grab my binoculars for a better look. I count at least 50, but it's hard to tell with all the commotion. They're grooming, and every so often they shake their heads, much like dogs drying off after a bath.

Suddenly, as if on cue, they all "clap" their front paws and begin to swim away. I wonder if a predator has arrived. Orcas and sea lions can strike from below and bald eagles are known to swoop down and fly off with baby otters. But no threat materializes. Within minutes they're back.

That evening the sky becomes an artist's palette of glorious pink and purple as the sun sets. I can still make out a dark mass on the water when I crawl into my tent

for the night. The next morning the otters are gone. We won't see another large group all week, but often we see individuals swimming alone.

My appetite for otters sated, I'm ready to explore. "Want a little challenge?" asks Sheldon over a breakfast of granola and fruit. Just offshore, waves crash against exposed rocks. Sheldon calls them "boomers." They look dangerous. Further out, the ocean is calm with only gentle swells.

The six of us paddle out, carefully avoiding the boomers. The brute force of the ocean is mesmerizing. I slow down and watch in awe as each wave explodes in a spray of white water against the rocks, then is sucked away, leaving a gaping hole that another wave surges in to fill.

And that's when I get stuck in the kelp. Sheldon tells me to paddle hard. After what seems like many minutes, I'm free again. Further out, we enjoy the roll of the swells coming across the open Pacific Ocean. Our kayaks gently rise and fall. We're far enough out now to get a good look at the forested slopes of Nootka Island and further back, the high, jagged peaks of Vancouver Island.

No wonder the sea otters float on their backs. What a view!

Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer was a guest of Spirit of the West Adventures and they have not reviewed or approved the story.

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