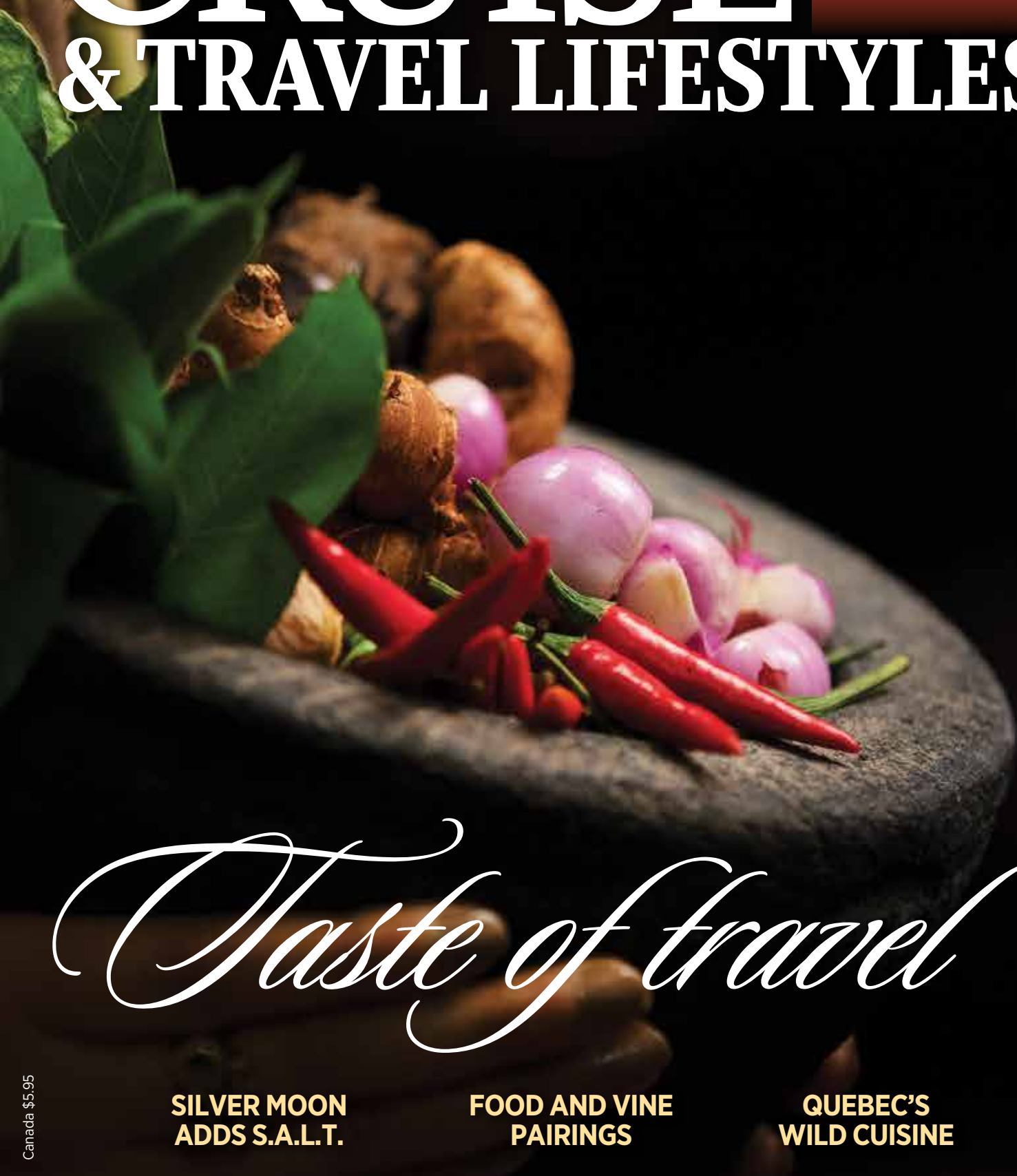


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CRUISE & TRAVEL LIFESTYLES

REBIRTH OF A
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WILD CUISINE

PLUS... CANADA'S RUGGED WEST: TOFINO AND ALBERTA ROCKIES



WILD WEST COAST

SUP, soak, cycle, surf. Tofino is a breathtaking place that has it all.

SUZANNE MORPHET

SWINGING MY BARE FEET over the side of our boat, I'm suddenly struck by how extraordinary this moment is.

Just a couple of hours ago I was in my street clothes amongst the high-rise condos of downtown Vancouver. Now, I'm in a wetsuit near Tofino, on the wild, west coast of Vancouver Island.

Arriving by floatplane on Harbour Air's scheduled service from downtown Vancouver, the single engine Cessna pulled right up to the dock of our hotel, the Tofino Resort + Marina. The one-hour flight replaced the usual six-hour drive, including a ferry and a section of sometimes-harrowing mountain road. (The road trip is scenic too, but Highway 4 is currently being upgraded and subject to closures, so if you're driving, be sure to check drivebc.com.)

But no matter how I arrive, Tofino always takes my breath away. Its never-ending beaches, its cedar and hemlock trees bent near-horizontal by the wind, that first glimpse of fog-shrouded islets offshore... it's no wonder that what began as a sleepy fishing and logging town at the turn of the 20th century has grown into a major tourism destination with visitors far outnumbering locals, especially in summer.

On my first afternoon we leave the town of Tofino with its colourful mix of old shacks and new builds to explore a remote inlet, where the waters are suitably calm for some stand-up paddle boarding. The maze of forested islands and narrow channels we motor through is part of Clayoquot Sound, a 100-km wide stretch of coastline that's home to three First Nations, thousand-year-old trees, and myriad wildlife including bears, wolves, whales and sea otters.

Back in the 90s Clayoquot Sound was practically a household name. The 'War in the Woods' – a non-violent protest against the way the area's forests were being logged – was the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history and captured worldwide attention for five months. In 2000, the Sound was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve to help conserve its immense bio and cultural diversity.

I'm recalling those formative days when our guide cuts the engine of our motorboat and we launch our paddleboards off the side. Gripping mine with bare toes, I push off and savour the enormous silence, pierced only by the cry of a bald eagle and the rhythmic splash of my blade.

Top: Sunset on Tofino's spectacular Cox Bay Beach.

Facing page:

(Left) Tofino Resort + Marina.

(Right) Hiking in the coastal rainforest of the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve.



FORREBAARSEN / SHUTTERSTOCK



JEREMY KOPESKI / TORINO RESORT



EDB8 15 / ISTOCK

The next morning, we pick up ‘fat’ bikes from our hotel’s Adventure Centre to explore Tofino’s stunning beaches. It’s easy riding on the town trail that runs for about 17 km to Long Beach in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. (By next spring it will extend another 20 km or so, all the way to the town of Ucluelet.) Leaving the trail at Chesterman Beach, we emerge into bright sunshine and the wide beach spreads out before us, rippled and glossy. With the sun in our faces and the wind at our backs we fairly fly down the beach, waves rolling in at our side, seagulls soaring overhead.

Chesterman Beach is a favourite with locals, partly because of the sandspit that’s exposed at low tide, allowing you to walk out to Frank Island. Look back and you get a view of the entire beach with the mountains of central Vancouver Island as a backdrop. Above the high tide mark, Chesterman Beach is lined with pricey houses and as we cycle along, we keep an eye out for celebrities including singer Sarah McLachlan, who owns a home here. (I chuckle remembering what McLachlan told *Canadian Geographic* magazine about visiting Tofino for the first time: “I was like ‘Holy crap, this is the most incredible place in the world!’”)

After a couple of hours of free-wheeling fun, we’re famished and happy to have reservations for lunch at The Pointe restaurant in the Wickaninnish Inn. The local McDiarmid family is credited with



COURTESY THE WICKANINNISH INN

Above:
Feather George
creates delicate
carved wooden
feathers in the
Carving Shed at
Wickaninnish Inn.

Below:
Spectacular sea
views at The Pointe
restaurant,
Wickaninnish Inn.

Facing page:
Wickaninnish Inn.
Surfing lessons on
Cox Bay Beach.

launching Tofino’s tourism boom when it opened the small inn in 1996 at the north end of Chesterman Beach. Suddenly, Tofino was no longer just a destination for hard core surfers, but a place where you could find upscale hospitality and exquisite food. Built from local materials – cedar, fir, driftwood and stone – in the emerging architectural style of the Pacific Northwest, the inn is still a joy to visit 25 years later. Art, sculptures, rare maps and books fill the common areas.

After lunch – a creamy West coast chowder followed by crispy Lingcod and chips for me – we walk the short distance to Henry Nolla’s Carving Shed.

Nolla was Tofino’s legendary wood carver who did finishing work throughout the Wickaninnish Inn, including on the yellow cedar welcoming doors. Nolla’s skilled hand can also be seen on landmark buildings throughout Tofino, such as the Common Loaf Bake Shop and the Eagle Aerie Gallery. Nolla passed away in 2004 but his Carving Shed is still used by other carvers. Inside, the scent of cedar hangs in the air as we examine delicate carved feathers and admire traditional bentwood boxes for sale.

Back on our bikes, I leave the rest of my group so I can re-visit a few other places I’ve enjoyed staying over the years. On Cox Bay Beach, I peddle around Pacific Sands Resort and inhale the tantalizing aroma of burgers on the BBQ at the Surfside Grill. Passing Long Beach Lodge, I recall a wonderful family get-together where we enjoyed meals and games in the Great Room. And on Mackenzie Beach, I remember being in awe of the setting when we camped at Bella Pacifica Campground.

(One place I won’t be revisiting this year is Hot Springs Cove. Normally a must-do for the scenic boat ride there, and being able to soak in geothermally heated pools, it’s still closed due to Covid. On my next visit however, I’m already looking forward to experiencing the Tofino Resort + Marina’s new floating sauna, anchored just a short boat ride up the Tofino Inlet.)

On this trip, I save the best for the last. On my final morning I’m lying on the sand at Cox Bay Beach trying to imitate our instructor as he pretends to jump up on a surfboard. Like a jack-in-the-box, Luke pops up in one elegant move.



COURTESY THE WICKANINNISH INN



COURTESY THE WICKANINNIISH INN

With the opening of the Wickaninnish Inn in 1996, Tofino was no longer just a destination for hard core surfers, but a place where you could find upscale hospitality and exquisite food.



MENDRICKSON / TOURISM TOFINO

The rest of us flop around in wetsuits like clumsy seals. “I find it easier on the water,” consoles Ruby, an equally lithe instructor from Ireland.

Luke, an Aussie, confides he enjoys surfing here better than on Australia’s famed Gold Coast. “There,” he says, “you’re always a little bit on edge. It doesn’t feel safe, it feels sharkie. Here, I’ve surfed until 9:30 at night.”

Minutes later we waded into the cold water until we’re chest deep, then clamber onto our boards.

“Pick your wave, then get ready for it,” Ruby yells over the wind. I let a few big breakers thunder past, then choose one that looks tamer.

It’s not and soon I’m upside down in the foaming drink. But that’s okay, because in just a few hours I’ll be in Vancouver, right side up and back to a more mundane life. ■