

L4 | LIVING | TRAVEL**BRITISH COLUMBIA**

Meet me at the BEACH

Camp under old-growth trees or — if you're lucky — watch whales swim past

SUZANNE MORPHET

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"There's nothing between us and Japan," my husband tells our friend Atsuko as we gaze over an unusually placid Pacific Ocean from our favourite camping spot on all of Vancouver Island.

We're at Sombrio Beach in Juan de Fuca Provincial Park, just about a two-hour drive from our home in Victoria, B.C. The beach itself resembles others on the West Coast, with its long, windswept stretch of sand and cobblestone backed by magnificent forest, but camping here is nothing like staying at one of the cookie-cutter sites in most provincial or national parks.

Here, you can find your own spot under old-growth trees or on the beach and take in the ocean views, which on a lucky day may include whales swimming past. Except for a half-dozen wooden platforms for tents in the forest, there are no designated sites, no numbered posts and no picnic tables.

You cannot reserve camping either — it's first come, first served, open year-round for the nightly fee of \$10 per adult. You'll find no washrooms, only outhouses, and no artificial lights. It's backcountry bliss, just a 10-minute walk from the parking lot.

We began coming to Sombrio Beach almost 30 years ago, soon after moving to Vancouver Island, and have introduced it to friends from all over the world, including

Atsuko, who arrived from Tokyo this summer. Like us, she's in awe of the raw wilderness and solitude so close to the city. The fact that this is a prime habitat for black bears always heightens our excitement.

Juan de Fuca Provincial Park is in the traditional territory of the Pa-cheedaht First Nation. More recently, Sombrio Beach itself was home to a small, year-round community of passionate surfers. They were evicted after the B.C. government established this park in 1996, following the creation of the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail, which runs through it.

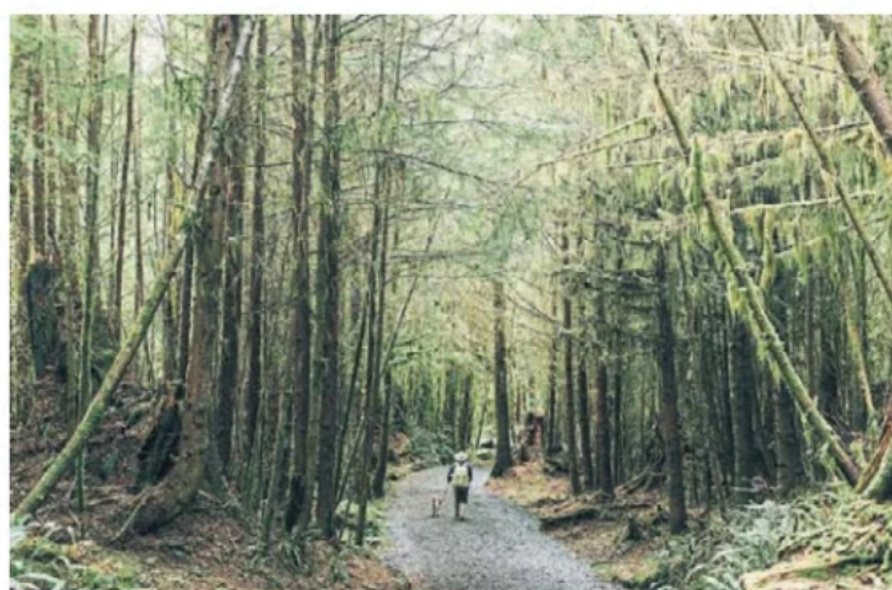
Sombrio lies about halfway along the 47-kilometre trail, which extends from China Beach to Botanical Beach. There are four trailheads to access this rugged route, but Sombrio is the only one you can reach easily from the parking lot and where you can camp on the beach. We've hiked small parts of the trail and always enjoy meeting those tough enough to do the whole thing. This summer, that includes a Swiss couple with three children, who join us one evening to watch the molten sun sink into the ocean.

Our adventures are softer than theirs but still fun, starting with a hike along Sombrio Beach to the hidden waterfall. Following a tell-tale trickle of fresh water coming from the forest, we enter a darkened slot canyon. Deep inside, mossy green walls frame an icy cold torrent of water that appears to pour from the sky.



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On a lucky day, Sombrio Beach campers might spot whales swimming in the ocean.



Back on Sombrio Beach, we pass a moulting elephant seal and climb the rocky headland that offers a view of yet another waterfall, this one flowing melodiously over a cliff into the ocean where two women swim under it. Offshore, we spot another couple: a mother grey whale with her calf.

Backtracking a little, we find the opening in the forest where the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail continues southeast and head up the steep embankment, climbing over gnarly roots and around tree trunks. This is one of the most challenging parts of the trail, but as we reach a lookout, the views are spectacular.

A light mist has moved in, embellishing its natural beauty. When I

The path leading to Sombrio Beach, which lies along the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail.

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wonder yet again why I haven't tackled the entirety of this trail, Atsuko says, "I'll come back. We'll do it together!" I laugh and agree, knowing it's not likely, but fun to contemplate.

The next morning, we wake before dawn and drive 20 minutes to nearby Botanical Beach, at the trail's northwest end, in time for low tide. Marine scientists have been coming here for more than a century to study the abundant intertidal life.

We peer into small pools carved in the sandstone and spot green sea anemones, purple urchins and a bright red sea star. "Nature's aquarium," says Atsuko.

Further out, gooseneck barnacles and mussels hug the rocks where they get bashed by waves. On this morning, all is quiet, the water calmed in part by an underwater forest of bull kelp.

On our way back to Sombrio Beach, we stop at the village of Port Renfrew, also known as the Tall Trees Capital of Canada. We buy prawns from a local fisher and pick blackberries along the roadside for our last dinner under the stars. It's been another wild weekend, just the way we like it.