



Clueless in Ucluelet

Besides bears and whales, Vancouver Island has plenty to offer tourists, discovers **Anne Z Cooke**

THE SHINY “Michael Jackson”, popular lately with fishermen, isn’t Ed Jordan’s first choice. Even the pink and yellow “Disco Party” ranks higher on his list of hoochies. But after hearing that another Campbell River fishing guide hooked a 32-pound king salmon on it, he’s reconsidering.

“Take a look,” he tells me, idling the motor and rummaging through the tackle rack beside the wheel. Shaking his head, he unhooks a blue and green hoochie with silver sparkles and a tail like a hula dancer’s skirt. “Nope,” he says, after a long look. He puts it back and pulls out a Tomic Plug 602. This lure, five inches of ivory iridescence with a mean-looking hook, “swims” when you drop it overboard. “It’s old but it never fails,” he says.

Sure enough, the Tomic does the job. By mid-afternoon we’ve hooked and landed two kings (chinook) and a silver salmon (coho). To sweeten this sunny August day we’ve followed Quadra’s ragged coastline, watched sea birds diving for dinner and spotted a pod of dolphins. Pleased, pumped and anticipating grilled salmon for dinner, we ask ourselves what took us so long to get here.

Vancouver Island, 480 kilometres long and 80km wide, lying off the southwest coast of British Columbia, is just over a 13-hour direct flight from New Zealand; 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, especially Ucluelet (you-clue-let) on the southwest coast. This is a place we knew nothing about but the name alone is tantalising enough to get our attention. And so the adventure began.

In Victoria, we track a pod of killer whales, explore the lively harbour scene and sample the city’s impressive new world of food. We spend a day as Canadian postmen, flying with mailman and pilot Mike Farrell on CorilAir’s six-seater DeHavilland Beaver out of Campbell River. Farrell not only delivers letters, packages and emergency supplies to residents of six emerald-green islets, but he plays travel guide to sightseers

along for the ride, pointing out tidal currents, celebrity mansions, hidden harbours and apple orchards.

Following Route 19, between Victoria and Campbell River, harbours, inlets and towns dot the eastern shore, some more scenic than others, but each with its fishermen’s dock, sailboat slips, kayakers on the water and inviting green islets beyond.

Wandering through Nanaimo we eat lunch at Troller’s Fish and Chips, a guidebook-recommended restaurant that takes us 20 minutes to find but that more than lives up to its reputation. Heading west toward Tofino and Ucluelet on Route 4, we stop to explore Cathedral Grove, walking among the park’s 300 to 800-year-old douglas firs, ancients that have been spared the loggers’ saws.

The biggest surprise is the abundance of farm-fresh food, sold or served everywhere. When icecream shops beckon, we stop to sample their homemade flavours: Peach, blueberry, funky chocolate, pumpkin nut, sassy cherry. Stalls in open-air farmers’ markets, set back under shade trees near the highway, display piles of vegetables, fruit, cheeses, breads, fish, cuts of meat and specialty jams and sauces.

For a week we hustle, going 16-7. But we shift to neutral in Ucluelet, taking time to wander along the Wild Pacific Trail and to tour the town’s unique learning-focused aquarium. Even our lodging, at Black Rock Resort, is a poster child for the latest in minimalist design, instantly soothing. Ensnared among white walls, plate glass and monochrome upholstery, watching the tide surge and ebb is almost obligatory.

In fact, the longer I watch the breakers rolling in, the harder it is to look away. As each wave rises, crests, curls over into a wall of foam, roars onto the rocks and slides in among the tree roots beneath the window, the easier it is to breathe deep.

Our most memorable evening in Ucluelet is at the resort’s Fetch Restaurant, where we sit on the outdoor deck overlooking the ocean. We order wine, fresh halibut and a steak, then linger over dessert, watching the twilight fade into night. But the reverie is short. At 6.30am the next day we

Water world: Kayakers head out of the harbour in Ucluelet.

Photos: Steve Haggerty/ColourWorld/MCT