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VANCOUVER ISLAND

Hiking the West Coast Trail

"There are boulders,
sheer cliffs, suspension
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beaches and ladders.

So many ladders."

BY ADAM SAWYER

Mile for mile,

the West Coast Trail (WCT) is one of the toughest hiking paths in North America. It is located within a section of the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve on British Columbia's Vancouver Island. There are times when the physical and mental grind of the nearly 50-mile, five- to 10-day hike will force you to question your resolve—and perhaps your judgment. Over the course of the trek, you'll encounter arduous stretches of trail consumed by roots and mud. Or cross above it all on decrepit boardwalks with missing, broken, or about-to-break planks whose only remaining purpose is to test your faith in weathered wood. There are boulders, sheer cliffs, suspension bridges, cable cars, sandy beaches and ladders. So many ladders. And all traversed with a 40-pound pack strapped to your back.


But before you skip to the next story and curse my name for suggesting such an endeavor, know this—daily that same trail will deliver you to undisturbed, ancient forests, wildly diverse stretches of jaw-droppingly beautiful coastline, waterfalls, caves and canyons that are among the most rugged, remote and beautiful in North America. Everyday you'll be tested, and everyday you'll discover that you're stronger and more capable than you thought you were. This adventure isn't for everybody, obviously. But for many, its rewards are greater than any obstacles or hardships that the trail can impose. And that's exactly why I wanted to go.

Because of their stellar reputation and eco-friendly business practices, I booked a trip with local outfitters BCA Tours. Additionally, having trained guides that know the trail and can plot the proper course of action based on the tides and other extenuating circumstances is invaluable. It also doesn't hurt that they handle all the meal prep.

Our group—a daddy/daughter duo from Southern California, a group of five friends from Saskatoon, two guides and yours truly—broke bread in the town of Bamfield the night before the hike. We got to know each other a bit, discussed how the trip would unfold and how to lessen our environmental impact. We were immediately a lively, eager bunch that shared a love of laughter. This would bode well for the rest of the trip. We retired to our rooms for the evening where we were briefed individually and received food rations for the multi-day hike.



© Paxson Woelber



Talia, co-owner and executive chef at BCA Tours, has been honing the craft of preparing delicious, hearty and nutritionally optimal freeze-dried backpacking meals for years. In doing so, she ensures that dietary needs and restrictions are tended to, while also reducing the waste typically incurred with individual meals. So, in addition to receiving our own personal snacks, each of us were tasked with carrying a group meal.

When you're backpacking, there are many daily chores, goals and little games you play that help mark the progress of the journey. Having received the Day 4 dinner rations, one of my immediate goals was to survive to that meal. When I would blithely deliver the package to the guides and hike fancy-free for the final two days, released from the burden of food weight. I would also sneer jealousy at those who had shed Days 1 through 3 meals and flaunt my nimbleness to the Days 5 through 7 chumps.

The next morning, we caught a shuttle to the trailhead where we received a half-hour briefing and slideshow from a park ranger, which, for me, was chock full of useful information

as well as some nervous laughter. Due to the large number of inherent dangers that come with hiking in such a remote wilderness area, the presentation might as well have been titled, "Impassable Obstacles and Wild Animals: The many ways your trip to Vancouver Island can come to a swift end."

After being equally frightened and inspired, it was finally time to put on our packs, extend our trekking poles and get hiking. We made our way down the beach, adjusting straps and finding our legs. The next seven days would be a roller coaster—literally ascending and descending countless times. Heading down to the beach, up into the woods, and across steep canyons. Sometimes this was accomplished by conventional trail, footbridge or cable car, but often it was done via ladder. One of the hallmarks of the WCT are the ladders. And when we weren't on ladders, we were negotiating the aforementioned mud, roots and boardwalks.

But the forest the path meanders through is wonderfully varied. We encountered untouched groves of massive Sitka spruce and western red cedar accented and interspersed with

patches of mature second-growth and ghostly, defiant snags—telltale signs of a past wildfire. The trailside setting is in a constant state of flux between forest age, type, elevation, proximity to the ocean and stretches along the coastline itself. If there's an aspect of the WCT deserving of top billing, it's the coastline. We hiked across fine white sands, through mobile-home-sized boulder fields and everything in between. We traipsed carefully across sandstone shelves teaming with life, passed by towering, tree-topped sea stacks and, because we timed the tides right, explored a handful of sea caves that I could have spent a lifetime photographing.

By the end of each day, I was spent. But every time we settled into our home for the night, my energy was renewed by a combination of scenery and the prospects of dinner and fireside whiskey. While it's good to be prepared, trips like this are experienced best when there are moments of real-time discovery. And in that spirit, I'm intentionally leaving out some stellar highlights—but I will say that the evening spent at Tsusiat Falls is a camping memory I will cherish. If you ever have the opportunity to be serenaded into a summer evening slumber by the melody of a lapping tide with waterfall accompaniment, I highly suggest you take it.

When I woke up on the morning of Day 8, I knew we were nearing the end. I was chomping at the bit to finally and safely conclude the WCT, but at the same time, I really didn't want the journey to end. I wasn't alone. I knew that we would soon catch the ferry into Port Renfrew. Then we would have a few rounds of what would surely be the best tasting, coldest beers of my life. After, we'd all be summarily dropped off at our lodgings in Victoria. Everyone would become Facebook friends, and that would be that.

But this adventure was going to linger. In many ways, it was one of the most difficult undertakings of my life. It was the sorest I can remember being, my feet hurt more than they had in recent memory and, at times, I felt dirtier than I had in a decade or more. But it was also the most inspired by Mother Nature's grandeur I've been in a commensurate amount of time. The hardest I've laughed, the soundest I've slept and the most connected to complete strangers (as well as to myself) that I've felt in a very long time. I can't wait to do it again. Well, let's revisit that idea in a few years. That hike was tough as hell. 🏔️

PLAN TO HIKE THE WCT?

- >> BCA Tours, bcatours.com
- >> Parks Canada, pc.gc.ca
(search for "West Coast Trail")
- >> Tourism Vancouver Island, seevancouverisland.com



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