

Stormwatching, surfing lessons, whale-spotting – Vancouver Island's Tofino is ...

CANADA'S WILD WEST!

by FIONA TAPP

WEARING my hotel-branded yellow raincoat, I walk to Cox Bay beach on Vancouver Island's Tofino looking out to the wild Pacific waves, dotted with brave surfers.

The noise of the ocean is immersive, like cinema Surround Sound. I record it on my phone, hoping it will transport me back here once I am home, far from the restorative healing properties of the sea.

Getting here isn't simple, incorporating a ferry and five-hour winding road trip or a floatplane flight from Vancouver.

As you soar over the Pacific Rim National Park and the Clayoquot Sound from Vancouver to Tofino, expect your stomach to dip and twist on the descent. But if a journey were ever part of the experience, then it's here, where one of Canada's most westerly towns clings on to what feels like the edge of the world.

In Tofino, everything is connected to the waters. The way it cuts you off from the mainland, surrounds and nurtures wildlife, and creates dramatic swells and squalls that bring visitors from across the world to storm watch.

I stay at the Pacific Sands Beach Resort where you are steps from the ocean and can learn to surf as

well as enjoy a Scandi-style hydrotherapy circuit, starting with wood-fired barrel saunas, then a bracing dip in the Pacific and a rest on Adirondack lounging chairs.

The storms that lure visitors also cause inconveniences such as power cuts. Chocolate Tofino offers 50 per cent off its gelato before the lights come back on; how better to ride out a storm than with a spoon or two of Hammerhead, their secret recipe flavour?

Tofino is near the Unesco

Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Region and on the traditional territory of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples. The therapeutic qualities of the region are well known to the original custodians, who have lived here for more than 5,000 years.

On a nature walk with Elder Moses Martin, from Clayoquot Wild, I am shown beautiful cedar totem poles being carved. The company also offers whale-watching wildlife tours and trips to Hot

Springs Cove to hear stories as you soak in the healing waters of its sacred pools. Sail from here and there's no land until Japan.

Pacific Sands is relaxed but luxurious with beachfront accommodation, cosy fireplaces and enormous bathtubs.

One evening, I walk to Pettinger Point for dinner along a cedar boardwalk path with sweeping ocean views. My Dungeness crab dinner was pulled from the ocean minutes before it was cooked in



Pictures: ALAMY

Calming waters: Tofino Harbour and, inset, whale-watching in the Pacific

salt water over an open flame. Research shows being close to the ocean or 'blue spaces' is beneficial to mental wellbeing, helping to reduce stress, and the rhythmic pull of tides can help you find balance and calm. It worked for me.

TRAVEL FACTS

DOUBLES at Pacific Sands Beach Resort from £148 (pacificsands.com). Heathrow to Vancouver from £880 return (aircanada.com). Seaplane flights to Tofino cost about £329 return (harbourair.com). Visit helloworld.com and tourismtofino.com.

Flights & Overseas Holidays



The port city of Dénia

Amazing autumn

in the Region of Valencia

Summer might be over, but you can still enjoy a seaside escape in this Spanish region, with its appealing coastal cities where mountains meet the Med

Footprint-free beaches, uncrowded cities and a relaxed vibe... the Region of Valencia really comes into its own in the autumn. And did we mention the weather?

Temperatures nudging the 20s, along with more than 300 sunny days a year, provide the perfect contrast to the cold days and grey skies of home. It feels a world away from Blighty, even though you can fly to the provincial

capitals of Alicante, Valencia and Castellón from the UK in little more than a couple of hours.

There's plenty to explore on a city break, with great transport links from the airports, or you could take an easy road trip – perhaps flying into one city and out of the other – incorporating small, charismatic towns along the way.

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Valencia's City of Arts and Sciences

ADVERTISING FEATURE

Calatrava, with its aquarium, 3-D cinema and interactive science museum. Or explore the past in Alicante, taking the lift up the mountainside to Santa Bárbara Castle to can gaze down over the bay and the palm-fringed esplanade.

Between the coastal cities lies Dénia, with its historic town, ancient walls and scenic hilltop castle. Or drive just an hour north of Castellón to Peñíscola, whose massive Templar castle and medieval walls surrounded by water featured in Game of Thrones.

There's miles of coast to explore, with plenty of beaches to stroll along in the mild weather. Head inland, too, to some of the national parks in the mountainous interiors, where you can hike amid trees that are a patchwork of autumnal colours.

At this time of year, mushrooms and chestnuts are ripe for the picking and feature in the region's diverse and delicious gastronomy. The birthplace of paella is also home to 300 different rice dishes, while seafood options include the red prawn of Dénia, whose intense flavour comes from its high concentration of iodine. And for gourmands, there are no fewer than 22 Michelin-starred restaurants.

Good food, plenty of sunshine and lots to see and do... the Region of Valencia has all the ingredients for an idyllic autumnal escape. ■

MAKE A DATE WITH ELCHE

With its huge grove of date palms known as the Palmeral, Elche feels like an exotic winter-sun destination. Yet this town in the south of the Costa Blanca is just a 20-minute drive from Alicante airport.

Stroll among the forest of 200,000 palm trees, with their elaborate irrigation systems laid out by 10th-century Muslims, and ponds and sculptures dotted around. The star attraction is the 180-year-old imperial palm in the Huerto del Cura garden.

Elsewhere, take in La Calahorra fortress in the walled part of the city, and the blue-domed Basílica de Santa María, built on the foundations of an ancient mosque. Climb up the tower here and you can look down on the palm trees – a stunning sea of green.

For more information, see comunitatvalenciana.com/en or scan here



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