

# COURIER



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# Clayoquot Sound—of Spirits and Sunshine

BY DAWN RUECKL, CTP

THE SUN IS SHINING. Here on Clayoquot Sound on the western coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, this is a remarkable thing indeed. It is 6:30 a.m. on an exceptionally fine morning in September, and I am rushing to meet my guide and two companions to catch the outgoing tide and begin our six-hour kayaking adventure. We slip into the icy Pacific Ocean and paddle into the boating channel, then the sun breaks the mountain and blinds us as the rays create a symphony of sparkles across the water. There are no words. I am enraptured. But there's no time to dally—there is a hump in the distance that is rhythmically surfacing, and we paddle off to investigate.

Literally at the end of the road that crosses Vancouver Island lies the village of Tofino, gateway to Clayoquot Sound. Once a timber and fishing village, Tofino is now a year-round resort town that has rapidly become one of the best surfing destinations in North America. The unrelenting pound of the wild, West Coast waves is impressive. But I would argue that the real attraction here is the oxygen. You get positively drunk on it.

The islands and mountains of Clayoquot Sound are covered with coastal temperate rainforest. This kind of rainforest is the most rare kind of forest, covering less than 0.2 percent of the earth's land surface. And this primordial forest stores more carbon than almost any other forest in the world. The old-growth giant cedars, hemlock and Sitka spruce are blanketed in that rare kind of green that makes you wonder if the color setting is off. The air drips . . . constantly. The low-lying mist shrouds the islands with mystery, and the spirits of the forest hold domain here.

We skirt Meares and Vargas islands, gazing at land and sea. We are remarkably lucky with our sightings. We decided the hump was an elephant seal. We also watch a gang of sea lions frolicking, an otter and possibly a gray whale in the distance. We start to feel the swell as we round the protective corner of the island to the wide-open ocean. There is nothing between us and Japan. Hmmm . . .



Kayaking on Clayoquot Sound

"Do you know what the whale-watching boats call kayakers?" asks Jason, our guide. "Speed bumps!" Hmmm again . . . We stick close together as the swell gets bigger, and the rules that Jason outlined start to become much more important. We are so small.

In 1993, Clayoquot was the scene of one of the defining environmental protests of our time. Logging giants were given permission to tear down up to 66 percent of the oxygen-producing, old-growth tree spirits, and there were many in British Columbia and beyond that would not accept this. The protestors' massive act of civil disobedience, accomplished by road blockades, resulted in the largest mass arrest in Canadian history, and incredibly, the largest mass trial in British common law. More than 900 people, from students, artists and business people to religious clerics, loggers and grandparents, were jailed. But they

succeeded. The logging was stopped. They saw the creation of the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2000. They are the reason why I am experiencing what I am today.

The battle is not over. The Biosphere Reserve designation recognizes the ecological importance of the region, but does not protect the Clayoquot's ecosystems. About three-quarters of Clayoquot's productive ancient rainforest is still not protected and can be logged. The forest owes us nothing, yet we are nothing without it. Vigilance is required.

We ride the swell and the incoming tide on our return, and there is still enough of the day left for me to take the rainforest walk to Long Beach in Pacific Rim National Park. Halfway, I stop amongst the giants and give thanks for the life force that surrounds me. Breathe in. Breathe out. Smile. Yup, I am totally drunk on oxygen. ☘