

ALL ALONG THE MOUNTAINS AND SEA

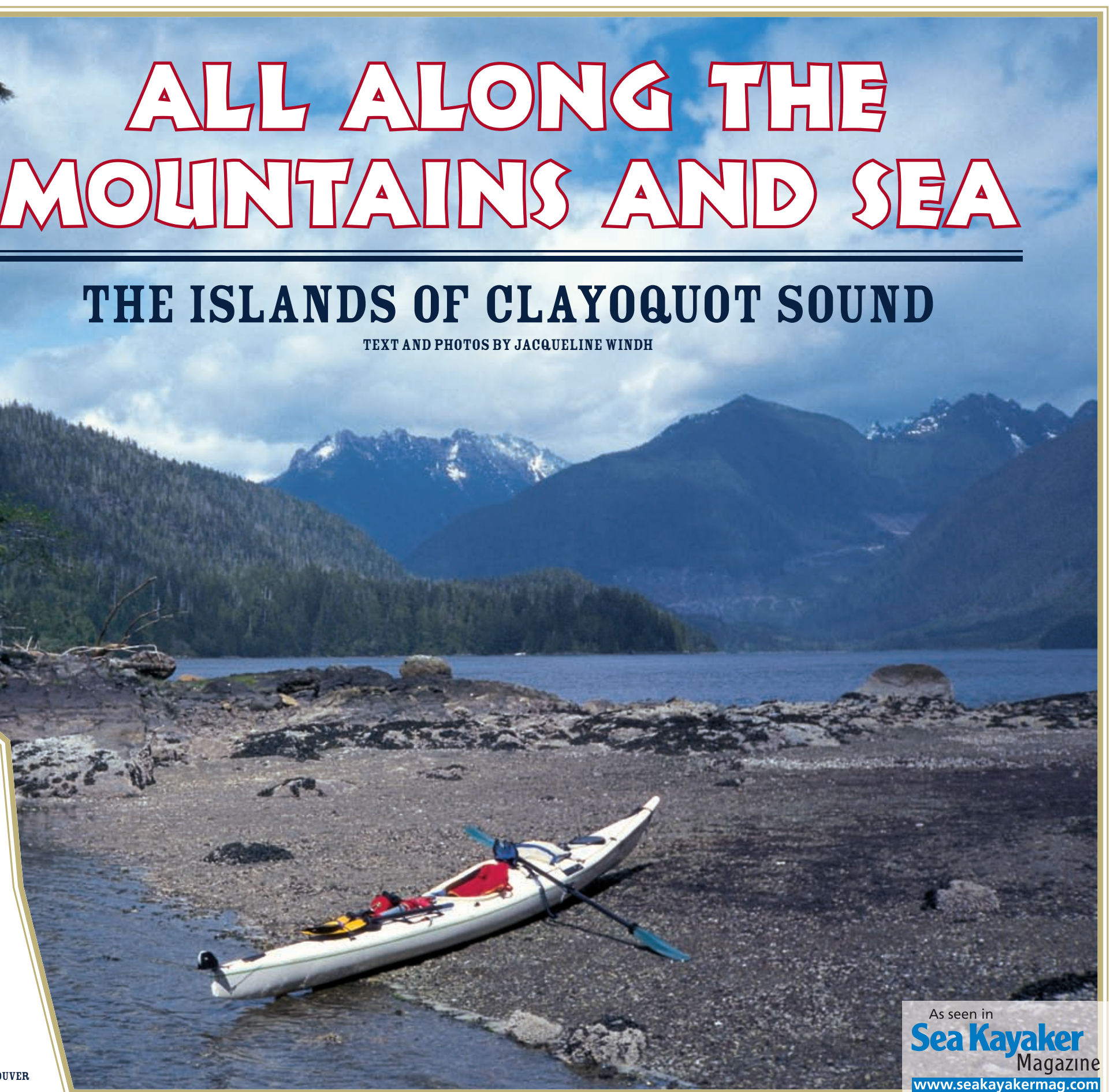
THE ISLANDS OF CLAYOQUOT SOUND

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JACQUELINE WINDH

The flash of a paddle blade is nothing new to the sparkling waters of Canada's Clayoquot Sound. For millennia, the Nuu-chah-nulth (whose name, in their native tongue, means "all along the mountains and the sea") have been paddling huge dugout canoes hewn from giant rain forest cedars. Although colorful sea kayaks made of fiberglass and Kevlar are now commonplace too, this is one of the few places on the continent where traditional dugouts continue to ply the waters.

I first showed up here with my folding kayak more than a decade ago. I had heard about Clayoquot's dark and secret old-growth rain forests, its expansive sand beaches, the secluded fjords and the rolling ocean breakers. Although I had come only for a week-long kayaking adventure, I quickly fell under its spell.

THE SHELTERED INLETS BEHIND MEARES ISLAND PROVIDE PROTECTED WATERS WITH VIEWS OF VANCOUVER ISLAND'S DRAMATIC INTERIOR MOUNTAIN RANGES.



As seen in
Sea Kayaker
Magazine
www.seakayakermag.com



YOU CAN PADDLE THE SAME WATERS, THE SAME INLET, TIME AFTER TIME—YET IT IS NEVER THE SAME.

A RUGGED COAST

Clayoquot Sound is a large and ragged bite out of Vancouver Island's western coast. Deep and steep-sided inlets cut far into the island's central mountain range, and narrow channels separate a smattering of islands large and small. Dense, dark rain forest carpets the mountain slopes. Ancient giants of cedar, hemlock and spruce tower above a tangle of berry bushes and devil's club and cushions of moss.

The sheltered inlets wind their way to the outer coast: sweeping sand beaches separated by headlands of gnarled, twisted rock upon which stunted pines and cedar anchor themselves. Winter storms shape this coastline, pounding rock and shell into fine sand, moving the gigantic boulders that gouge clefts and caves from the bare rock and tossing giant logs like matchsticks upon the shore.

The year after my first brief visit to Clayoquot, I returned for more. And now, with many years and many paddling miles behind me, Clayoquot is my home. I had never thought that I would find fulfillment in paddling the same waters over and over again. But the moods of Clayoquot are never the same. The shifting of the tides, the changing of the seasons, the movement of the light...

You can paddle the same waters, the same inlet, time after time—yet it is never the same.

TOFINO

Access to Clayoquot Sound is through the village of Tofino. Once a quiet fishing community, Tofino has become one of Canada's most visited tourist towns. As the "Gateway to Clayoquot Sound," it offers opportunities for whale-watching and bear-watching tours, guided kayak trips, beach strolls and rain forest walks. With a population of 1,800, this once sleepy little village now receives about a million visitors a year. Make sure you have booked your accommodations before you commit to the long journey there!

Clayoquot Sound offers experiences that are suited to almost every type of paddler. The sheltered inlets are protected from the open ocean swell (although they may tend to funnel winds). The surf-pounded beaches offer experienced rough-water kayakers, or less experienced paddlers who choose to travel with a local guide, the chance to experience first-hand the force, and sometimes the fury, of the open ocean.

Paddlers contemplating any route along the



THE NUU-CHAH-NULTH

The Nuu-chah-nulth is a group of about 15 tribes, linked by language and culture, that occupies the territory from northwestern Washington up the outer coast of Vancouver Island. These tribes are the original inhabitants and original paddlers of Clayoquot Sound. Three of them live in Clayoquot Sound: Tla-o-qui-aht in the south, Ahousaht in the central part and Hesquiaht in the north. The name "Clayoquot" is an old spelling of Tla-o-qui-aht.

Nuu-chah-nulth are ocean people. Their traditional villages consisted of a collection of giant longhouses lining the seashores. They traveled long distances in large seaworthy dugout canoes to hunt whales and seals, to visit other villages for marriages or other ceremonies and to make war. Even their diet was derived mainly from the sea—mussels and clams, salmon and marine mammals.

Since the arrival of Europeans more than two centuries ago, traditional Nuu-chah-nulth culture has been disrupted by the decimation of their population by introduced diseases, by the loss of their traditional territories and food sources, and by the effects of a century of enforced attendance at Indian Residential Schools. Although some cultural knowledge has been lost forever, many native communities in Clayoquot Sound still occupy their traditional village sites and are working to recover nearly lost traditions and instill a sense of pride in their ancestors and in who they are.

The Tla-o-qui-aht still occupy two traditional village sites: Esowista, on Long Beach, about 10 miles south of Tofino, and Opitsaht, on Meares Island and visible from the Tofino docks. Ahousaht's village is called Ahousaht and is on Flores Island, about 10 miles north of Tofino. The Hesquiaht abandoned their traditional village site for a safer anchorage for their motor boats in the 1960s, moving down the coast to Hot Springs Village. Both Ahousaht and Hot Springs Village welcome visitors and are accessible either by sea kayak or by water taxi, and have hostels and basic food sources. Opitsaht is not equipped with services for visitors, and it is not appropriate for kayakers to land there unless invited.

exposed coast must be very comfortable with surf landings and launchings. Even along the more sheltered routes, it's important to have experience with rough water—breaking whitecaps and strong tidal currents that at times generate small whirlpools are normal here, even in seemingly sheltered inlets.

Conditions change rapidly on the outer coast. On many summer mornings, Tofino Harbour appears to be a glassy pond that, later in the day, abruptly transforms into a frothy sea of angry whitecaps and standing waves as the afternoon westerly winds fight against the tidal currents. And most overnight paddling routes pass by stretches that are at least periodically exposed to breaking surf—even in the finest weather, storms brewing half a world away can send

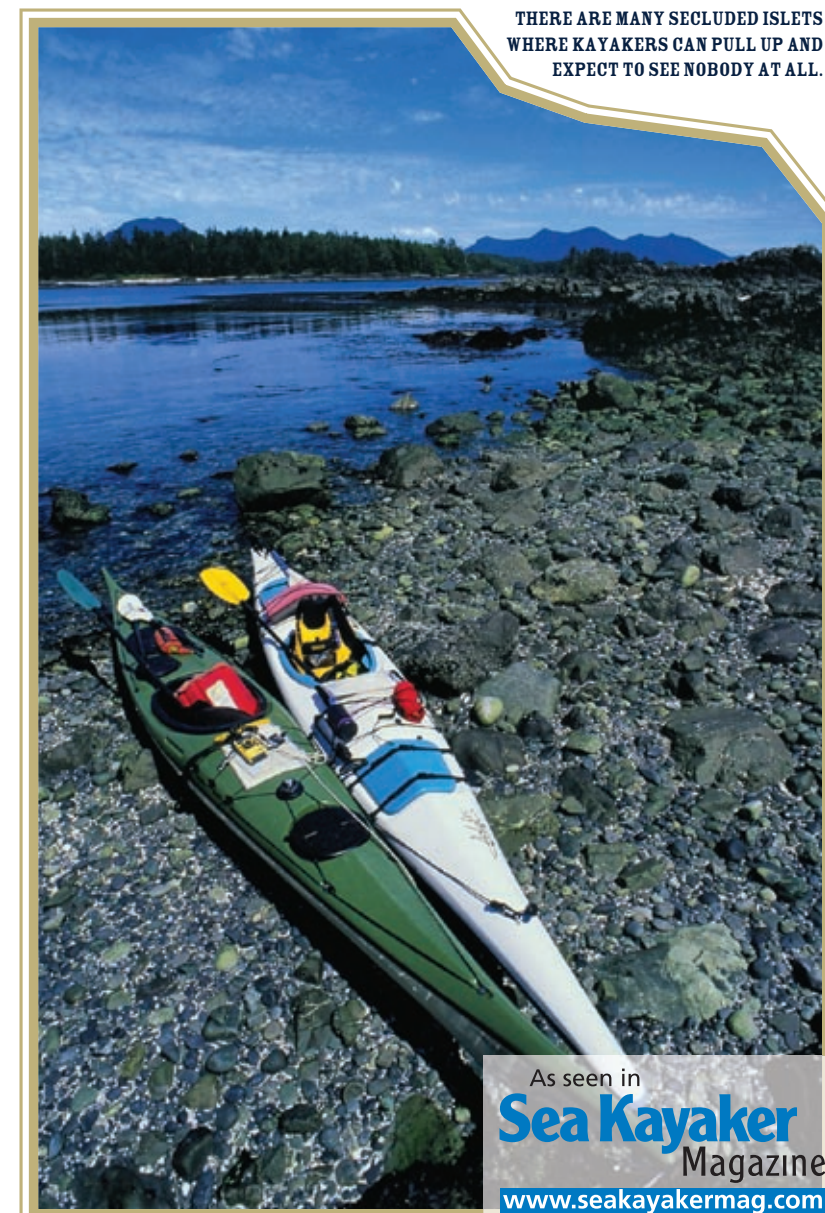
ocean swell to our shores.

There are many routes, exploring up the inlets and skirting behind the inlets, that are suitable for less adventurous paddlers—just pay attention to the available charts and the weather forecast and use common sense. However, if you're new to Clayoquot, consider traveling with a guide. Aside from the local knowledge to help you make appropriate judgment calls, you will probably appreciate all of the insider information about the landscape, wildlife and native communities.

DAY TRIPS FROM TOFINO

Before setting out on any day trip, check the daily marine weather forecast, predicted ocean swell heights and the tide tables. Tidal currents in

THERE ARE MANY SECLUDED ISLETS WHERE KAYAKERS CAN PULL UP AND EXPECT TO SEE NOBODY AT ALL.



As seen in
Sea Kayaker
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www.seakayakermag.com

THE AUTHOR ENJOYS A QUIET MORNING ON ONE OF HER MANY JOURNEYS THROUGH CLAYOQUOT.



Tofino Harbour may be quite strong.

Tofino Harbour: If you're looking for a trip of a few hours or so, there are a number of small islands to explore in Tofino Harbour. Most are privately owned, so please respect private property. Along their rocky shores at low tide you'll find abundant intertidal life: purple sea stars, bright green anemones and brilliant orange sea cucumbers. On Deadman's Island, there is a bald eagle's nest that has been in use for over a decade.

You can land on the west side of Morpheus Island and explore the old cemetery, now being reclaimed by the rain forest. It dates back to the first half of the 1900s, when Tofino was still an ocean-based settlement with no access by road to the outside world. Beware of strong tidal currents in the middle of the tide changes, especially in some of the narrow gaps between here and Nielson Island and also just off the Tofino docks.

Meares Island and Lemmens Inlet: Beyond the Harbour Islands, you can make a half-day or full-day trip out to Meares Island, or up the deep inlet that cuts into the center of this island, Lemmens Inlet. In 1984, local resident protesters managed to keep loggers from landing their equipment on the island. The fate of Meares Island has yet to be decided in court, but for now it is home

to some of the largest and oldest cedar trees in Canada.

The Big Tree Trail is a half-mile section of boardwalk that passes by several of these ancient cedars, including the famous "Hanging Garden Tree." Beyond the end of the boardwalk, a muddy three-mile loop passes by even more of these rain forest giants. Access the trailhead by landing on the little peninsula on Meares Island that faces Morpheus Island.

If you are paddling up Lemmens Inlet, time your trip to go in with the flood and return with the ebb. The extensive tidal mudflats on the east side of the inlet are a great place for bird-watching in the spring and fall, but on a falling tide, they can rapidly strand paddlers. If you can't drag your kayak a half mile through deep oozing mud, you'll have to wait a few hours for the tide to come back in! There are numerous small bays and creek mouths on both sides of the inlet where you can stop and explore the rain forest.

Vargas Island: Situated out on the exposed and open coast, Vargas Island has some beautiful sand beaches that you can visit on a long day trip. These may all be subject to surf and wind, so pay close attention to the weather forecast.

The beach at the south tip of the island is known to locals as Medallion Beach.

There's always surf at this beach, but on some summer days, it may be only one or two feet high. At low tide, you can walk out the sandspit to explore a windswept rocky islet with views to the open sea, and at the northeast end of the beach a trail heads northward into the rain forest.

On the eastern corner of the island is Rassier Point and a breathtaking beach that is usually surf-free in summer, getting the best of the sun while being out of the wind. From here, you can head northward to Miltie's Beach along Vargas' eastern shore. It's a spectacular paddle if you can do it during an early morning low tide when the rising sun lights up the abundant intertidal life clinging to the rocks here. Sunset views out toward Flores Island and the open ocean beyond are highlights at Miltie's, but beware of changing surf conditions.

Grice Bay: Grice Bay is a summer feeding ground for gray whales. The whales don't use it every year, but if you find them there, please respect these wild animals by observing local whale-watching regulations and guidelines (see Clayoquot Trip Planner, p. 54-55).

This is a trip that you *must* time with the tides, because the bay empties right out at low tide. Paddling along Browning Passage to Grice Bay with the flood is usually a fast trip. Coming back can be more difficult because the afternoon westerly wind against the ebb current may form big breaking standing waves in Browning Passage; if you don't have the rough-water skills for these conditions, you can make a contingency plan to take out on the south side of Grice Bay, where there is road access.

OVERNIGHT TRIPS

Most of these overnight trip routes involve primitive wilderness camping, but there are options for accommodations at the Vargas Island Inn, in the village of Ahousaht on Flores Island, and at Hot Springs Cove.

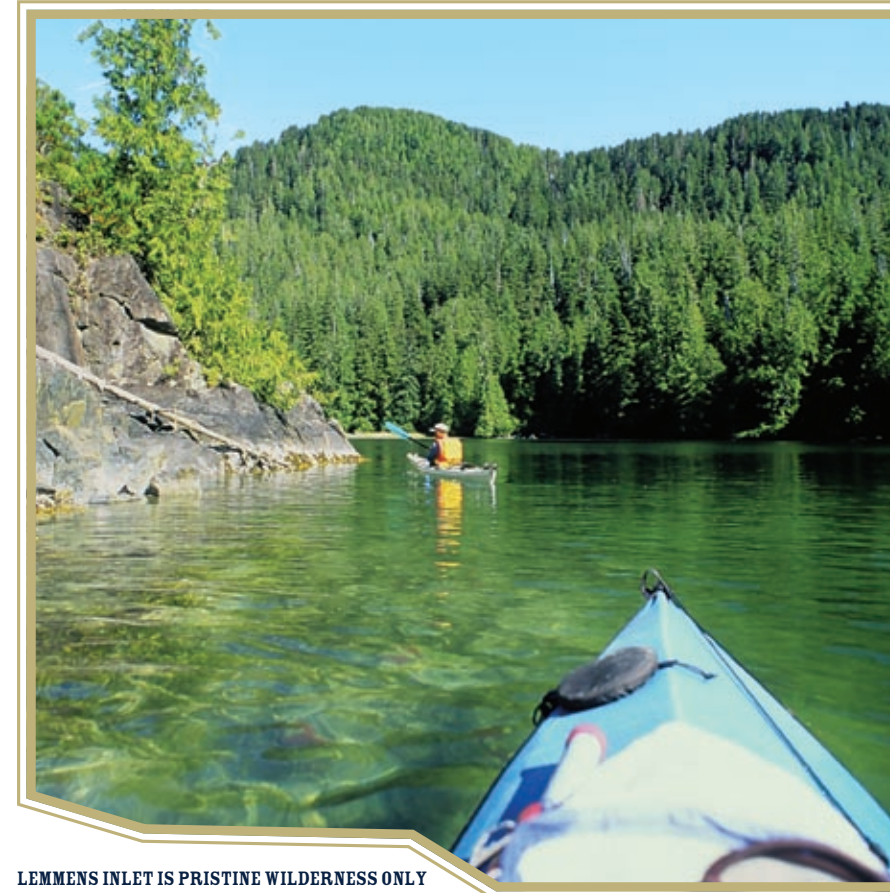
Meares Island: Although a strong paddler traveling with the tides could paddle the 25 miles around Meares in a single day, this is a nice trip to do in three days. The shores of Meares are all protected inlets and channels, so there are few sand beaches and limited places to camp. The narrower channels are subject to strong tidal currents. Matset Narrows has some of the strongest tidal

currents in Clayoquot. Currents there have speeds of up to four knots.

The shoreline around Meares Island is bear country. The best time for bear-watching is in the mornings around a full or new moon, when the tides are very low. Paddle the shorelines quietly during these parts of the moon's cycle, and you'll see bears in the intertidal zone flipping rocks in search of crabs and fish.

The steep shores of the inlets limit where you can land a kayak. The best campsites are: the beach by Robert Point, on the northwest corner of Meares; the shores north and south of Matset Narrows, where you may hear porpoises playing in the current at night; and Heelboom Bay, on the island's southeast corner. There are few good camping spots on the island's east side or in Mosquito Harbour. Depending on the tide, you may be able to camp on some small islands to the north and to the east of Meares Island—if you do camp on these islands, please remember that bears as well as cougars and wolves (which are found on all of the islands of Clayoquot Sound) all swim and that you still must cache your food properly.

Vargas Island: Vargas offers a variety of paddling—its east side faces Tofino



LEMMENS INLET IS PRISTINE WILDERNESS ONLY AN HOUR'S PADDLE FROM TOFINO.





SURF-WASHED BEACHES ON CLAYOQUOT'S OUTER SHORES PROVIDE STUNNING VIEWS OF THE OPEN PACIFIC OCEAN.

and the relatively sheltered waters of Tofino Harbour, while its wild west side faces open Pacific swell. You can design a paddling route of two to five days that suits your group's experience level.

If you'd like a break from camping, The Vargas Island Inn, three miles from Tofino, can serve as a base for day trips or for a place to stay at the beginning or end of a cruise through the islands. It's run hostel-style, with comfortable indoor cooking facilities, and it has a wood-fired beach sauna. From the inn, you can do pretty day trips both toward the north and the south, and you can also walk a two-mile trail across the island to the beaches of Ahous Bay. Ahous, the traditional home of the Ahousaht people, is also a summer feeding area for gray whales, which can often be seen from shore.

The western half of Vargas Island is provincial park, but other than a few pit toilets at some of the beaches, the park is undeveloped. At the moment there are no camping fees, but this could change in the future. The sand beaches are subject to surf, so use good judgment and take into account your group's abilities as well as current weather and swell predictions. The best camping beaches that usually have only small surf in summer (generally less than about two feet) are Medallion in the south, Rassier in the east and Miltie's in the northeast.

The north and west coasts of Vargas have wave-washed rocky islets and headlands and broad curved surf beaches. Ahous Bay has the largest beach—over a mile long—with two small and protected

changeable swell and are only for the most experienced surf kayakers.

OUTER COASTAL BEACHES

Serious ocean paddlers will want to visit the wild sandy beaches of Vargas and Flores Islands. Lovely wilderness journeys of between four and seven days can be planned around these islands and the adjacent Catface Peninsula. These areas are all frequented by wolves and cougars, so take all precautions with your food and keep children near you.

The western part of Vargas Island and the southern and western parts of Flores Island are all provincial park, but at the moment camping is permitted for free on the beaches. Please respect the Nuu-chah-nulth by not landing at any of the beaches marked on the charts as "Indian Reserve."

As a start, head northward from Tofino up Maurus Channel. You can camp at Miltie's Beach on Vargas Island or at Robert Point on Meares Island—each about five to six miles from Tofino. From here, you can choose a route according to the winds and the tides. Calmus Passage, the stretch of water between the Catface Peninsula and Vargas Island, has strong tidal currents, so try to plan your trip to travel with the tide through here.

There is a string of sand beaches on the western shore of the Catface Peninsula—all at times subject to surf. On Flores Island, the summer surf on the beaches of Whitesands Cove is usually not very big. The beaches west of here and at Cow Bay are also lovely, but may have larger surf; use good judgment here. Here you

slot beaches at the bay's northern entrance. Paddling the outer coast of Vargas Island is rewarding, but it involves open-ocean navigation and surf landings. The island's circumference is about 15 miles. Allow four or five days for a circumnavigation and leave time to explore or wait out possible adverse conditions.

The best places to camp on the outer coast are: Ahous Bay (to avoid the biggest surf, land at the extreme south end or in the little slot beaches at the bay's northern entrance) and the east side of Blunden Island. The tiny beaches between Medallion and Ahous have lots of rocks that make surf landings dangerous, especially at lower tide levels. The beaches on the northwest corner of the island are beautiful and wild, but are usually exposed to quite large and

HUMPBACK WHALES, ONCE HUNTED TO NEAR-EXTINCTION, HAVE RETURNED TO VANCOUVER ISLAND'S OUTER COAST.



will also find the Wildside Trail, a hiking trail connecting the village of Ahousaht to Whitesands Cove and Cow Bay, then climbing through the forest to the peak of Mount Flores. Look for fishing floats hanging in the trees that mark where the trail leaves the beaches.

Most of the islets between Flores and Vargas Islands are steep-sided and impossible to land on, although Whaler Islet is a sandy isle, too windswept to make a good camping spot, but a great lunch stop for groups making this crossing. On Vargas Island, you can camp at most of the sandy beaches shown on the charts. This route is true open coast, and along it you have a good chance of seeing gray and humpback whales, as well as sea lions, seals, porpoises and a variety of seabirds including, if you are lucky, tufted puffins.

HOT SPRINGS AND BEYOND

The thermal waters of Hot Springs Cove are the aim of many sea kayakers. About 25 miles northwest of Tofino, the cove can be reached in two days by sea kayak, conditions permitting. However, it's much more prudent to allow three or four days each way for the journey (as well as at least a full day or two there)—

ONLY EXPERIENCED SURF KAYAKERS SHOULD EVEN CONSIDER THE OUTSIDE ROUTE TO HOT SPRINGS COVE. IT'S RISKY TO LAND ANYWHERE ON THIS COAST, NO MATTER WHAT YOUR SURF EXPERIENCE IS.

both to have time to explore the wild rivers and their estuaries and the wide sand beaches, as well as to have time up your sleeve if you need to wait out strong winds or ocean swell. A number of commercial boat operators will transport kayakers to or from Hot Springs, for those who only want to paddle one way.

There are two very different options for your route to Hot Springs. From Tofino, you head northward between Meares and Vargas Island and past the Catface Range. From here you make the choice: what locals call the "inside," the longer but more sheltered route around and behind Flores Island (30 miles), or the "outside," following Flores Island's rocky western shore, completely exposed to full-on open ocean wind and

swell conditions (25 miles).

The inside route is true wilderness, and there are a few tiny, gravelly beaches where you can set a tent or two. Be especially cautious during spring tides, when the high tides have been known to rouse sleeping campers just after midnight. (I speak from personal experience!) This route is *not* suited to large groups, as there are very few sites where you can fit more than two or three tents—and if you arrive somewhere that is already "taken," you may find it a long paddle to the next possible camping spot.

For traveling the inside route, the best strategy is to get yourself in position the night before by camping on a beach a few hours out from Tofino—for example, at Whitesands on the southern shore of

Flores Island—or booking into the hostel at Ahousaht. Then, in reasonable conditions, you should be able to make it all the way around to the beaches on Flores Island's western shore, or right into Hot Springs Cove, the next day.

Only experienced surf kayakers should even consider the outside route. The few beaches on Flores Island between Cow Bay and Hot Springs Cove are strewn with boulders, so it's risky to land anywhere on this coast, no matter what your surf experience is.

At Hot Springs Cove, there is pay-camping at the campground beside the dock, a 20-minute walk to the springs on the boardwalk, or at the tiny bay called Openit on the east side of the peninsula, a 20-minute walk from the springs on a harder-to-find trail. Wave-washed rocks make it impossible to land a kayak anywhere near the hot springs. You can also camp for free nearby on Flores Island, then paddle across to Openit to hike to the springs. A floating B&B and a lodge in the nearby native village both offer accommodations as well.

North of Hot Springs Cove, toward Hesquiaht Harbour and Nootka Sound, the shoreline changes. There are no sheltered inlets, and the beaches change

from sweeping sand to steep boulder beaches with dumping surf, separated by rocky headlands and fringed by breaking reefs. Beyond the reach of marine radio bases or cell phones, this coastline is only for serious, experienced, self-reliant expedition paddlers who have planned for lots of days waiting out foul weather.

NOT TO BE MISSED

I have been paddling these waters for a decade and a half, and I still am enchanted by the magic of Clayoquot Sound. This ancient landscape is vibrant—ever-changing with the wind and the light, the cycles of the seasons and the movements of its wildlife. No matter what your experience level is or what your goals in sea kayaking are, you are sure to enjoy your travels in this wild and pristine paddling paradise. **SK**

Jacqueline Windh is a former sea-kayak guide and instructor and a full-time photojournalist. Her articles have been published in magazines worldwide, and she is author/photographer of The Wild Edge: Clayoquot, Long Beach and Barkley Sound and The Wild Side Guide to the Pacific Rim (www.harbourpublishing.com).

CLAYOQUOT TRIP PLANNER

WILD AND WINDSWEEP BEACHES ARE ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF CLAYOQUOT SOUND.



WEATHER

Conditions on the outer coast are changeable. A typical weather pattern for summer is calm mornings and afternoon northwesterly winds of 10 to 25 knots. Low-pressure systems bring rain and southeast winds. Although the region receives most of its 13 feet of rain over winter, be prepared for rain at any time of the year. Winter temperatures that are rarely below freezing mean that you can paddle at any time of the year, but frequent winter storms with high winds make it difficult to plan multi-day trips from October to April.

TIDES, CURRENTS AND SURF

The tidal range of up to 13 feet generates strong currents with local speeds of up to four knots. Much of Clayoquot is exposed to surf. Seemingly sheltered inlets can also become rough very quickly, especially where wind funneled down the inlet is blowing against the tidal current.

KAYAK LAUNCHING AND TRANSPORT

There is a public kayak launch in Tofino at the end of First Street. Local water taxis will transport kayakers and gear—call for information. For Ahousaht and Flores Island: Ahousaht Pride, 250-670-9563; for Hot Springs Cove: Matlahaw, 250-670-1106. Some of the whale-watching companies may also do Hot Springs drops. For custom boat drop-offs, call Marcel Theriault, 250-726-8438.

RENTALS AND OUTFITTERS

Kayak rentals and guided overnight and day trips are available through

Tofino Sea-Kayaking Co.: 800-863-4664, www.tofino-kayaking.com

Guided day trips are available through Remote Passages: 250-725-3330, www.remotepassages.com; and PaddleWest: 250-725-4281, www.paddlewest.com

Wilderness-based kayaking courses are offered by Rainforest Kayak Adventures: 877-422-9453, www.rainforestkayak.com

ACCOMMODATION ON THE WATER

Vargas Island: Vargas Island Inn, 250-725-3309

Ahousaht: Hummingbird International Hostel, 250-670-9679

Hot Springs Cove: Hot Springs Lodge, 250-670-1106; Innchanter B&B, 250-670-1149, www.innchanter.com; Hot Springs Campground, 250-670-1106; Openit Campground, Hereditary Chief James Swan, 250-670-2436 or jamesswan@telus.net

CHARTS

For index maps and order information, see: www.fedpubs.com/charts.htm
Charts presently available are:

- 3603 – Vancouver Island coast from Ucluelet through Tofino and Hesquiaht to Nootka Island Sound, 1:150,000
- 3673 – SE Clayoquot Sound, Tofino Inlet to Millar Channel, 1:40,000
- 3674 – NW Clayoquot Sound, Millar Channel to Estevan Point, 1:40,000
- 3685 – Tofino Harbour, 1:20,000

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Tofino Sea-Kayaking Co. has annotated charts and valuable area information compiled by its guides, as well as tide tables and current weather information, all available to visiting kayakers on its back deck overlooking the harbor.

LEAVE-NO-TRACE CAMPING

Clayoquot Sound is true wilderness. The areas designated “provincial park” (aside from Hot Springs Cove) have no managed campgrounds or facilities. Pack out everything you take in. Elimination of human waste must be near the water's edge and below the high tide line and shallowly buried; wave action and marine organisms will decompose it while washing away smells. Toilet paper must be burned or packed out. Travel in small groups. Do not encourage any interactions with wildlife.

TRAVELING WITH WILDLIFE

Bears are more common in the sheltered inlets, and cougars and wolves more on the outer coast islands and beaches, but any of these animals may appear anywhere—even on the tiniest islands.

Both bears and wolves are attracted to messy campsites. You must be consistently careful about food and other human smells. All cooking should be done below the previous night's high tide mark, so that the smells will be washed away by the next tide, and all food and toiletry items must be cached high in

trees. I strongly discourage taking oily foods that have strong smells, such as tinned fish or bacon.

Do not leave any food inside your kayaks; bears will destroy them, and you'll be really stuck! Keep your belongings secured, as wolves have been known to steal shoes and belts and water bottles from sleeping kayakers. Cougars naturally prey on other mammals, including humans, so children and small adults should not be put at risk by being separated from their group.

WHALE-WATCHING

Clayoquot Sound is home to gray whales, humpback whales and orcas and occasional other species. Federal regulations state that you may not approach closer than 100 meters (110 yards) to any whale. If your presence is affecting their behavior, such as making them change direction or stay submerged for longer periods of time, then you must back away from them. If other kayakers or boats are already watching a whale, you must approach the whale from the same side as them, so that the whales do not feel surrounded. You must not get between orcas and the shoreline, since this disrupts their feeding behavior.