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In the loop on southern Vancouver Island

Tuesday, April 23rd, 2013 7:00 AM Journey Michele Whitehead

I surveyed a jumble of seaweeds that Diane Bernard—aka the "Seaweed Lady"—was spreading out on a rock at Whiffin Spit: a stunning, almost-neon-green "sea lettuce"; one with the texture of a bath loofah, another like seersucker.

Victoria, B.C., might be known for its colorful gardens, but the southern Vancouver Island coast "has the wildest garden going on," said Bernard. Some 200 species of seaweeds grow in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and Bernard harvests them for culinary use and for her Sealfora line of 40 organic skin-care products, manufactured right here in Sooke. For 13 years, Bernard has been leading 1.5-hour tours on the beach for groups of 10 to 100 people: Visitors don boots and tramp out into low tide to hand-harvest seaweed themselves, while Bernard shares her enthusiasm for and knowledge about these nutrient-laden plants.



A tour with Bernard is one possible adventure on the 158-mile Pacific Marine Circle Route, which showcases driftwood-strewn beaches, gigantic trees, and artisanal agricultural products. The loop drive follows the West Coast Highway 14 from Victoria to Port Renfrew, heads northeast to Lake Cowichan, and then loops back to Victoria on the Trans-Canada Highway via Duncan and the fertile Cowichan Valley. Road improvements in the last few years mean all cars can now easily traverse the entire paved loop, so you could zip around in one day or meander, as I did last July.

Taking all day to drive the 70 miles from Victoria to Port Renfrew allowed me to spend the morning in Sooke with Bernard; check out the nostalgic vibe at the Posee-on-Point Resort; sample mead at Tugvald Creek Honey Farm & Meadery; hike the wooded trail to China Beach; and watch an eagle swoop down and perch in a tree across the cove from my cabin at Port Renfrew Resorts.



The second morning found me hiking up a footpath with TJ Watt of Ancient Forest Alliance (AFA) to "Canada's greatest tree" in Avatar Grove, about a 15-minute detour off the circle route from Port Renfrew. In 2009, Watt and a friend discovered the grove—home to huge and strangely shaped red cedars and Douglas fir—and, through AFA, led a successful campaign to protect this 145-acre old-growth forest from logging.

"It's good when everything's messy like this," said Watt, as we scrambled over a fallen log and he pointed out the forest's luxuriant understorey of plants, ferns, and wide mossy limbs on 400-year-old trees. "An old-growth forest is much more than a stand of trees. It's a full-fledged ecosystem that hosts an abundant amount of wildlife."

On reaching the red cedar, we marveled at its size, nearly 12 feet in diameter, and fantastical shape—flat and hollow in back, with an enormous burl protruding off the front. A red squirrel chirped his presence as we examined each side of the tree.



"Finding these giant trees is like a treasure hunt for me. It's amazing how over thousands of years this complex tapestry evolves. And how quickly it can be lost," said Watt, noting that 90 percent of Vancouver Island's productive valley-bottom old-growth forest has been logged.

"Big tree" tourism is becoming a draw for misty Port Renfrew, which also boasts the San Juan Sitka spruce and 230-foot-tall red Creeks fir in the vicinity. The Ancient Forest Alliance website features directions to the area's trees, and Watt plans to lead tours to Avatar Grove starting this summer.

By early afternoon, I had cruised into the sweet seaside village of Cowichan Bay for lunch. Enjoying a sandwich at Hilary's Cheese & Deli, with a view of the houseboats in the marina, I marveled at the diversity of terrain I'd experienced in just two days on the Pacific Marine Circle Route.



Tags: AFA Journey, Avatar Grove, Cowichan Bay, Michele Whitehead, Pacific Marine Circle Route, Port Renfrew, Sealfora, Sooke, Vancouver Island

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