The wild, wild, west

WORDS AND PHOTOS_GABI MOCATTA

When tackling Canada's West Coast Trail it pays not to be scared of storms, heights and wolves.

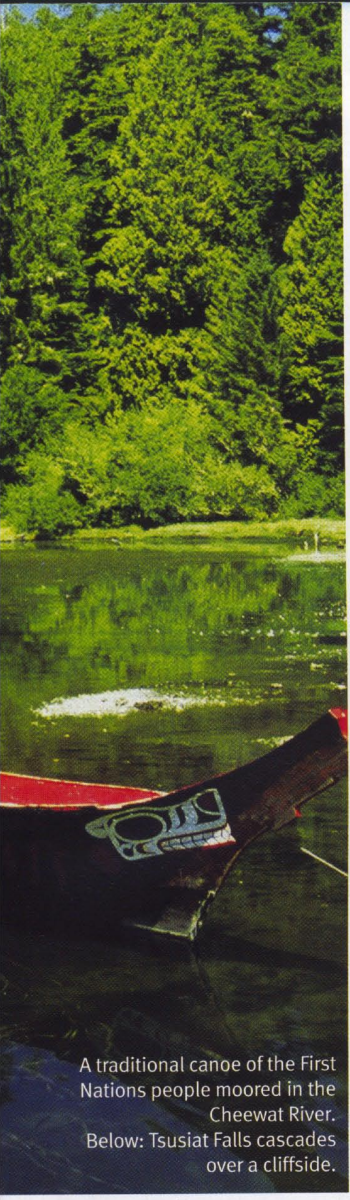
It's been called 'The Best Walk in the World' and for seven days of perfect summer, overarched by a deep blue Pacific sky, it was easy to understand why. Think of the most beautiful walk you could imagine, then multiply it: that's the West Coast Trail, Vancouver Island, Canada. Meandering along the edge of this pirate's treasure map coastline, the trail spans 74km of magnificent forests, pristine ocean beaches, sea cliffs and caves, clear rivers and cascading waterfalls. Add to that abundant wildlife, soaring lighthouses, a pioneering history and a rich cultural present, and you approximate some of the West Coast Trail's wonders.

Great Walks' West Coast Trail started on a frozen lake in the deep Canadian prairie winter, where we first met our walking companions-to-be. It was a serendipitous chance meeting that led to an evening of hiking tales shared round a fire and hours of pouring in awe over a photography book glowing with the beauty of West Coast Canada. It was a place that looked so gorgeous we decided, on that winter night, to walk the trail that summer.

And so it was that, packs loaded, food carefully weighed and stowed, and hearts in slight trepidation, we set off into deep green forest, ready for an adventure. A little apprehension about the trail was not misplaced. As well as being known for its gorgeousness, the West Coast Trail is considered a walk that's seriously challenging. There's the ferocious West Coast weather – lashing winds, rains and storm surges, and sometimes thigh-deep mud. Then there are the trail's infamous ladders: almost 40 of them, leading steeply – often vertically – up and down cliff sides, many with yawning drops below. This is also bear and wolf country, and the cougars here though rarely seen, have been known to attack.

The trail winds through the homelands of the Huu-ay-aht, Ditidaht and Pacheedaht





A traditional canoe of the First Nations people moored in the Cheewat River.
Below: Tsusiat Falls cascades over a cliffside.

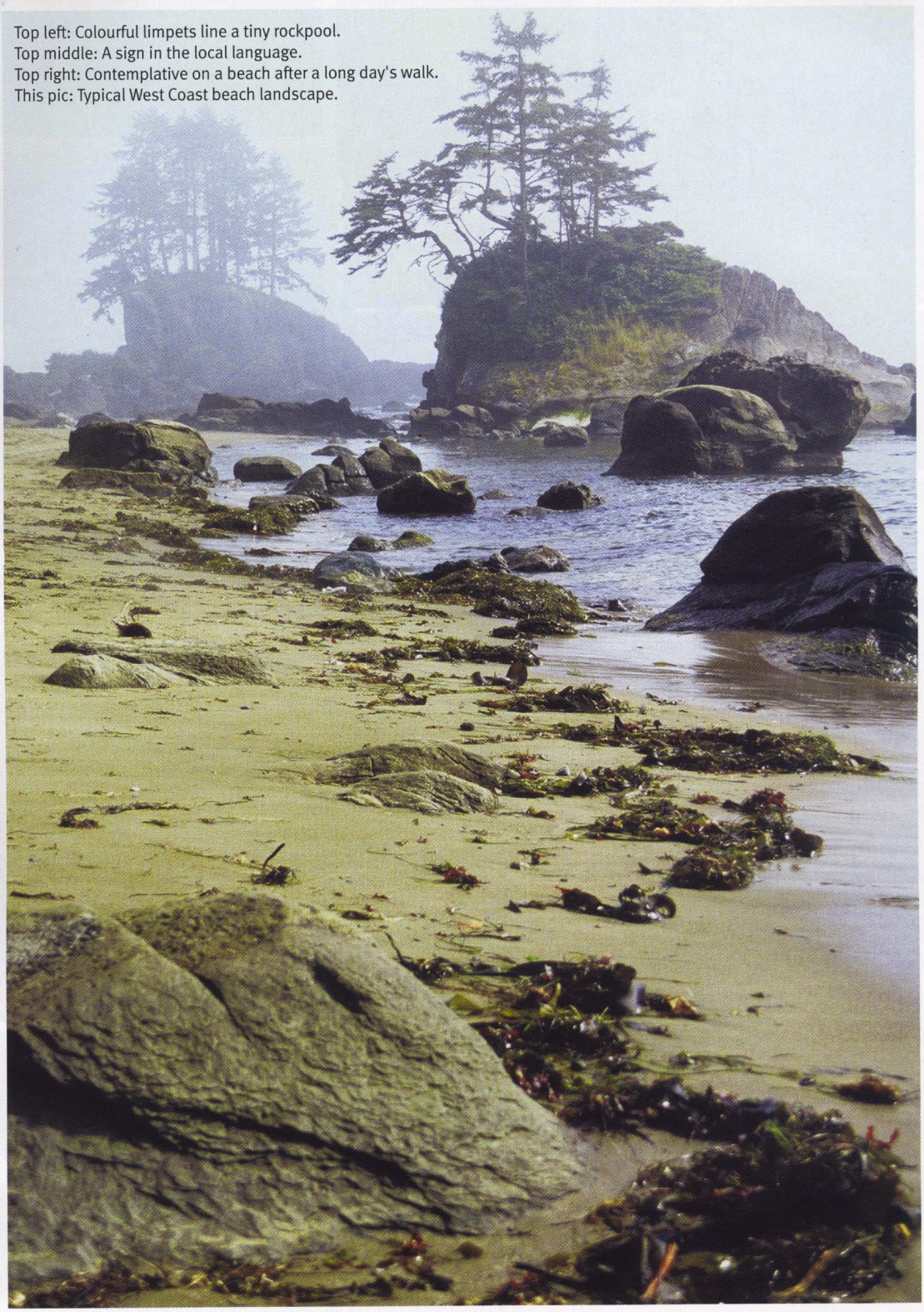








Top left: Colourful limpets line a tiny rockpool.
Top middle: A sign in the local language.
Top right: Contemplative on a beach after a long day's walk.
This pic: Typical West Coast beach landscape.

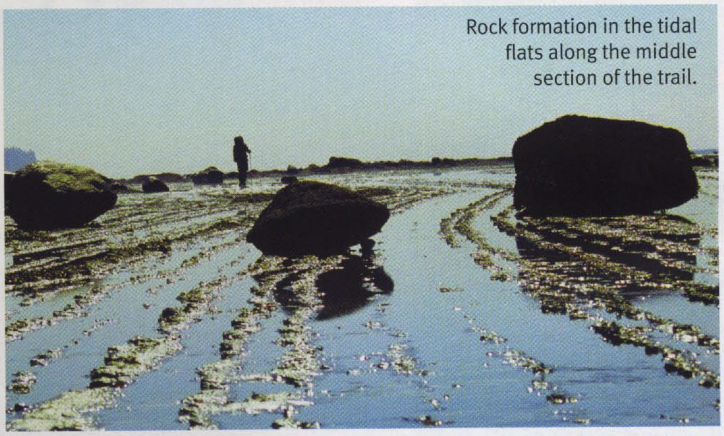




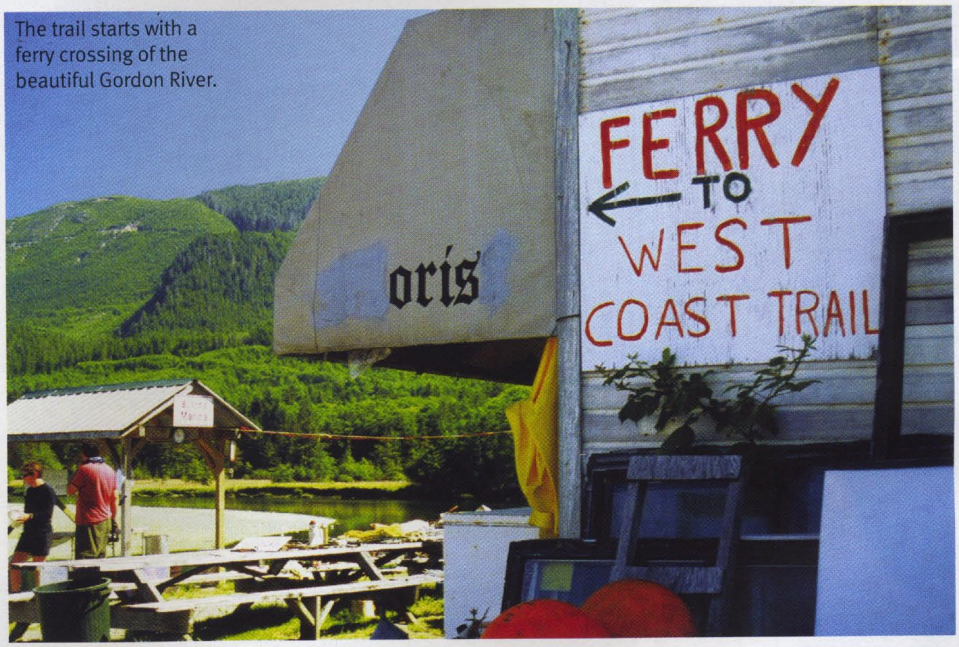
A massive anchor is all that remains of one of the 60 ships wrecked along this coastline.



Creek crossing by hand-powered cable car.



Rock formation in the tidal flats along the middle section of the trail.



The trail starts with a ferry crossing of the beautiful Gordon River.

people, custodians of this country for 4000 years, and keepers of the tracks and pathways that now make up the route. In the late 1800s, the numerous shipwrecks that gave this stretch of coastline the epithet 'Graveyard of the Pacific' warranted improvements and additions to the trail – like ladders for the shipwrecked to escape into the clifftop forests, and a rough route out to civilisation. The trail was first hiked end to end in its present form in 1907.

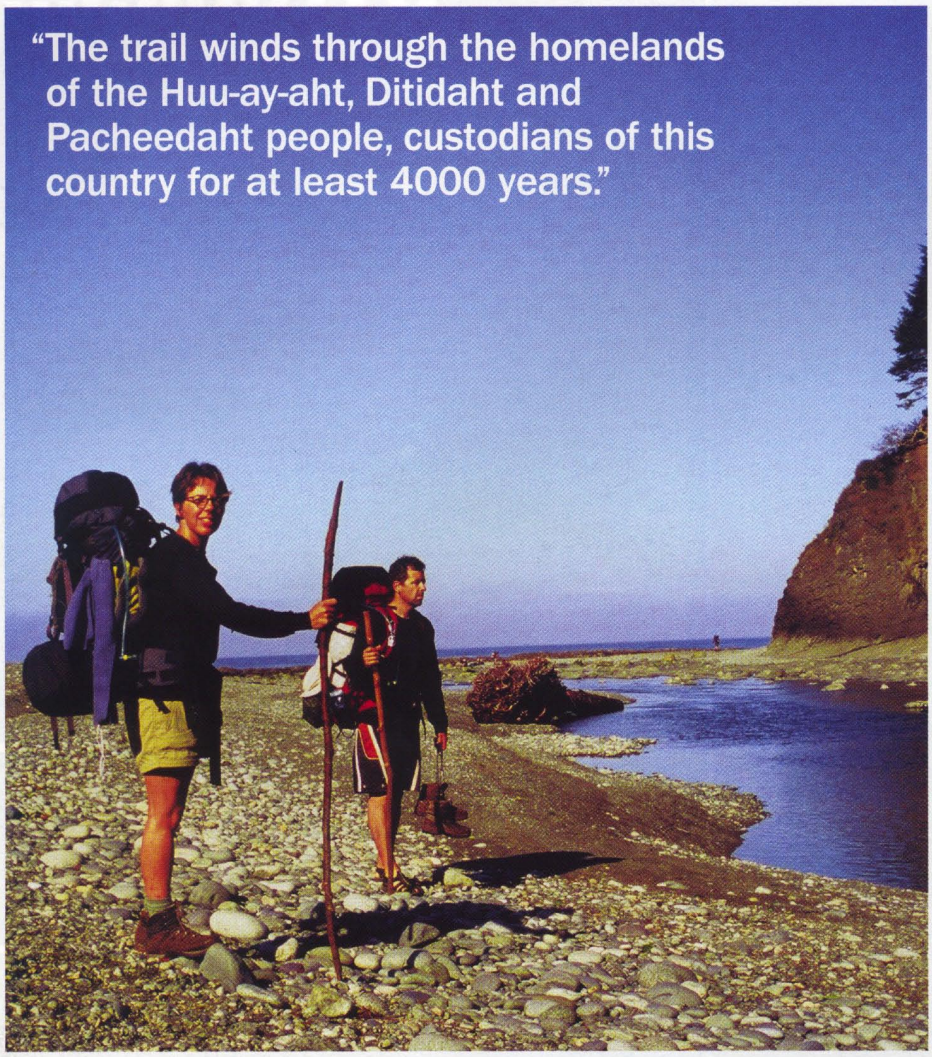
Today the trail is the jewel in the crown of the Pacific Ring National Park and one of the best managed multi-day walking trails anywhere. In the May-September walking season when the trail is open there's a streamlined pre-booking system which allows a maximum of 26 walkers travelling in each direction onto the trail each day, avoiding overcrowding and helping keep the route pristine.

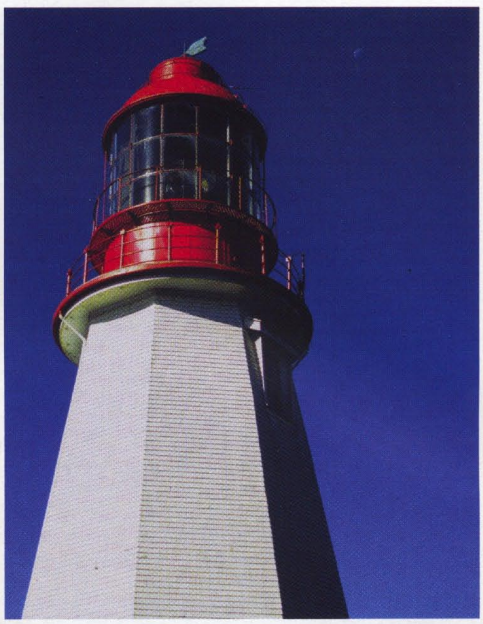
Though the trail passes through edge-of the-world wilderness, it's not an entirely unpeopled landscape. You will see other walkers, and meet the First Nations people that live here. A few souls inhabit the isolated outposts at the lighthouses along the coast, and at one point on the trail First Nations people provide a boat service to cross the beautiful Cheewat River – where they'll also ply you with fresh seafood. And then there's Chez Monique's, a beach camp famous the length of the trail where motherly Monique Nytom conjures up incredible burgers.

On the quieter stretches of the trail, there is abundant wildlife. Bald eagles soar overhead and tiny hummingbirds flit through the forests. Black tail deer, racoon, mink and marten are sometimes seen and on the coast there are colonies of seals and sea lions; with orcas cruising by. Some lucky walkers spot cougars here, or even elusive wolves. Bears roam the forests and beaches so it's essential to use the strengthened bear boxes provided in campsites – or string your food up in an inaccessible spot in a tree.

Our West Coast Trail coincided with the migration of grey whales through the Clayoquot Sound – and viewing these huge creatures in closeup was one of the

"The trail winds through the homelands of the Huu-ay-aht, Ditidaht and Pacheedaht people, custodians of this country for at least 4000 years."







Above left: Contemplating a creek crossing – and perhaps a swim.
Top: Carmanah Lighthouse is one of several lighthouses that alert seafarers.
Above: More ladders. Some have up to 40 rungs and are 25m tall.

NEED TO KNOW

Getting there
The walk is on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island. From Vancouver, take a ferry to Victoria. Buses deliver walkers to the southern trailhead at Port Renfrew. To access the northern trailhead at Bamfield, travel to Nanaimo from Vancouver by ferry, then overland to Port Alberni, and by ferry to Bamfield. Bamfield can also be accessed from Nanaimo by car.

Walk statistics
74km of beach and forest walking through the 25,640 hectare Pacific Rim National Park. 36 ladders – some up to 40 rungs. Two river crossings by boat. Three river crossings by hand-powered cable car. Numerous swing bridges.

Trip duration
Six to seven days. It's worth allowing some extra time for preparation at the trailheads, to sit out bad weather in the tent, or for a rest day when the weather is fine.

When to walk
The trail can only be walked May 1 to September 30 during which a reservation and quota system for daily departures applies. The permit cost CAD$166 in 2008 (approx $A200). Visit **www.pc.gc.ca/pacificrim** for booking info.

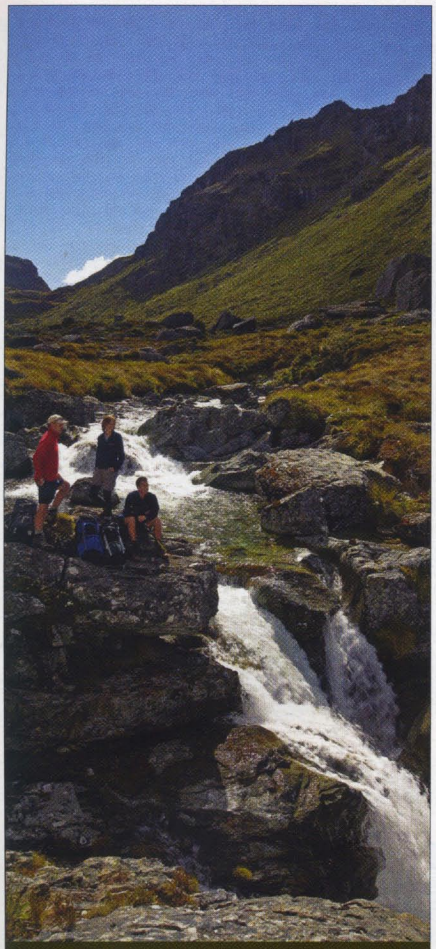
Be prepared
The West Coast Trail is the walking adventure of a lifetime – and a serious undertaking. Don't overestimate your fitness before embarking in the trail. Train on shorter walks with the backpack that you intend to carry. Pack light. Read and understand the tide timetables. Carefully assess surge channels before crossing: the wet rocks around the channels are treacherous. Practice bear safety: know what to do if you encounter a bear, and how to store food at night.

What they don't tell you:
The West Coast Trail is so popular that even with the booking system, it can get crowded in high summer. For a more peaceful trail experience, time your hike in the shoulder seasons of May and September.

Further details:
For more info visit
www.besthike.com/northamerica/canada_west_coast/west_coast_trail.html
Hiking on the Edge – West Coast Trail, Juan de Fuca Trail by Ian Gill and David Nanuk
Hiking the West Coast of Vancouver Island by Tim Leadem

highlights of the journey. Walking through clifftop forest, close the water's edge, we would hear loud exhalations of air. Rushing to a clearing to look down to the cliff-edge ocean, we would see several of the vast creatures barely 30m away. At beach camps, and walking the waterfront during the day, we saw frequent whale waterspouts. It seemed the grey whales were everywhere, and we greeted the many sightings with joy: evidence they had recovered from their brush with extinction.

The forest here is populated by towering cedars, spruce and hemlock – primeval old growth forests that thrive on the rich red soils and over 3m of rain a year. In the shade of these giants – some 60-70m tall – the forest understorey is swathed in moss, so that walking through it sometimes feels like entering an emerald-lined cave.



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Trail history

How did this great hiking trail come into such acclaim? It started with a shipwreck back on January 22, 1906. The 77m vessel SS *Valencia* ran aground just north of Klanawa River on Vancouver Island's west coast. The wild and rugged shoreline bordering a temperate rainforest offered no relief whatsoever and all 126 passengers perished. This tragic event spurred the government at that time to construct a trail between Port Renfrew and Bamfield in case of future shipwrecks as this section of the Pacific had been the site of over 60 shipwrecks since 1854. The present West Coast trail generally follows the route of the historic life saving trail.

The West Coast Trail's beauties are in stopping as much as the walk itself. Camp spots are in glorious beachside settings, usually with a crystal clear river for swimming – and washing the mud off – nearby. Driftwood campfires are allowed, and on our journey we sat round them long into the night, recounting the day's escapades and dreaming of future trips. At day's end, we'd sleep to the gentle wash of the waves, overarched by a velvety sky bright with a billion stars.

Seven days without so much as a cloud – in this infamously soggy, even treacherously wild, domain. A week of magically beautiful walking, challenging enough to make us feel we'd undertaken a worthy adventure. Strong shoulders, brown faces, aching feet and muddy everything – and smiles as big the ocean horizon: that was West Coast Trail bliss.

Walk notes

1. Attend compulsory Parks Canada orientation session. Cross Gordon River by boat to the trails southern access point. A short, difficult 6km walk to Thrasher Cove traversing the highest point of the trail through dense temperate rainforest. Descend to the beach via a series of steep ladders.
2. A strenuous 14km trek along the coastline with tricky routefinding over a jumble of logs and boulders. Surge channels to cross: walk this section inland at high tide. Overnight at Campers Cove.
3. 9km to Walbran Creek including plenty of forest walking – and mud. A cable car crossing and the steepest ladders on the trail at Sandstone and Cullite Creeks.
4. Follow the coastline around Vancouver Point. 11km of mainly beach walking. Take the short side trail to Carmanah Lighthouse to spot sea lions. Camp at Cribs Creek.
5. The longest stretch – 17km to Tsusiat Falls. Hike through rainforest to the Cheewat River boat crossing. Continue to Tsuquadrah Point for spectacular views, and along the coastline through the Hole in The Wall at Tsusiat Point, tides allowing. Camp by gorgeous Tsusiat Falls.
6. Climb ladders to get back onto the forest trail and cross Klanawa River by cable car. Trek through rainforest – often muddy underfoot. Descend ladders to Tsucowis Creek and follow coastline to rockpools at Michigan Creek – tides allowing. Camp on beach. Total 13km.
7. 12km of easy – though potentially muddy – rainforest walking. Side trip to Pachena Lighthouse for spectacular views. The last series of ladders lead down to the northern trailhead near Bamfield.

Walk Notes

WEST COAST TRAIL, VANCOUVER ISLAND

Time/Distance: 74km/6-7 days | Degree: challenging

