

Riding swells, avoiding wipe-outs at beginner's camp

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

NOOTKA, British Columbia — A bald eagle soared overhead and a curious seal poked its head out of the water, about 20 feet from where I was resting on my surfboard, waiting for the perfect wave. Jeremy Philips, our instructor, was giving my husband a few tips on how to spot a good wave and how to pop up onto his surfboard at the perfect moment.

I was trying to listen, but I admit I was distracted by the views: In front of us was a sprawling beach covered in smooth, round stones that were so polished by the ocean they looked as if they had been crafted with an artist's touch.

Mountains dotted with patches of snow and ice rippled away into the distance and a creek slipped out of the woods — a dense forest of ancient spruce, cedar, and yew — and spilled into the ocean. Behind us, there was nothing but thousands of miles of open water.

“Storms brew in New Zealand and Antarctica and create big swells that end up here,” Philips said, explaining how and why British Columbia is so blessed with good surf.

We had gone to one of the most rugged and remote areas of the province to learn how to surf: the exposed west coast of Nootka, a small island off the west coast of Vancouver Island. Here, Clay Hunting and Silvi Rautter, owners of Tatchu Adventures, run a wilderness surf camp for beginner to expert surfers, who come from around the world to catch waves and improve their skills.

There is little here except two tree houses, a small lodge, a cedar sauna, and miles of empty coastline. Occasionally, a hiker wanders along the beach (the 22-mile Nootka Trail follows this coast), Hunting's “neighbor” Pat stops by (her house is in the woods, barely visible, about a quarter of a mile away), or a fishing boat slips past. Otherwise, there isn't another soul on water or land, as far as the eye can see. That's no surprise, since getting here was a real adventure.

We drove from Victoria to Tahsis, a seven-hour trip that took us through picturesque communities along Vancouver Island's east coast and then west through Strathcona Provincial Park — B.C.'s oldest and largest park, where we saw the Comox Glacier and several bears — and along a winding dirt logging road that crosses several mountain passes and has grades of up to 15 percent. Eventually, we reached Tahsis, a tucked-away village with 500 residents surrounded by the Rugged Mountain Range.

From Tahsis, Tatchu Adventures took us on a one-hour ride by Zodiac down the fiord-like Tahsis Inlet to the eastern side of Nootka Island. It was another 45-minute drive across the island by four-wheel-drive vehicle to reach the Beano Creek Eco Surf Village.

The surf camp hosts an average of eight, but no more than a dozen, people at once. We happened to be the only surfers when we were there last month.

Tatchu Adventures offers four-to seven-day surf packages about seven months of the year. The best time for beginners is July through early September, when the waves are smaller. Intermediate and advanced surfers should shoot for September and October or April to June, when the surf kicks up and offers more challenging waves.

Tatchu Adventures provides all surf gear, including learner boards and wet suits, plus all meals, snacks, and drinks. We just needed to bring clothes, a towel, sunscreen, and a sleeping bag.

Surfers can stay in the main lodge or one of two tree houses Hunting has built by hand using wood he milled on site from old cedar and spruce trees. Each tree house sleeps up to four people and has double beds, a wood stove for heat, and a big deck with ocean views. Surfers also can sleep in tents on the beach — our choice.

My husband had never tried surfing. I had been on a surfboard only once in my life, when I took a three-hour lesson at Waikiki Beach in Hawaii. On Oahu, I wore just a bathing suit and shared the beach with dozens and dozens of surfers. On Nootka, I wore a full-length wet suit with a neoprene hood and booties, and I was sharing the surf with only large harbor seals and an instructor who was accustomed to teaching beginners. About 35 percent of the people who come here have little to no experience on a surfboard.

Philips spent the first day teaching us how to hop up onto the board — a frog jump — and



GLOBE PHOTOS/KARI J. BODNARCHUK

Jeremy Philips, an instructor at Tatchu Adventures wilderness surf camp; a treehouse where guests may stay, built from wood milled on-site by co-owner Clay Hunting; the Rugged Mountain Range from the Tahsis Inlet en route to Nootka Island.

correctly position our feet for good balance, plus how to time our paddling and pop-ups so we could catch a wave. We practiced for hours and managed to stand for brief moments before belly-flopping into the surf.

When the waves died down, he showed us how to do turtle rolls and duck dives, to get through waves that we weren't going to ride and to avoid getting tumbled around by the surf.

He also explained the different types of waves found in the area, like left-hand reef breaks and wind-protected point breaks, and how to assess how they would break. He explained surf etiquette, such as how to paddle in a lineup and not drop in on someone else's wave. Mostly, though, we just practiced and played, doing our best to stand on our boards for more than a few seconds at a time.

At the end of the day, there was nothing better for easing tired

muscles than the sauna, which Hunting had built with 18-inch-wide cedar planks next to a little stream in the woods, in full view of the ocean. We spent hours there, sipping cold drinks and basking in the warmth of the wood stove, followed by a refreshing solar shower and big dinner.

Rautter makes fresh, organic dishes — over a gas camping stove — that could rival any found at Vancouver restaurants. We had special muesli and buckwheat pancakes with fruit and organic syrup for breakfast, quesadillas and salmon shish kebabs for lunch, and “happy chicken” (free-range chicken), vegetable lasagna, or curry for dinner.

When we weren't surfing, sitting in the sauna, or eating, we wandered the empty beaches in search of Japanese glass balls (floats from old Japanese fishing nets, now a treasure along these shores), hiked through old-growth

spruce forests, and fished for Pacific salmon.

At night, we had bonfires on the beach, swapped stories, and enjoyed Rautter's fabulous deserts. She even baked a special Austrian chocolate cake and offered us champagne after hearing it was my husband's birthday. Such is their hospitality.

“We're all about the experience and making friends with the people who come here,” said Hunting. “Surfing has become so commercialized, but this is surfing that still has some soul to it. And people really love this environment.”

That night, my husband and I slept in a tent on the beach, next to a giant piece of driftwood — a sitka spruce that measured at least 15 feet in circumference. We fell asleep listening to the sound of the surf rolling the beach stones around like marbles, and we awoke to the sound of a dog sniffing around our tent. When we

mentioned this to Rautter the next morning, over our buckwheat pancakes, she said, “The dogs were with us last night. We don't let them out because of the wolves.”

Oh, to be so close to wildlife — and, sometimes, blessedly, not know it's there.

We spent the next two days practicing our surf moves, finally learning how to stand and ride the waves at least a few feet — a big accomplishment for me, given the thick wet suit and heavy booties I was wearing.

Then we hopped back into the Zodiac and trolled for salmon as we headed back to Tahsis. As we cruised up the jade-colored inlet, an eagle flew overhead and we had a clear view of the mainland's mountains as they disappeared in the summer haze.

Boston-based Kari J. Bodnarchuk is an adventure and travel writer.

If you go . . .

BRITISH COLUMBIA (Canada)

Nootka Island

Tahsis

Comox

Vancouver

Strathcona Provincial Park

Pacific Ocean

Victoria

WASH. (US)

Seattle

75 MILES

SOURCE: ESRI

GLOBE STAFF MAP

- How to get there**
- Rent a car in Victoria and make the seven-hour drive to Tahsis. Follow Route 1 and Inland Island Highway 19 north to Campbell River and then Route 28 west to Gold River, continuing on a maintained dirt logging road to Tahsis along what is dubbed the Tree to Sea Drive. From Tahsis, Tatchu Adventures transfers surfers to the Beano Creek Eco Surf Village on Nootka Island via high-speed boat.
- Where to stay**
- Seaside RV and Campground**
1235 South Maquinna Drive, Tahsis
250-934-6689
Next to public boat launch, restaurants, and shops. Campsites from \$17.
- Maquinna Resort**
1400 South Maquinna Drive, Tahsis
250-934-6367
www.maquinnaresort.com
A hotel and pub on the waterfront, with dive and retail shops. Rooms \$110-\$150.
- Gentle Valley Guest House**
523 Alpine View, Tahsis
250-934-5557
www.gentlevalley.biz
A guest suite or bed-and-breakfast rooms available, \$60-\$122.
- Home Suite Home**
570 Alpine View, Tahsis
250-934-6232, 888-617-3474
www.tahsisbc.com/home
Newly renovated guest house and suite; two or three bedrooms with kitchen, cable TV, and barbecue. Suites from \$90.
- Barnacle Beach B&B**
1107 South Maquinna Drive, Tahsis
250-934-6238
www.barnaclebeach.com
An old schoolteacher's residence turned into a cozy bed-and-breakfast. Rooms from \$85.
- Where to eat**
- Cook Shack**
1387 South Maquinna Drive, Tahsis
250-934-5565
A funky cafe on the waterfront, offering sandwiches, home-baked goods, lasagnas, chicken wings, soups, and burritos, \$5-\$18.
- Millhouse Cafe**
187 Head Bay Road, Tahsis
250-934-6665
Ocean-view cafe offering lasagna, spaghetti, and its famous spar tree burger (a local favorite), \$10-\$20.
- Marina Cantina**
771 South Maquinna Drive
Tahsis at Westview Marina
250-934-7672
Traditional Mexican and Mexican-inspired dishes, \$8-\$20.
- Ocean View Cafe**
115 Alpine View, Tahsis
250-934-6232
Overlooking Tahsis Inlet, this cafe features standard pasta and burgers, plus East Indian specialties such as curried chicken and samosas. Entrees \$6-\$18.
- What to do**
- Tatchu Adventures**
888-895-2011, 250-934-6602
www.tatchuadventures.com
Four- to seven-day, learn-to-surf trips at Beano Creek Eco Surf Village on Nootka Island (about \$1,070 to \$1,570) for surfers of all levels. A four- to six-day surf camp also is available for groups of intermediate to advanced surfers; surfers take day trips along a 100-mile stretch of coast between the Brooks and Hesquiat peninsulas on Vancouver Island's west coast.
- The Nootka Trail**
A 22-mile wilderness hiking trail along the quiet and remote west coast of Nootka Island that typically takes four days to complete, and is free of the crowds, fees, and reservation systems on many other popular British Columbia trails. It's a relatively easy and level hike for experienced, self-contained backpackers. Along the way, you may see whales — greys, humpbacks, and orcas — plus land-based wildlife, old native sites, sea caves, and forests of old-growth spruce, hemlock, and cedar.
- Village of Tahsis**
250-934-6344
www.villageoftahsis.com
Tahsis is popular for scuba diving, sea kayaking, hiking, fishing, and wildlife viewing.
- Information**
www.tahsis.ca
www.tahsisbc.com
www.villageoftahsis.com.