

Vancouver Island: Ancient Forest Giants, Then Whales Off Tofino

A 3-Day Road Trip — Real Lodges, Real Prices, 2026

DURATION

3 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

June – September

the driest, mildest stretch of the year, with long daylight and the best odds for whale watching — gray whales migrate past in spring, while humpbacks and orcas are most reliable July–September; the west coast gets over 100 inches of rain October–April, when many Tofino resorts drop their rates but Pacific Rim Highway driving is wetter and slower

FROM

\$650 USD / person

for 2 people, incl. rental car, 2 nights' lodging, Butchart Gardens admission, and a whale-watching tour

DAY 1

Victoria's Inner Harbour & Butchart Gardens

A Victorian-era harbor town to start, then an afternoon in one of the most famous gardens in North America, planted in the pit of an old limestone quarry.

Rental Car Pickup — Victoria International Airport (YYJ)

~25 minutes to downtown Victoria · from \$55 USD / day

Vancouver Island has no road bridge to the mainland, so most of this trip starts either off a flight into Victoria or a BC Ferries crossing from Tsawwassen to Swartz Bay (~1.5 hours, from \$49 USD per vehicle) — either way, a rental car is essential for the drive north to Tofino.

Victoria's Inner Harbour & the Fairmont Empress

~2 hours, self-guided · free to stroll; Empress afternoon tea from ~\$85 USD / person

A working harbor ringed by the ivy-covered, century-old Fairmont Empress hotel and the domed BC Legislature building, with street performers, seaplanes landing on the water, and totem poles along the seawall — the Empress's storied afternoon tea is worth booking ahead if there's time for it.

The Butchart Gardens

~3 hours, self-guided · ~\$30 USD / person (peak summer season, less in shoulder months)

A 55-acre former limestone quarry that Jennie Butchart began turning into a garden in 1904, now one of the most-visited gardens in the world — the sunken garden, the Italian garden, and the rose garden are the highlights, and summer evenings bring the whole place lit up after dark.

The Butchart Gardens · butchartgardens.com

Overnight — The Oswego Hotel

From \$230–\$280 USD / night, for 2 people

An all-suite boutique hotel in the quiet James Bay neighborhood, a short walk from the Inner Harbour, with a rooftop terrace and full kitchens in every room.

The Oswego Hotel · oswegohotelvictoria.com

DAY 2

Over the Island's Spine to Tofino

A self-drive north through 800-year-old trees and a market with goats on its sod roof, then west over the island's mountain spine to the open Pacific.

Drive — Victoria to Cathedral Grove & Coombs

~2.5 hours with stops via Hwy 1 & 19 · self-guided

North out of Victoria to Cathedral Grove in MacMillan Provincial Park, where an easy loop trail passes Douglas firs up to 800 years old and 9 feet across, then a short backtrack to Coombs Old Country Market, famous for the goats grazing on its living sod roof each summer alongside a bakery, cider mill, and ice cream stand.

Old Country Market, Coombs · oldcountrymarket.com

Pacific Rim Highway — Port Alberni to Tofino

~2.5 hours via Hwy 4 · self-guided

The island's only paved road west, climbing over Sutton Pass and running along the turquoise length of Kennedy Lake before dropping into the rainforest of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve — narrow and winding in places, with pullouts worth taking for the lake views.

Sunset at Chesterman Beach

~1 hour, self-guided · free

A long, flat stretch of sand that splits around Frank Island at low tide, backed by rainforest and facing straight into the open Pacific — one of the most reliable sunset spots on the island, and the same beach the next morning's surf lesson uses.

Overnight — Long Beach Lodge Resort

From \$300–\$380 USD / night, for 2 people

A timber-frame lodge directly on Cox Bay with a fireplace-lined great room looking straight out at the surf, plus a restaurant serving Vancouver Island seafood after a full day on the road.

Long Beach Lodge Resort · longbeachlodgeresort.com

DAY 3

Whales, Waves & the Drive Home

A morning on the water looking for whales, an afternoon learning to surf the same swells, and the long drive back across the island.

Whale Watching — Jamie's Whaling Station

~2.5–3 hours · ~\$120 USD / person

A zodiac or covered-vessel tour out of Tofino harbor into Clayoquot Sound, tracking gray whales, humpbacks, and resident orcas depending on the season, with black bears often spotted foraging along the shoreline on the way back in.

Jamie's Whaling Station · jamies.com

Surf Lesson — Surf Sister, Chesterman Beach

~2.5 hours, board & wetsuit included · ~\$85 USD / person

A beginner-friendly group lesson on Tofino's gentle, sandy-bottomed beach break — Surf Sister has been teaching visitors to surf here since the 1990s, wetsuits and all, whatever the water temperature.

Surf Sister Surf School · surfsister.com

Lunch — Wolf in the Fog

~1 hour · \$30–\$40 USD / person

Tofino's best-known restaurant, built around Vancouver Island seafood and foraged local ingredients in a wood-and-glass dining room — a fitting last meal in town before the long drive back.

Wolf in the Fog · wolfinthefog.com

Departure — Drive to Victoria or Nanaimo, Rental Car Return

~4.5 hours to Victoria (or ~2.5 hours to Nanaimo for the mainland ferry) · self-guided

The same Pacific Rim Highway and island spine in reverse, closing the loop on a trip that ran from a quarry turned into a garden to a beach where the whales and the surfers share the same water.