



The writer (in orange), her daughter (in blue) and friends cycle Long Beach as high tide approaches.

Kit Spence for The Globe and Mail

After the summer crowds, the vast beaches of B.C.'s Pacific Rim give cyclists a wild ride

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When the summer crowds have gone and the wild weather has yet to hit, Tofino's beaches are at their best. It's the lull before the storms. In theory, anyway.

Our plan is to pedal the glorious stretches of hard-packed sand, surf pounding beside us, the wind at our backs. But as we load up our bikes for a weekend on the beach, the weather isn't co-operating. The forecast is for wind and rain. Will our plan be scuttled?

Our first morning dawns dark and dismal. We head to the closest surf shop with our 16-year-old daughter and two of her friends to outfit them for surfing. "You better go right now," the woman at Westside Surf School warns. "We're supposed to get big surf later today and the rest of the weekend."

We drop the kids at the north end of Chesterman Beach, a favoured surfing destination, unload our bikes and pull on full weather armour: rain hat, rain coat, rain pants, gloves. Ten minutes later the sun breaks through, as if to laugh at our precautions.

We cycle past the kids, now black dots bobbing in the surf trying to catch a wave. We pedal down the beach, feeling joyfully alive and free. No helmets, no problem!

As we ride close to the breaking surf, our wheels kick up water, and we race back up the beach before the next wave. We make big circles on the smooth sand, taking full advantage of the expanse at low tide. We're like big kids playing in the sand.

The next day, the waves are too big for surfing, so we rent more bikes and head to Long Beach, about 20 kilometres south of Tofino and part of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. When we're finally assembled, we realize we'll be racing against the incoming tide. Can we get to the end of the six-kilometre beach and back before the whole thing is under water? "Floating logs are a huge public safety issue," I was warned earlier on the phone by a Parks Canada official.

There are only two places to enter or exit Long Beach: Incinerator Rock, where we're starting, and a spot about half a kilometre south. With an eye to the breakers, we take off.

Long Beach is justifiably famous. An endless crescent of windswept sand, it follows the curve of Wickaninnish Bay, waves crashing down one side and a wall of impenetrable greenery growing up the other.

We dodge driftwood and manoeuvre around coils of slick seaweed. A flock of low-flying sandpipers overtakes us, as perfectly synchronized as Canada's Snowbirds but silent, each turning its white belly toward us at precisely the same second.

After a kilometre or so, we see no more people; it's just us, the birds and the roaring surf.

We reach the headland that separates Long Beach from Combers Beach, stop just long enough to catch our breath, then head back. The waves are creeping ominously closer, but now the wind is at our backs. We're sailing, not biking! And when Incinerator Rock appears out of the mist, we grin and relax. We're home free.

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