

# Times Colonist (Victoria)

## Olympic dreams: A parkland paradise lies just across the waters in Washington state

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: The writer watches daughter Alanna Spence, 12, on the world's largest spruce tree at Lake Quinault on the edge of Olympic National Park. Suzanne Morphet photo

Photo: Suzanne Morphet photo / Visitors to Sol Duc Hot Springs in Olympic National Park have a choice of pools at different temperatures.

Colour Photo: Sea stacks loom in the morning mist at Ruby Beach on the Pacific coast at Olympic National Park. Suzanne Morphet photo

Bigger, higher, closer. Those three words kept coming to mind as we sailed home by ferry to Victoria from Port Angeles, after four days amid jaw-dropping scenery in Olympic National Park in Washington.

While we are blessed with lots of parks on Vancouver Island, none is quite as big as Olympic. Nor are the mountains as high or the trees as tall. And perhaps best of all -- for those of us living on southern Vancouver Island -- Olympic is closer than either Strathcona Provincial Park or Pacific Rim National Park, our two most impressive parks.

In under three hours, including the ferry from Victoria, you can be on top of Hurricane Ridge with its spectacular views and instant access to alpine wilderness.

Where do you start in a place that offers so much that it has been designated a World Heritage Park and an International Biosphere Reserve? Olympic is really three parks in one -- mountains, ocean and rainforest. We decided to start in one of the park's rainforests, at Lake Quinault in the southwest corner of the park, and work our way north.

When we stood beside the rain gauge at Lake Quinault Lodge on the first evening, we had to look up; the marker for rainfall this year was already well over our heads, at about three metres. On average, the area gets about 3.6 metres, about 30 centimetres more than Tofino. All that rain supports incredible biodiversity; 50 species of moss alone grow in the park.

Perhaps the serious rainfall explains why the owners have made Lake Quinault Lodge such a comfortable place to curl up in. Sink into one of the leather couches or chairs that surround the floor-to-ceiling rock fireplace in the main lodge and you won't want to go outside, even if it's sunny. Of course, the views of the lake are enticing, as are the Adirondack chairs on the lawn that slopes to the shore.

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The lodge was built in 1926 and designed by the same architect who designed the Old Faithful Inn at Yellowstone Park. With no TVs or phones for distraction, this is truly a place to relax and read. But with only a day and a half to look around, we didn't

have time to lounge. After we spent the morning hiking through a forest lush with moss, lichen and ferns, a retired park warden urged us to drive up the river valley where he had spotted a dead elk the previous evening.

"Why do we want to see a dead elk?" my husband asked. "Because we may not see a live one and a dead one is better than none," I replied, also secretly hoping that a bear or cougar had been attracted to the dead animal and we could observe a wilderness feast, so to speak.

The Lake Quinault area is home to several herds of Roosevelt elk, the same kind that populate Vancouver Island. In fact, President Theodore Roosevelt created Mount Olympus National Monument -- the forerunner to the park -- primarily to protect the sub-alpine calving grounds and summer range of the elk.

On our drive to find the dead elk, we made the first of many stops in what became a weekend hobby: looking up in awe at enormous trees. "Big tree," read a sign so small that only our 12-year-old eagle-eyed daughter, Alanna, spotted it. Half a kilometre down the path and we arrived at not just any old big tree, but the world's largest spruce, a Sitka so big it was hard to get close to the trunk because of the massive roots growing out from the base.

Alanna clambered up and over the roots, then stretched out her arms to make some sense of the tree's enormous circumference of 58 feet, 11 inches (almost 18 metres). We figured it would take about 15 "Alannas" with arms outstretched to circle the tree.

Back in the car, we drove along the lakeshore, past waterfalls tumbling down the verdant mountainside until we came to the Quinault River and eventually the grassy shoreline where we were supposed to find the dead elk. On our second drive by, I spotted it: a swollen tan belly protruded from the grass about 50 metres from the road.

Not seeing any sign of other wildlife, we got out of the car and walked over for a closer look, my husband holding his nose. Sure enough, something else had also found it and had eaten most of the rump. According to the retired park ranger, Roger Blain, the elk had likely died as a result of gorging on

grass after a winter diet of twigs. Another 24 to 48 hours and it would probably be gone, dinner for some more fortunate creatures.

On our drive back to the lodge, we discovered something else dead that was also providing nutrients for other forms of life: the world's largest western red cedar. This tree is still standing, but the top half of its trunk has broken off and the core is partly hollowed out, exposing beautiful golden-red wood. Even decapitated, it is enormous. Out of its branches grow many new plants including, amazingly, a sizeable Douglas fir tree.

Leaving the rainforest behind, we headed to the coast and our next night's rest at Kalaloch Lodge. Perched on a bluff looking over the Pacific Ocean and the largest collection of driftwood we have ever laid eyes on, Kalaloch Lodge offers the same rustic accommodation that Tofino would have provided visitors before becoming an international tourist destination. We quickly checked out our cabin, and then headed to the beach where a wedding was underway at one end, parents with young kids were exploring the shoreline, and bigger kids were building forts and bonfires. Like Long Beach, this beach is big enough for everyone.

The next day we continued driving up the coast and stopped to explore Ruby Beach, recommended for its imposing sea stacks. These islands were once attached to the mainland, but the relentless pounding of waves has eroded the softer parts of the rock, leaving only the harder rock behind. Ruby Beach has one huge sea stack that is cut off from the mainland even at low tide and a few smaller ones dot the shoreline. Our first glimpse of the beach shrouded in morning fog with the sea stacks standing like sentinels elicited one word: "wow."

Our daughter was particularly looking forward to our next stop: Sol Duc hot springs. The weekend had been on the cool side and we were ready for a long soak in some hot water. The resort at Sol Duc today is not anywhere near as grand as the original. Built in 1912, the first resort had a four-star hotel with 165 guest rooms as well as a sanatorium for 100 patients seeking health benefits from the natural mineral water. The resort was renowned and people would travel to it from all over the U.S. and as far away as Europe. Alas, it burned to the ground four years after opening.

The cabins on the property today were built in the 1980s and are comfortable, though not luxurious. But the mineral water seeping out of the ground at up to 56 degrees Celsius still provides the same good reason to come here. Three soaking pools are maintained between 36 and 41 degrees Celsius. When you get too hot, you can cool off in the large chlorinated swimming pool.

And when you get hungry, you can have lunch on the patio or dine inside for breakfast and dinner. (Breakfast was especially memorable; the strawberry pancakes are bursting with juicy berries and the French toast was delectable.)

Bathing and eating are not the only reasons to come here, though. The nearby waterfall on the Sol Duc River is apparently the most photographed falls in the park. This is not simply because it's easily accessible -- a 20 minute walk and you're there -- but because it's a spectacle not to be missed. The river splits into four arms of foaming white water at the beginning of its descent, then rejoins before plunging into a deep, narrow chasm.

We had time for one more spectacle before the weekend ended, one I had been anticipating the entire trip: a drive to the top of Hurricane Ridge and -- if it wasn't too early in the season -- a hike among some alpine wildflowers.

When we got to the top, snow still blocked most of the trails; any hike would be short. But miraculously, flowers were in bloom next to patches of snow, as if no time could be wasted. Bright pink, soft pink, white, purple ... they were a riot of colour against the brown earth and grey, threatening sky.

As our week-end adventure ended in a burst of hail, we ran back to the car laughing at our unexpected soaking and revelling in the pleasure of finding a park so close to home that offers so much diversity.

## IF YOU GO

The MV Coho has four sailings a day each way from Victoria to Port Angeles in the summer.

For lodging in or near the park, Lake Quinault Lodge, Kalaloch Lodge and Sol Duc Hot Springs Resort are all operated by ARAMARK Lodging.

For information and rates go to  
[www.visitlakequinault.com](http://www.visitlakequinault.com) (800-562-6672)  
[www.visitkalaloch.com](http://www.visitkalaloch.com) (866-525-2562) and  
[www.visitsolduc.com](http://www.visitsolduc.com) (866-476-5382).