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## In British Columbia, Where the Sun Set on an Empire

By SIMON WINCHESTER

ON the navigation charts it is barely more than a dot at the southern outer end of a generally overlooked deep-water notch, one of scores of such cliff-bound, tree-rimmed inlets in the otherwise wildly indented Pacific coast of Vancouver Island. Yet for the first half of the last century, the tiny [fishing](#) village that this dot represented enjoyed a fame and reputation far beyond its size: it was a place of vital geostrategic importance, among the most crucial links that held together the vast extent of the British Empire.

Bamfield, [British Columbia](#), was a key station on the fragile line of telegraph cables that kept [London](#) talking to its farthest-flung outposts. British schoolchildren of my generation in the years just after World War II had the names of all the stations on the line down pat: we knew that the Imperial Morse Codes — some busily dispatching fleets and armies, most others cozily announcing births and weddings and idle gossip — chattered out from Whitehall through [Cornwall](#) to the southwest tip of [England](#) under the Atlantic to [Halifax](#) in [Nova Scotia](#) across the Canadian prairies to this unknown and unimagined coastal hamlet we called Bamfield and then by way of the longest submarine cable ever laid (4,000 miles of copper and insulating goo from the tropical gutta-percha tree) down to the atoll of Fanning Island in the mid-Pacific and farther down to Suva in [Fiji](#) and finally to Southport in [Australia](#) and [Auckland](#) in [New Zealand](#).

But time caught up with Bamfield. In 1959 the cable station closed as telegraphy gave way to electronics. Morse was eventually abandoned, the satellites took over, and the village reverted to slumbering anonymity. Today, Bamfield remains just a cluster of pretty wooden fishermen's houses — and a few bed-and-breakfasts for the more curious of wanderers — nestled around a bay formed by two tiny peninsulas of cliffs, a hidden place snuggled out of the Pacific's formidable winter gales between huge forests of cedar and spruce.

Its untrodden sandy [beaches](#) and sea stacks sacred to the very active local indigenous people meet an ocean crowded with humpbacks and gray whales and starfish and halibut and pilchard, and with squadrons of the most enormous and, to the delight of sport fishermen, eternally fighting-mad salmon.

In recent years a stretch of the Pacific coast of Vancouver Island has become extraordinarily fashionable. The former fishing port of Tofino, some 40 miles north of Bamfield, has advanced in no more than a decade from a stellar destination for a few busloads of savvy bohemians to a grande-luxe place for [Vancouver](#) weekenders and the [Toronto](#) or [Seattle](#) cappucinocracy. In Tofino and its neighbor port of Ucluelet, faded fishing shacks have given way to hotels with \$600-a-night prices, and there is soon to be a [Jack Nicklaus](#) golf course. Construction cranes and chain saws whine all the daylight hours in the

ceaseless creation of new moneymaking structures, and so many visitors arrived last summer that the town's water supply dried up for three weeks.

But in a sturdy old coastal cutter called the Lady Rose, or in a newer steel-hulled cruiser, it is entirely possible to escape the avarice-madness of Tofino and Ucluelet and chug south across Barkley Sound toward Bamfield — and into another universe, peaceful and quietly beautiful.

Thirty minutes from the port in Ucluelet on the cruiser in mid-July, all sound had faded. A light wind blew in from the ocean, and the skipper had stopped his boat to watch three 30-ton humpback whales lunging from the waves or circling to make so-called bubble-nets in which they like to catch clouds of small fish. Gray whales were blowing on the horizon, salmon were jumping out of the calms, white-sided dolphins were playing under the bow, and cormorants were [diving](#) to retrieve morsels that their grander cousins had ignored. In consequence of this diversion, we were late in arriving at the dock: “Bamfield time,” someone remarked — it must be a reaction to those long years when everything in the village had to be done to the second, on strict orders from London.

The least pretty of the cable buildings still stands, a three-story concrete structure built for communications security (it was heavily guarded by kilt-wearing Scottish sentries during World War II) and known by the cable men as the Potala, or as Alcatraz. An old fretworked cedar building that housed the operators was bulldozed in the 1960s. The remaining buildings, and a cluster of rather agreeable new structures, house a marine sciences center run by five universities from British Columbia and [Alberta](#), primarily for students and professional researchers, but also with limited public programs. The center has specialists on every imaginable denizen of the ocean from seaweed and starfish to octopuses and goose-necked barnacles.

Perhaps 300 people live in Bamfield full-time, many in the cluster of houses beside the harbor. The others are in a First Nation village a mile away, where 100 or so members of the Huu-ay-aht, part the Nuu-chah-nulth tribes, live and try to preserve their crafts, their customs and their language. The two communities, physically separate but bonded by the trials of remote location and unforgiving winter storms, seem at ease with each other. For a visitor, myriad fascinations of Indian life are all around — a dugout [canoe](#) here, a burial ground there and feast days and the occasional potlatch serving as reminders of the cultural antiquity of a people who have inhabited this coast for very much longer than any European.

The sea — deep, blue, freighted with long Pacific swells, terrifying with southeasterly storms in winter and rightly regarded as the graveyard for the three centuries' worth of ships whose wrecks are scattered up and down the chain of islands off the coast — dominates life in town.

Supplies (and the doctor and dentist) mostly come by ship — an 50-mile logging road connects the village with Port Alberni, but locals suggest forgetting its existence. A pair of water taxis shuttle people from one side of town to another, everyone has a [kayak](#) or a skiff or a dinghy or a tiny yacht, and the town maintains a boardwalk that allows landlubbers to walk along the shore.

The notoriously difficult West Coast Trail runs south from Bamfield to the town of Port Renfrew: the walkers who brave its rigors — dizzying cliff-top ledges, 100-foot ladders, rope bridges across bottomless chasms — are soon made aware that it was created first as a rescue path, government-made so that mariners stranded on the coast could walk out to safety. The local lighthouse keepers (some west coast Canadian lights are still manned) are accommodating and friendly; it is said that Norby at Cape Beale and Sylvia at Pachena Point will tell stories of lost mariners and great seas that will stand your hair on end.

The winter storms are every bit as much an attraction as the empty white-sand beaches; Brunhilde Niederacher, an artist whose tiny bed-and-breakfast, West Coast Magic, stands high above Brady's Beach, known as the finest of all the local secret island seaside coves, was forced for safety to stand in sheeting rain outside her house for one terrifying hour last winter as a hundred-year storm snapped 30 enormous hemlocks and a Sitka spruce that was fully 10 feet in diameter. A few brave souls come to Bamfield for no other reason than to see a storm like that; they leave shaken, it is said, unable to forget the bedrock's vibrating under the titanic hammer blows of the waves.

In summer, though, the seas are calm and the skies are blue for weeks. On a small boat one can venture right out to the open ocean, where the swells are long and ponderous and the only land on the western horizon is [Japan](#). But the islands that stand between Bamfield and that deep sea — Fleming, Helby, Diana and Edward King and a handful of nameless skerries — are themselves rich with beaches and sea caves. Perhaps the most spectacular cave, on Edward King Island, is a 100-yard-long tunnel — one end loud with the heaving pale green sea and swells and spume, the rocks heavy with starfish and barnacles; the other opening up deep inside the rain forest — a secret place of great moss-covered trees and with ravens, hawks and ospreys that all seem quite careless of the sea so close beside.

A town so tight knit and far from mainstream society is full of hidden intrigues and eccentrics, and the longer one stays the more engaging are its complexities. Bamfield, with its extraordinary history, seems the perfect subject for a novel, though whether by Stephen King or Carl Hiaasen or Patricia Cornwell depends on how long you stay, and whom you meet.

But it is also the perfect place just to read a novel — by the fire, in the quiet, with no more than the sibilant sea in the background, and the high Pacific winds sweeping gently over the trees. Its abiding peace is just a part of its charm. Once it was known by all the schoolchildren of [Britain](#); now it is an all-but-forgotten little sea-girt village, no more than an insignificant dot at the southern end of a tiny notch in a Canadian Pacific cliff — and all the more delightful and memorable for being so.

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