

Rita & Ian's Newsletter (Issue 3)

February 9, 2009

We have *lots* to report this time round! Let's start with some rather mundane news about our daily routine here, because something rather extraordinary has happened, something that no-one who knew us would ever have suspected might come to pass. Rita has discovered the joys of getting up early in the morning — really early. Our regular morning start time is now 5:30 a.m. Yes, really! This has all arisen because Rita has started going to yoga (specifically Bikram Hot Yoga, which is done in a very hot and sweaty room, which sounds charming), and they have a 6:00 a.m. session that she can just get to on time if she jumps on her bike and spins her little legs. While all this yogic activity is going on, Ian either goes to work, does chores, or cycles to the swimming pool for a bit of a workout. That really is quite a bit of a workout, since the pool is about 10 km from our house, and Victoria is not flat. I'm having to start very slowly with the swimming workouts, since I'm already pretty knackered by the time I arrive at the pool, and cycling home afterwards isn't any easier!

Our flat is starting to look a little more homely. We now have a bed of our own, which finally arrived after three missed meetings with the delivery guy (including one where he really distinguished himself by saying "You know, it just completely slipped my mind"!). It's a nice futon, and we're going to get some tatami mats from Vancouver some time soon to put it on, which will make it even nicer. (Tatami are Japanese mats used for flooring in traditional houses. They're made of rice straw, and when the sun comes through the window in the morning, they make your bedroom smell like a stable! Lovely!) We've also taken delivery of an **ENORMOUS** beanbag, which is easily big enough for two to cuddle on, and is also big enough to safely dive across the room onto it. Rita might get one soon too.

In other news, our stuff has arrived in Canada, all 43 boxes of it. We don't have it quite yet, since it was only unloaded from the ship in Montreal this afternoon, but it's on its way here. More bikes, more clothes, more frying pans, and books, lovely books! And probably more handling and customs fees to get our sweaty paws on it all, but hey, that's the price you pay for moving to "British Columbia: The Best Place On Earth" (seen on the side of a bus this morning).

So, we're getting back into sporty mode a bit after a couple of weeks of settling in. Rita is going to try to go to yoga every day this week, and Ian is swimming in the mornings and biking (did a nice ride along the seaside last week!) and running (down to the beach and back up through the forest, and around the university campus). It's all very very good.

But anyway, enough of that sort of routine stuff. You'll be wanting to know what we've been doing with our weekends! (Weekdays are filled with work, which we're both finding

very interesting, but is probably of limited interest to most of you, so we'll skip lightly over that.)

Last weekend, we did a bit of walking. Saturday morning, Rita went to yoga while Ian worked his way through a massive shopping list in town. It was well worth getting the chores and errands out of the way, because it meant we could go for a nice walk with some of the people from Organic Athlete Victoria, a bunch of "sporty vegans" we've hooked up with¹. There was us, Dave (OA Vic president, bike racer, and all round good egg), Jen, Julia and Sketcher (Julia's little dog). We headed off to Thetis Lake, a lake (!) in some woods near to Victoria. We bimbled around the lake for a couple of hours, looking at the trees and the water (lots of ice, so a bit cold for swimming!), and laughing at Sketcher as he picked a fight with every other dog he met, even ones that could eat him for breakfast. When particularly scary dogs were coming, Julia would pick Sketcher up and put him under her arm, just to avoid having him being eaten by a pit bull (he was eyeing one of those up at one point, which might have been a bit messy). After walking, we went to Costco, a vast warehouse supermarket that was a bit of a culture shock for us. But Dave wanted to get some cheap frozen corn, and who are we to stand between a man and his cheap frozen corn? After stopping off for some Thai food, we got the bus home. A very nice day!

Sunday morning was taken up with sleeping. Those 5:30 starts take it out of you a bit! In the afternoon, we cycled north from our house to the base of Mount Douglas, a little hill (not really a mountain!) overlooking Victoria. We locked our bikes up by the sea, then walked off up through the woods to the top of the hill. We saw lots of nice trees, had a good view of Victoria and the surrounding countryside from the top (including the Gowlland Tod Provincial Park where we'd been the weekend before), then walked down and around the other side, where we saw lots more trees, some interesting birds and a couple of pretty crazy tough trail runners.

So that was last weekend. What did we do this weekend? Well, we went on a tiny little trip². We've been here on Vancouver Island about three weeks now, and until now, we hadn't left the Saanich Peninsula, the bit of land where the city of Victoria is located. We'd decided that we wanted to take the chance to get a look at some more of the island. It was Ian's birthday, so we decided to drive to Tofino, up on the west coast of the island (about 320 km from Victoria, over some mountains). So, we got up early on Saturday morning, packed our bags and got the bus into town to pick up a hire car!

Driving out of Victoria is very simple, since the main street through town, Douglas Street, seamlessly turns into the Trans-Canada Highway when you reach the northern edge of the city. Canadian driving does mostly seem to consist of pointing the car in the direction you want to go, pressing the accelerator a bit and waiting. Quite a long time. None of this effete European turning of corners is needed! Just point and go. (At least in town. In the mountains, point and go would get you to the bottom of a cliff pretty quickly.)

Our first stop on the way was at Goldstream Provincial Park, which is only about 20 km from Victoria, at the southern end of the Gowlland Range. There are places here where the salmon run in the autumn, and lots of people come to see them (and the bears that eat the

¹Photos here: <http://www.wania.net/photo-albums/Thetis-lake-walk/album/index.html> or just go to <http://www.wania.net> and follow the *Photos* link.

²Photos: http://www.wania.net/photo-albums/Tofino_Feb09/album/index.html

salmon). There were no bears or salmon when we were there, but there were lots of mossy trees. Rita was in her element! We just stopped briefly to have a quick look near the road, but we'll definitely be going back there. There are quite a lot of walking possibilities there, and once we're fit, it's within cycling distance of town (in the summer anyway, when the days are a bit longer).

From Goldstream, we headed on up the Malahat, a long uphill that climbs along the western side of the Finlayson Arm, the fjord we were looking down into from the Gowlland Range a couple of weekends before. As we climbed up over the Malahat, we had a fantastic view down into the sound, with low clouds and fog stretching out over the sea, the mountains in the distance, and the sun sparkling on the sea. Very very beautiful indeed.

The road runs down from the Malahat pass to a long coastal strip with small towns and residential areas. The shopping malls here are a little different to those in Victoria, selling all the essentials for a life in the great Canadian outdoors. We noted at least one chainsaw shop along the way!

We passed through Duncan and Nanaimo (the second largest town on the island, where we stopped to shop for supplies) and a few other little towns before we got to our turnoff to head west for Tofino. It didn't take long after we turned onto Highway 4 for us to start climbing up into the mountains and for patches (and then big piles!) of snow to start appearing by the side of the road.

After heading up the road for a while, we got to our first main stop of the day: Cathedral Grove. This is a park area of old growth forest, with 800 year old Douglas Fir trees and lots and lots and lots of mosses. The forest really is spectacular, with some very big trees, the tallest of which is 76m high. Some of the fallen trunks are just about that long as well: quite a few came down in a storm a few years ago. Absolutely everything is covered in moss and lichens, trees, shrubs, the forest floor, everything. It was pretty cold, and there was ice and snow on the ground, but Rita was dancing around like a little child. It's a very cool place. There were two circular walks, one on each side of the road, and we took quite a while to go around them, looking at the trees, enjoying the sun streaming through the forest, and poking around in the mosses and lichens. The big fallen trunks provide a source of nutrients and a platform for smaller plants and trees to grow, and it was quite odd to see these huge trunks with little mini-forests growing along the top of them. Some of the fallen trees have enormous root systems sticking up into the air. The second loop walk goes down to a nice lake nestled in the mountains, where we stood on the squidgey mossy ground on the lakeside and admired the view. On the way back to the road, we saw a tree with some amazing yellow jelly fungus growing on it, all covered with a shiney layer of ice. Rita took lots of photos!

From Cathedral Grove, we headed on towards the west coast of the island, driving further up into the mountains and passing over the Sutton Pass before following the Kennedy River down to the peninsula where Tofino lies. There's more or less no human habitation for about 100 km here, which is pretty amazing. Kennedy River had some nice looking whitewater on it, and the mountains around all looked very lovely and walkable. We'll have to go back there for a proper explore some time! (This weekend was mostly just an opportunity to see a bit of the island, to get some idea of what it's like away from the Saanich Peninsula where we live.) We'd been told by some people that the roads to Tofino weren't so good: narrow and windy, we'd been told. By European mountain road standards though, they're enormous and comfy. No death defying drops three inches to the side of the road, no swerving out to

avoid overhanging cliffs, nothing like that.

At the end of the Kennedy River, we got to Kennedy Lake, which is more or less at sea level. The road from here to Tofino is mostly flat, and the last 15km or so are through the Pacific Rim National Park. From the road, there's not much to see of this, since there is dense forest on either side. Did we say forest? Oh yes! More trees!

But that was for Sunday. For now, we just headed directly to Tofino and our residence for the evening, the Tofino Trek Inn, a nice and cheap little bed and breakfast place right by the water in Tofino. The view from the front of the B&B was pretty spectacular, looking over the sound in front of Tofino to little islands and mountains and clouds and more trees. Just an amazing place.

After checking in and sorting out codes for getting in the front door, being shown our room and so on, we raced back out to have some more fun. We went to a beach close to Tofino, facing out onto the Pacific, called McKenzie Beach. We parked the car at the end of a narrow road and wandered off into the woods, following a trail with a rather worrying poster at the beginning, saying that a bear had recently been sighted thereabouts, and people should take care. We took care!

A nice little walk through more big trees brought us to the beach, which we had completely to ourselves, apart from a couple of crows that turned up later to dig for worms, a bald eagle sitting in a tree at one end of the beach, and a whole array of little sea life! We didn't realise at all when we arrived how cool this was going to be. We wandered down the beach, looking at shells and bits of kelp that had washed up, heading for some rocks near the water's edge. There were lots of rock pools here, and we started off with our "ooh"s and "aah"s when we saw some big purple-green anenomes in more or less the first pool we looked in. There were also little crabs, little fish and lots of other little beasties. But best of all were the hundreds (yes, really, hundreds!) of starfish camped out on the rocks near the water, all along the tidal zone. There were lots of purple ones and lots of orange ones (good for Rita!), and they were all pretty big (20–25cm across or so, I guess). Neither of us had ever seen so many starfish in one place before, and there was a lot of "Wow, look at this!" and "Wow, look at *this*!" and "**WOWZERS!!! LOOK AT THIS!!!**" as we saw more and more of the little things. It was echinodermolicious!

After we were starfished out, and had failed to get a good view of the eagle by climbing up on some rocks, we found a nice big driftwood log to sit on for a spot of lunch, keeping a wary eye out for the bear. The size and number of big logs (tree trunks really) on every beach here is really notable, but it's not that surprising when you see that the forest comes right down to the water nearly everywhere. After eating, we walked back through the trees and drove back to Tofino as there was only half an hour or so of daylight left.

A bit of admiring of the view from the shore was followed by some wandering around town (not too much to it!) where we bought some postcards and bought some food for dinner (pizza and burritos, since there weren't really any other vegan options we could see). We went back to the Tofino Trek Inn to eat, and had a nice chat with some of the other people staying there, who'd come over from Vancouver on the ferry, via Nanaimo, to surf. Tofino and the rest of this part of the west coast have the best surf in the Pacific Northwest, so you see lots of surf shops and lots of people with boards on their cars as you drive around. They gave us some tips for places to check out the next morning if we wanted to see what the local surf conditions were like (we did!).

And that was Saturday!

Next morning, we had some nice breakfast, with freshly baked bread, fruit, tea, etc., then packed up to go out and see more of the world.

Our first stop was Cox Bay, one of the surf spots we'd been told about, close to Tofino. This looked like a pretty good spot, though the two guys in surfing weren't all that good (not even as good as Ian, which is saying something!). It also looked pretty cold, and there was a fair chance of surfing straight into a big tree trunk, which must add some spice to things! After 10 minutes of admiring the waves (probably a couple of metres in height and pretty clean out the back, though it would have been hard work to get out there), we went back to the car and drove to the tourist information office to buy a national park permit for the day, since we planned to visit a few sites within the Pacific Rim Park.

The first of those was Radar Hill. This is a hill (!) that used to have a radar (!) station on it. Now, the radar station is gone, but there's a great view from the top back towards Tofino, the mountains and islands. A sign by the car park described the 100 metre walk to the top as "well worth it". For some reason, this kind of gave the impression that people don't like to walk too much here. Don't know if that's really fair! Ian was driving when we arrived in the empty car park, and was in a silly mood, so drove round and round in circles pretending to be undecided about parking spaces, only stopping when Rita threatened to be sick. I bet you're all glad that he has Rita to put up with him so no-one else has to do it, eh?

Radar Hill was followed by Long Beach. Very imaginative place names they have here! Instead of driving right down to the beach (possible), we went to another place where there's a 1 km boardwalk through the forest down to the beach. This was our first proper taste of the coastal temperate rainforest that this part of the world is famous for, and it was pretty amazing. As in Cathedral Grove, Rita took lots of pictures, but they just don't do justice to how amazing it all is. I don't think any photographs can really get it across. You have to come here and see it for yourselves! (And this was just a gentle introduction to the rainforest. We saw some even more fantastic stuff later on.)

And then we got to the beach. And it was long. Our walking along it was somewhat curtailed by the incoming tide, which was mashing up a big pile of driftwood (drift-trees more like) in the middle of the beach, making it impossible (or at least very very wet and rather dangerous) to go any further. The beach here wasn't as packed with life as McKenzie Beach, although the view was very nice indeed, and there was a little tree-covered islet 100 metres into the sea to add some interest. There was also a crazy dog with some other people on the beach trying to carry pieces of wood almost as big as he was.

Generally, we saw relatively few people all weekend, but in the summer, Tofino has something like 10,000 visitors per day at the height of the tourist season (the place has only 1600 permanent residents). This is definitely a better time to see the place than then!

After walking back to the car, we headed off to walk along what were advertised as *The Rainforest Trails*. I don't know what you might expect from something called *The Rainforest Trails*, but we were expecting a tree or two, maybe a bit of drippy water, possibly a patch of moss here and there, perhaps some ferns. Well, we weren't disappointed, I can tell you! I would try to describe to you what these places were like, but I think it's nearly impossible. As we were walking around, mostly in reverent silence, I couldn't help thinking that we were in some sort of enormous temple to an all-powerful forest god, old and slow, green and

merciless, before whom we were insignificant quick little things, flitting through his glades and beneath his trees only at his whim, to be crushed in an instant if our presence displeased him. And yet, it was beautiful. Every tree was a world in its own, full of life of all kinds, mosses, lichens, ferns, birds and smaller things. There were quietly tinkling streams running through the deeply vegetated glades that we walked through, their water brown from the tannins leached from the acidic forest soil.

The whole of the way that we walked was on a boardwalk, with steps up and down the steeply sloping ground and bridges across deep clefts clogged with shrubs and young trees. One of the bridges was made from a whole tree that had fallen across a gap in the ground, which flexed and bounced as we walked across. If walking through a forest on a boardwalk seems tame, it was, but looking into the forest and thinking about how quickly one would be irretrievably lost if you strayed from the path, it didn't seem that way. Five minutes struggling through the bushes and boggy ground and you'd never find your way out again. It made all those scary stories of impenetrable fairytale woods you hear as a child real again.

So, was it cool? Oh yes, it was. A tree hugger's wet dream, it was.

After worshipping the forest god, we drove on along the peninsula to Ucluelet, the town at the other end from Tofino, where we had a picnic lunch on some rocks by a cute little lighthouse, before starting the long drive home.

A few hours and 320 km later, we parked in front of the Lotus Pond vegan Chinese restaurant and sat down to fill our faces with pot stickers, Chinese greens with barbecued pork (not from pigs, of course, but Chinese soya mock meat) and the chili eggplant Szechuan style, which had been recommended to us. It was very fine indeed, and made a perfect end to a perfect weekend.

This Vancouver Island place really is something special. The bus with the sign on it saying "British Columbia: The Best Place On Earth" may very well be government propaganda (according to Reinhard from the maths department here), but it does seem rather close to the truth.