

# The Hotel Issue: Pacific Northwest

## Weather PROOF

Wet and wonderful on the West Coast's Relais & Chateau trail

**SONORA RESORT & THE WICKANINNIISH INN**  
BRITISH COLUMBIA

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CALGARY HERALD

Humans aren't the only ones who eagerly anticipate the fall salmon runs on Canada's west coast. Turns out, the grizzlies are waiting, too. That's good news for those who love both bears and fish (not such good news if you're a fish).

Our group of 12 people plus bear wardens could see the bright, orange-pink salmon in the river tantalizingly just below our 10-foot-high viewing platform. We'd travelled an hour from our resort on Sonora Island, just off the British Columbia mainland northwest of Vancouver via an open eco-tour boat and a school bus, misty-windowed as body heat inside met damp drizzle outside. This was the home of the Homalco First Nation, which partners with Sonora Resort to give guests a privileged view of nature operating as if no one's watching.

The nation has built a series of viewing platforms along a pebble-banked river confluence where the bears congregate in the fall to fill their bellies with spawning salmon. On this day, for the first 10 or so minutes, there was nothing. Wildlife watching is like that. You can put all the factors together, but if the animals decide not to show, they don't show.

But then someone spotted movement in the bushes just beyond one of the rivers. A dark shape emerged with the distinc-

### The Details

#### Sonora Resort

- **Best amenity:** The helicopter ride in and out!
- **One quibble:** Next time, I'll stay for longer.
- **Who would like it:** Anyone looking for a one-of-a-kind experience.
- **Pricing:** Starting at \$500 per night (packages are also available)
- **More information:** [www.sonoraresort.com](http://www.sonoraresort.com) (the resort opens mid-May to mid-October).

#### The Wickaninnish Inn

- **Best amenity:** The sound of the waves outside my room.
- **One quibble:** The whales were elusive during my sightseeing tour.
- **Who would like it:** Romantics and those moved by water.
- **Pricing:** Starting at \$500 night (double occupancy). Packages also available.
- **More information:** [www.wickinn.com](http://www.wickinn.com).

tive front paws of a bear and the shoulder hump of a grizzly. The only sound above the river and the rain was the whir of a dozen cameras as the bear began pacing the bank, watching the water. Once or twice he swiped the surface, but came up empty.

Here's the other thing about wildlife watching. Sometimes, you get more than you bargained for. Like the mother grizzly appearing on the opposite bank, shepherding



Yvonne Jeffery, Calgary Herald

The entrance to Sonora. The resort is a place to go for solitude and pampering in a luxurious but wild west coast setting.



Courtesy, Wickaninnish Inn

Watching the surf from the Driftwood Lounge at the Wickaninnish Inn, near Tofino, B.C.

two cubs along to the river. When one cub tried to bolt in front of her, she gently cuffed it back into line — because she had seen the male bear on our side of the river, and he had seen her. And started to move toward her, swimming the river in an aggressive move.

The chase happened so quickly it was hard to keep track. Mom started the cubs running toward the brush, the male chased the mom around a pile of driftwood, and when the two emerged from behind the trees, it was mom in pursuit, driving the male back

across the river and then calling out her cubs from their hiding place. The dozen of us let out a collective breath of relief.

Cameras resumed whirring as lone bears appeared singly in the distance and then closer in, ambling to the shoreline but keeping distance from each other. Behind us, a splash signalled one that had finally succeeded in capturing a salmon, baring its teeth at another bear that got too close, and then beating a retreat, salmon gripped in its teeth, to tear into it in safety.

The invitation to split a six-day vacation between the Sonora Resort and The Wickaninnish Inn in Tofino, on Vancouver Island — creating a trail between the West Coast's two Relais & Chateau properties — had been an easy one to accept. It guaranteed luxury, pampering and stress relief.

With the drizzle turning into a cold rain on the way back to the resort, it suddenly felt more wild and less luxe — but the wild is a huge part of the charm at Sonora. And luxe returned when the resort staff greeted us with towels, umbrellas and hot chocolate.

An hour's helicopter ride from Vancouver's airport (on London Air Services, named for the London Drugs family that also owns

the Sonora) gets you to the resort, where the island is yours. Hiking trails, fishing, a full spa, kayaking, cooking classes — you can be as busy or relaxed as you like. I opted for relaxed, taking the resort's two golden retrievers for a long walk one day and taking myself to the spa the next. It was pure bliss, drizzle or not, punctuated with five-star dining and cocktails in front of the fire.

You could connect Sonora directly with the Wick via a float plane (the resorts can help with this), or do as I did — head to Vancouver, spend the night on the north shore to retain some of the wildness (Grouse Mountain, the Capilano Suspension Bridge) and then board the ferry for Nanaimo.

I understand there are mountains in the middle of Vancouver Island, as you take a winding rollercoaster of a road to Tofino, but the closest I came to seeing them was a vague, looming shape when the cloud lifted slightly. I arrived at the Wick on the heels of an unexpectedly early winter storm that provided another balm to a weary spirit. I switched on the fireplace in my room, opened the patio door enough to hear the waves, sat back and watched the water. Pure bliss.

But there was more to come, in the form of the Hishuk Ish Tsawalk Awakening Treatment, at the Wick's Ancient Cedars Spa. The therapist began with a cleansing of the dimly lit room, the scent of burning sweetgrass drifting in the air. That was the element of fire; water, wind and air followed, with a local seaweed exfoliation, sauna heat alternated with cool water from the shower, and finally a massage with heated local basalt stones.

When I left the spa, it was with such deep calm and relaxation that I can only describe it as utter peace. And, finally, quiet. The treatment's name means "everything in one," and that's what it does: puts a splintered, busy existence back together in one healing, nurturing afternoon.

I can still sense that calm when I close my eyes and conjure up the sound of waves on the shore and the touch of salt water on my face. The Relais & Chateau Trail is, to be sure, a most wonderful indulgence. But so worth it.

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