

Days and Nights by the Sea

Meditations on Toleak Point

story and photographs
by John D'Onofrio

Ah, springtime in the Northwest!

Time to count our blessings and choose—as Joseph Campbell would've said—which bliss to follow. There's still plenty of snow to play in up in the mountains. The trails down in the lowland forests are unveiling their verdant new growth in a thousand different shades of vibrant green. Canoes can be launched on aquamarine lakes, full to the brim with snowmelt and frisky fish. But there is another choice, one that offers the renewing freshness of open sky and salty wind.

There is the sea.

Here in the fourth corner we are fortunate indeed to have access to the finest stretch of ocean frontage in the lower 48—the Olympic Wilderness beach. Over the years I have hiked extensively on the north section, visiting the wonders to be found at Shi-Shi Beach, Hole-in-the-Wall and countless points in between. Somehow I have never taken the opportunity to explore the south section, from La Push to the mouth of the Hoh River, a stretch famous for its idyllic sandy beaches, wave-tossed headlands and great congregations of eagles. An oversight to be corrected. The time has come.

We leave the car at the Third Beach trail-head, just south of La Push, and head down the short trail towards the beach. The maritime rain forest is deep and dark, with Day-Glo green patches where shafts of sunlight penetrate through the canopy. We emerge from the trees and step onto the sand of Third Beach beneath a dazzling blue sky. Not a cloud to be seen.

We hike down the beach for half a mile and then climb up Taylor Point on the dangling rope ladder that affords passage around the surf-battered point. After navigating the trembling ladder to the top of the bluff, we look down on the line of surf stretching for miles, gleaming in the sunshine; an unspeakably beautiful and seemingly limitless expanse of wilderness at the continent's edge. We negotiate the muddy forest atop the headland and descend the hurly-burly trail to the beach, rounding a headland on the outgoing tide. At 3.5 miles, we encounter Scotts Creek and make camp beside its sparkling waters.

Settled in at the place where the creek meets the sea, I listen to the primordial music of the Pacific. The timpani roar of the breaking waves sounds like the beating heart of the ocean, the unfettered utterance of a power beyond our clever measurements. Thin veils of spray drift in like the breath of God. Opalescent flotsam trembles in the breeze, backlit by Cecil B. DeMille.

Offshore, a resolute rock resembles Beethoven looking patiently out to sea toward Japan. A woodpecker hammers away at a tree leaning improbably over the beach, reaching for the surf. As the tide recedes, the wet beach gleams in the pure salt-scented sun of day's end.

At night we are subjected to the attentions of a gang of raccoons, skulking around like petty criminals. The firelight flashes in their larcenous eyes as they hiss for our chickpea curry. Stretched out in my sleeping bag next to the dying embers, I ponder the remarkable stars and count my blessings. The night is filled with the sound of the surf, its unseen edge marking the margins of the world.

Fetching the morning water from Scotts Creek, I almost step on a seal pup without seeing it. It hisses and waves its flippers, briefly freaking me out and almost causing me to drop the filter in the creek. We eat our breakfast, and a bald eagle soars directly over our camp, bidding us good morning. We load our packs with a sense of anticipation for the day's journey to Toleak Point, our destination for the evening.

The beach is breathtaking, and we walk in silence, enraptured by the staccato counterpoint of the waves. Every rock and piece of driftwood gleams in the morning sun. We round Strawberry Point and continue our pilgrimage south, beside the dancing ocean. We are alone here at the edge of North America. We haven't seen a soul since Third Beach.

We hike around Toleak Point and make camp just south of the spine of jutting rocks at its tip. I take inventory. Twenty seals watch us from just beyond the breakers, and seven bald eagles circle a green sea stack just offshore. I gather tinder for the fire along the margins of the beach and enjoy the long and languid afternoon.

As darkness falls, I sit beside the small campfire with my pen and trusty junior legal pad and watch the sun go down—my idea of a good time. Night gathers its dark secrets, and stars appear, one by one. A ship passes on the dark horizon, shining its melancholy light. The tide rolls nearer in the darkness, and the fire burns down to its last hurrah.

The sky is again full of eagles this morning. We struggle with the persnickety stove to boil water for coffee. The entire time we've been fighting with the stove, and generally speaking, I'd say the stove is winning. It won't hold pressure. We disassemble it and reassemble it twice, working like shipwrecked watchmakers. Finally we manage to produce two cups of cof-

fee, and all is well again.

We walk the beach, turning a corner into the wind. On one side, Tahiti, on the other, the Arctic Ocean. The wind holds all the cards and plays them strategically. An eagle swoops down and snatches a washed-up octopus tentacle in its outstretched talons. It beats its wings hard to rise above the rocks into the cadmium blue sky, tentacle dangling.

The wind curtsies in the crooked trees and blows the sky a bashful kiss. A solitary eagle flies overhead; a benediction. We sit quietly on the beach. I watch cormorants. Barb gets out her watercolors. A nearby cadre of seals watches us from just offshore, heads bobbing in the gently rolling sea. The question they ask seems important, if somewhat obscure.

I wander down the empty beach, walking on sand and over spray-slicked boulders. The rocks are smooth, molded by the caress of the sea; their sculpted forms possess the sensuousness of patient time. The scene is complete: the waves, the wind, the never-ending urging of the tides, the ancient trees, weathered and bent by the forces of heaven and earth. The present moment echoes the great unbroken and unknowable history of the mighty Pacific, the endless cycles of ocean and sky, renewal and constant change.

Paradise, found.

We spend a luxurious day exploring the beach: no agenda, no destination, no hurry. We watch the tide come in and roll out again in a state of perfect contentment, hypnotized by the rhythm of the waves, dreaming beneath the cliffs in the warm sun. It is unbelievably satisfying to do nothing.

In the wavering light of evening, we lean back on beach logs beside the fire and discuss our good fortune as the raccoons make their nightly reconnaissance. These days and nights by the sea are measured by the slow and patient tides. I align myself as best I can with the elegant rhythms. Careening eagles, easy laughter and wood smoke. Each one a gift. The night is filled with the sweet music of the sea, a nocturne tailor-made to accompany our dreams.

Another sun-drenched morning (can this really be the Northwest coast?) greets us and we



Hike It»

South Coast Wilderness Trail - Toleak Point

Roundtrip: 17 miles

Elevation Gain: 250 feet

Highest Point: 250 feet

Map: Green Trails #163s LaPush

set off for Mosquito Creek, 5 miles distant. The tide is out, and the smorgasbord of kelp and assorted debris that it has stranded is pungent on the breeze. We climb up onto a headland using a series of fixed ropes and find ourselves in deep green forest once again, a delightful contrast to the sun-sparkled beach. At Goodman Creek we cautiously ford the stream one at a time. Despite the rainless days the creek is running inexplicably high, and I use my tripod as a staff to get across the swiftly moving water. The thigh-deep current is icy cold and takes my breath away, prompting involuntary little yips and whoops.

We reach the headland's brink and lower ourselves back down to the beach with the aid of ragged ropes affixed to weather-beaten trees. The final drop lands us in boot-sucking mud, and soon we find ourselves on the beach beside Mosquito Creek. I drop my pack and recline on a great lounge-chair-shaped beach log in the glorious afternoon sun, basking like a shameless heathen and watching the choreography of the surf.

As has been the case for the entire trek, we have the beach to ourselves. Barb disappears around a point, and I explore the edge of the sea in solitude, contemplating the elegant bric-a-brac left by the tide. Getting down on all fours, I examine the multihued inhabitants of a tidepool; darting sculpins going about their implacable business amongst the starfish and anemones. A complete world, unto itself. Until the tide comes in.

Another star-spangled evening beside the boisterous sea, watching sparks rise into the darkness like brushstrokes in a Jackson Pollock painting. The sound of the waves has become so comfortable, so absolute, so all-encompassing. A distant foghorn adds poetic counterpoint, and a mist rolls in off the ocean, muting

the stars. The weather seems to be changing.

In the morning the horizon is busy with gathering clouds as we walk north along the beach beside the tempestuous sea. Our packs feel light and comfortable. Eagles chatter from the wind-gnarled cedars. We cross Scotts Creek on a jumble of logs and discover an elaborate structure of driftwood lashed together with brine-encrusted rope. We make our last camp here, at what we dub Gilligan's Island. Tomorrow we must return to the highway and rejoin the real world. Or is this perhaps the real world? Lying on my back on the soft bed of sand, it's real enough for me.

A light morning rain drifts in as we continue north, climbing over Taylor Point and down the rope ladder to Third Beach. With more than a touch of regret, we turn away from the ocean and into the forest towards the distant trailhead.

We stow our packs and drive around to the Hoh River Road where we park and take one last walk to the edge of the sea in a gently falling drizzle. So this is where it ends, at the Hoh River in the rain. Unknown birds in dark trees. One hundred thousand frogs seem to know my name.

The river lazily offers itself to the sea, languid and quiet, joining with the roaring ocean in a jubilee of ionization. The journey does not stop here on these rocky banks but goes on, goes on.

Joseph Campbell was right. If bliss is what you want to follow, the South Coast Route of Olympic National Park leads directly there.

I'll be back.♦

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