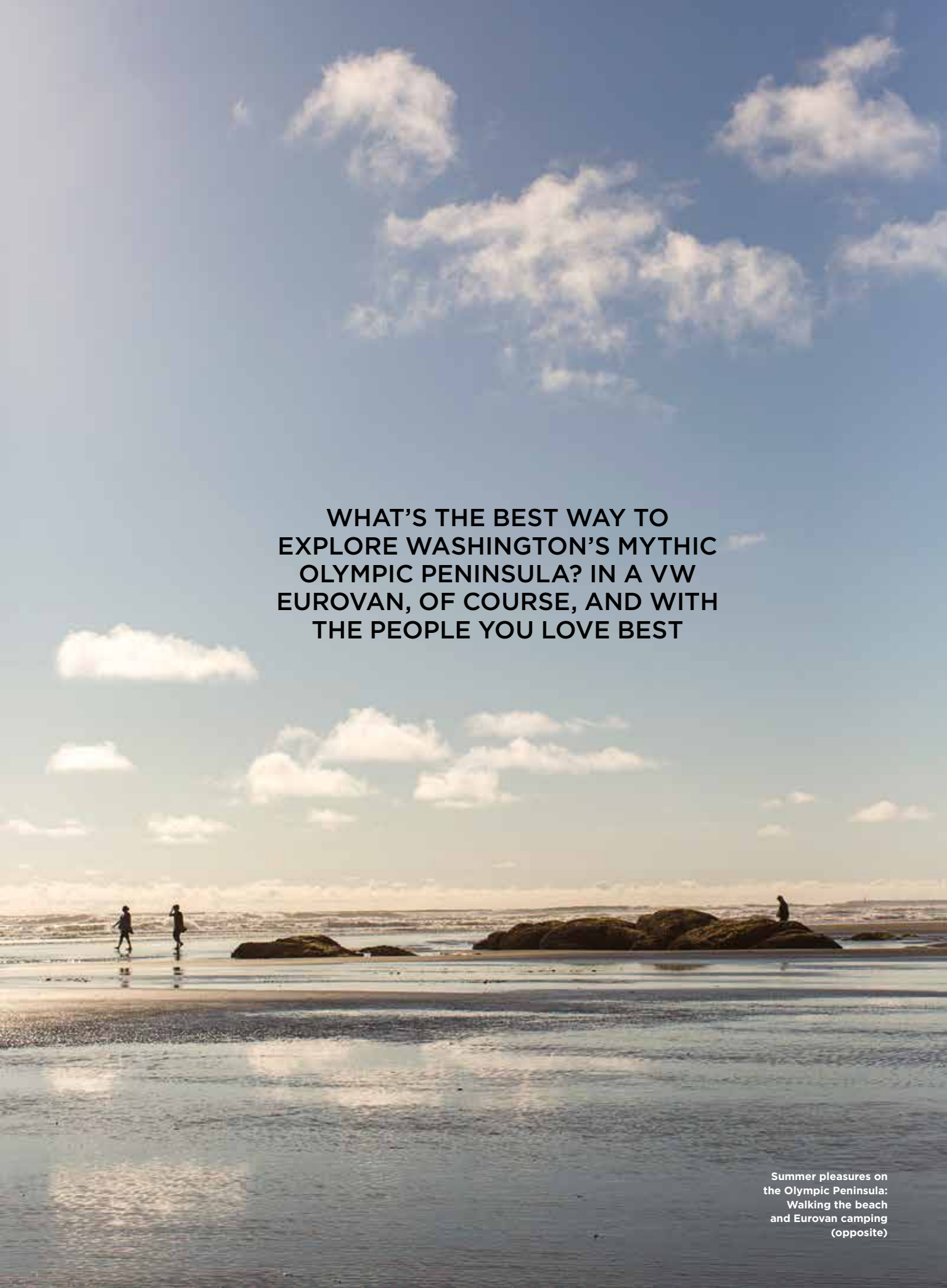


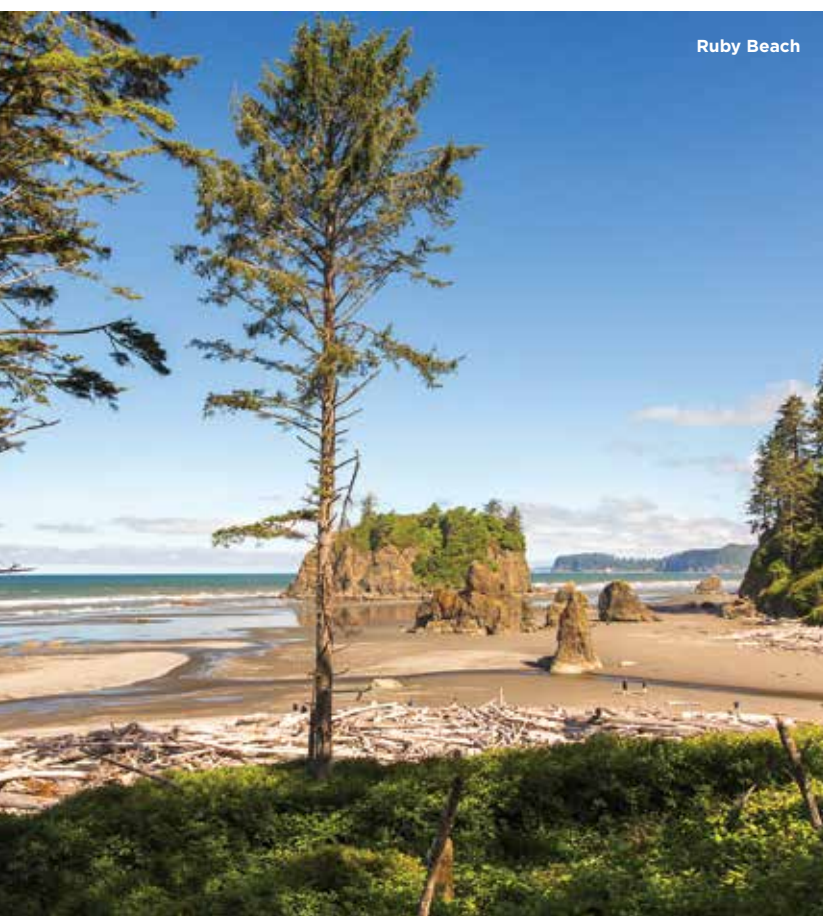


**(BACK) INTO THE  
WILD**

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY DAVID HANSON



WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO  
EXPLORE WASHINGTON'S MYTHIC  
OLYMPIC PENINSULA? IN A VW  
EUROVAN, OF COURSE, AND WITH  
THE PEOPLE YOU LOVE BEST



Ruby Beach

Imagine the profile of a boxer with his dukes up. The Olympic Peninsula is that gloved hand, and in this case, its western shore takes the brunt of the wild weather generated by the Pacific Ocean to the west—waves, wind, and nearly 10 feet of rain per year. From its Oregon border to the northernmost point at Cape Flattery, the peninsula presents 150 miles to the Pacific before its shoreline wraps back along the calmer waters of Puget Sound. Despite being quite close to the thrum of Seattle to its east, the Olympic Peninsula remains sparsely developed: More than half of its coastline is either National Park or tribal reservation. A few blue-collar beach towns like Long Beach and Westport dot the southern end, with economies buoyed by fishing, logging, cranberry bogs, and tourism. But the north end of the peninsula goes quieter, populated mostly by Makah and Quileute people. And that's exactly the route we're planning—from the relative hubbub of the south to the wild and remote north, into a landscape that looms mythically in my memory.

Almost 20 years ago I moved to the Olympic Peninsula from my native Southeast. Seeking the wild, I found it in a cabin set among old-growth cedars as wide as school buses and at the edge of a lake 700 feet deep and shrouded in clouds. On weekends, I'd go with friends to the Olympic Coast, where we'd watch winter surf lift 100-foot-long driftwood trees like pool floaties.

Having recently turned 40, I've admittedly tamed. But knowing that Christine has never visited her home state's western edge, it seems the right time to return to that wild of my memory. Knowing that June here is called "June-uary," for its tendency to be painted by the region's final brushstrokes of cold rains, we've rented a VW pop-top van for our journey. Because while the nostalgic romance of a Eurovan along the shoreline is a gift unto itself, it's also a great vehicle for rainy-day picnics. And while the sun is shining now, it's still Juneuary.

As we're finishing up our picnic, Dan Driscoll walks onto the Oysterville Sea Farms deck wearing a big smile, neoprene waders, and an orange marine jacket (the latter two muted by a gray layer of Willapa Bay mud). He owns this joint.

"I ruined my phone," he says, pulling the muddy device from his breast pocket with a wry shrug that suggests it's not the first time. "Forgot about the little channel between plots 28 and 29 and I went in neck deep."

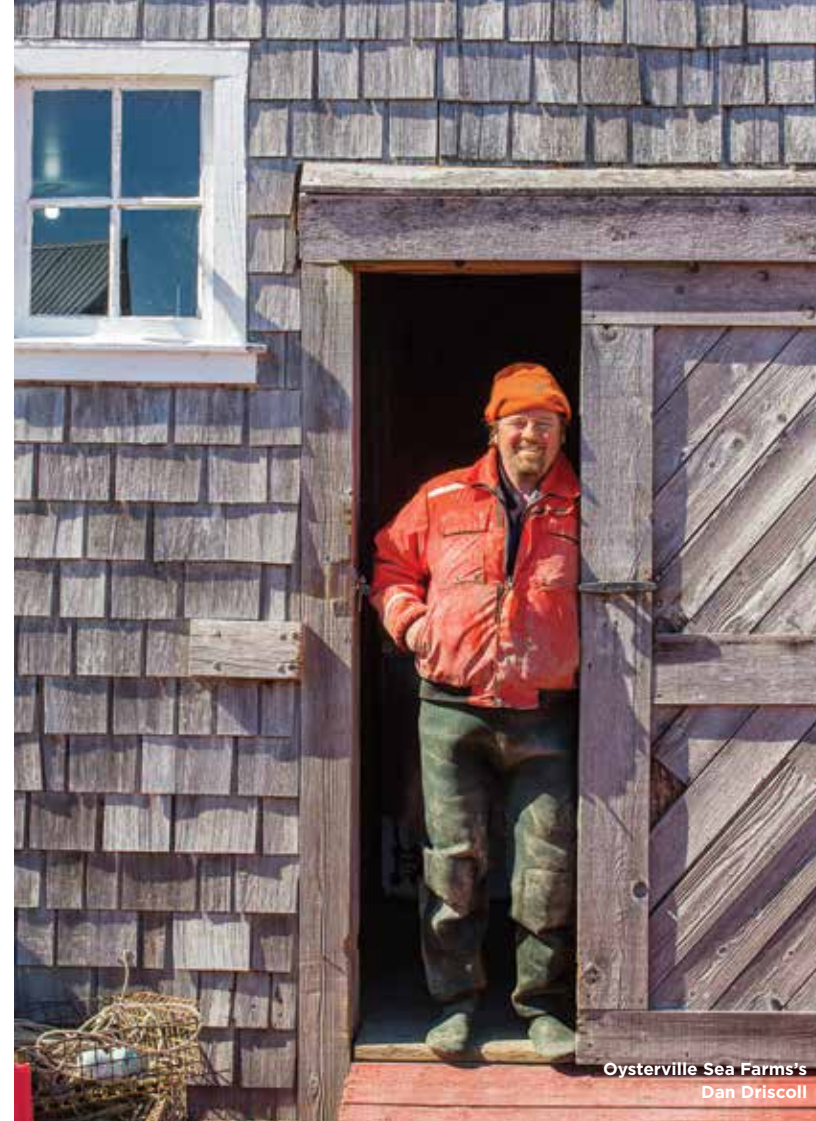
**“WE’RE IN THE SALT AIR NOW,”** my wife says, rolling down the windows of our rental VW Eurovan. Christine grew up on an island in Washington’s Puget Sound, so she senses the nearing ocean as innately as she knows when to pull salmon from the grill.

She’s right. That distinct air rushes in, and soon the forests open to Willapa Bay. Marshy meadows and rectangular cranberry bogs tinged in light red stretch between dark evergreen forests. Across the road, thin, crooked poles mark oyster beds in the shallow bay. We’ve been driving for three hours from Portland to reach Washington’s southern coast, racing the clock, aka our 15-month-old daughter, Ada, awaking from a nap.

We pass the signs to Long Beach. We’ll stop there next, but for now I’m eager to reach Oysterville, a tiny historic village at Long Beach Peninsula’s northern end. House-sized shell mounds and crab trap towers wordlessly advertise the local economy alongside the two-lane road.

“Stopping here, I assume?” Christine asks, already making the turn to Oysterville Sea Farms, a gray-shingled, white-trimmed oyster house and seafood market with a deck overlooking the bay. She also knows how to spontaneously curate a road trip.

Inside, a young woman of summer-job age stands behind the glass case of crab, smoked salmon, shrimp, halibut, and oysters, her rubber apron speckled with shellfish flakes. We buy a bottle of the house white, some baby shrimp, smoked salmon, a lemon, and Ritz crackers. As we step out to the deck to set up our picnic, I look up and confront a stunning Pacific Northwest event: The sun is out and shining.



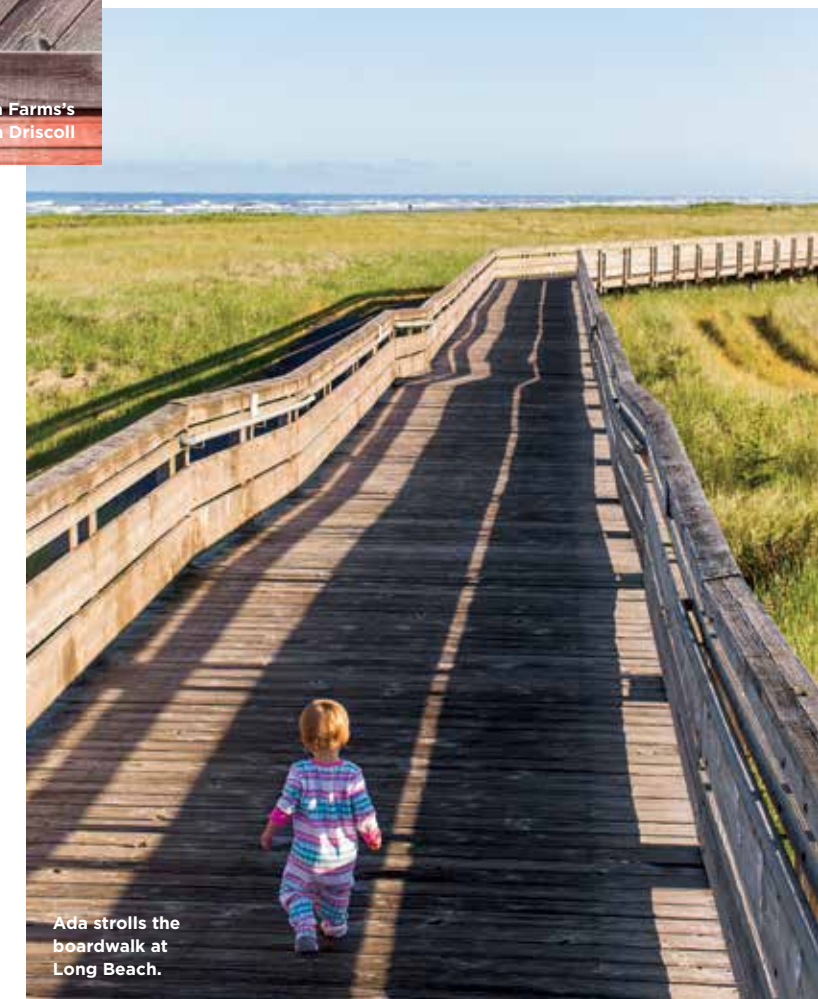
Oysterville Sea Farms's Dan Driscoll



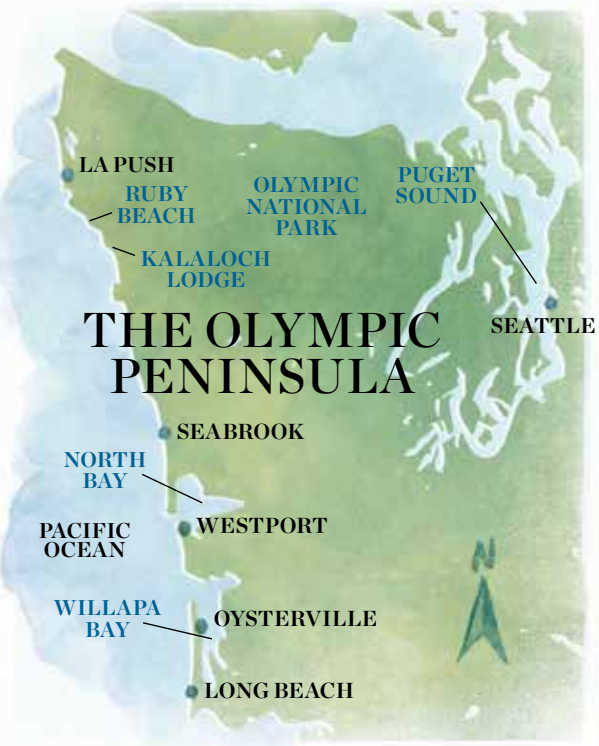
Low tide at Willapa Bay



The architectural charms of Oysterville



Ada strolls the boardwalk at Long Beach.



I LOOK UP AND  
CONFRONT A  
STUNNING PACIFIC  
NORTHWEST EVENT:  
THE SUN IS OUT  
AND SHINING



Driscoll takes me into his office, where his oyster plots are outlined on a giant wall map of Willapa Bay. I get the sense I could blindfold him and he'd still be able to pinpoint exact locations.

"At low tide you could almost walk across this entire bay," he says, looking out through the window. Then, more to himself than to me, "I can't imagine doing anything else. I get to walk on the sea floor for a living." Driscoll gets back to work as Christine and I load Ada into the kid backpack and follow a mowed grass trail. A few hundred yards away, the village of Oysterville—a few handfuls of century-old Victorian and cedar-shake homes—rises out of the tall grass like a Nantucket apparition. Picket fences furry with pale green lichen separate well-kept yards bursting with flowers. We sit on a bench overlooking swaying marsh grasses and the rising tide of Willapa Bay. For about 90 seconds. Then Ada squirms out of my lap and stumbles toward the water, snapping us out of Oysterville's sleepy reverie.

We retrace our drive south from Oysterville for 20 minutes, pulling into Long Beach well before sunset. Named for its 28-mile beach, the longest in the Lower 48, the town developed as a tourist destination for Portland and Seattle residents. We slow-cruise the main drag's panoply of candy, fudge, ice cream, kite, and t-shirt shops before reaching Adrift, a new boutique hotel towering four stories (tall by Olympic Coast standards) over the dunes. Christine and I are restless and would eagerly grab one of Adrift's beach cruiser bikes for a long beach

ILLUSTRATION: MATT CASERTA

Parking spot of dreams at Ruby Beach



Pickled Fish

ride. I'd love to confirm rumors I heard of fishermen and women perching from precarious rock outcrops beneath Long Beach's southern cliffs. But instead we let Ada lead us down the wooden boardwalk curving above the dunes. Upon reaching the beach, she sinks her toes into the soft sand and freezes. Her eyes widen as she cautiously lifts a foot and puts it back down, quickly learning the beach's invaluable lesson that not all ground is solid.

Atop Adrift is Pickled Fish, a Pacific Northwest-style restaurant and bar with rustic wood walls, giant windows overlooking the Pacific, and the best, most locally sourced menu in town. Over crab cakes drizzled with house-made tartar sauce and Spicy Fisherman's Stew—Willapa Bay oysters, clams, rockfish, smoked salmon—we marvel at this Olympic Peninsula discovery. A nightcap featuring Pacificque, an absinthe hand-crafted in Washington's wine country, accompanies the sun setting into the Pacific.

With the first light promising another sunny day, I can't help myself, and slip out of the room, grab a beach cruiser, and pedal to the beach's southern end. Sun rays stream through spruce trees clinging to the cliff top, and a handful of subsistence fishermen and women squat like oversize anemones on half-submerged rocks. It's a nice reminder of the life-sustaining connection between coastal residents and the sea, and a quick cure to my restlessness ahead of our upcoming two-hour drive north.

Stephen Poulakos, the town planner for Seabrook, a beach community a few hours north of Long Beach, greets me outside the Front Street Market in Seabrook's tiny, immaculate town center. Seabrook, which broke ground right around the same time I was sowing my first Pacific Northwest wild oats, is a classic example of New Urbanism, a development philosophy that draws on old-world village concepts to create walkable, well-organized communities. It also happens to be near a stunning beach, so we've rented a house for the next two nights.

"We learned from history," Poulakos tells me as he points to the bluff a quarter mile from Seabrook's town center. "In 1911 a massive storm took out the would-be resort town of Moclips a few miles from here. We knew to not get too close to the Pacific."

He and Seabrook founder Casey Roloff studied Pacific Northwest seafaring vernacular—Craftsman, Victorian, and Shingle styles of historic towns like Oysterville. Poulakos leads me down an alley of crushed oyster shells that weaves between houses bordered in white-picket fences and tidy lawns the size of bocce courts. We pass pint-size parks with actual bocce courts. It takes us only 10 minutes to reach the outer limits of Seabrook and the community's organic farm. Our tour loops back into town to the bakery that serves head-size cinnamon rolls handmade by the owner.

We spend two miraculously sunny days enjoying the easy life of Seabrook's village vibe. There's an all-inclusive simplicity of everything we seem to need lying within the outline of the community, without the all-inclusive, walled-off, clubby feel. Seabrook does its best to be a natural small beach town, so we do our best to be regular small beach town visitors: picnicking on the football field-wide beach, following oyster-shell paths, experiencing house envy, and drinking lattes and eating pastries.

Time flies with the easy life at Seabrook, eventually running headlong into checkout time. We move out of our four-bedroom rental house and back into the one-bedroom, no-bath VW van to head north: to the wilder coast and my old stomping grounds.

We've been lucky with weather so far. Three days of mostly sun, the ocean and sky a giant canvas of shifting blues with occasional moody bouts of fog climbing through the coastal forests. But a gray drizzle has returned. Clouds settle above gravelly, glacier-fed rivers we pass over driving north, each one the color of blue chalk and with beautiful names: Quinalt, Queets, Snahapish. At the Hoh River I make a rainy-day road-trip decision and turn inland. Our destination: the Hoh Rain Forest, which lies within Olympic



The Hoh Rain Forest's Hall of Mosses



Seabrook



Creekside Restaurant at Kalaloch Lodge

**GET HERE**

Long Beach is 120 miles northwest of Portland International Airport and 170 miles southwest of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

**STAY HERE**

**Long Beach:** An unassumingly hip, amenities-rich four-story hotel at Long Beach's quiet end, **Adrift Hotel** is a dune-side oasis featuring the excellent Pickled Fish restaurant, an on-site distillery, and a spa. Rates start at \$82; [adrifhotel.com](http://adrifhotel.com).

**Seabrook:** Rent a cottage or a full-size house and settle into the small-town beach life of this charming New Urbanism community. Rates start at \$95; [seabrookwa.com](http://seabrookwa.com).

**La Push:** Choose from a cabin, motel room, or campsite at **Quileute Oceanside Resort**, a no-frills beachside resort managed by the Quileute Tribe. Rates start at \$75; [quileuteoceanside.com](http://quileuteoceanside.com).

**Olympic National Park:** **Kalaloch Lodge** is a grand old National Park lodge with cabins and hotel units, and easy access to miles of wild, stunning beach. Rates start at \$120; [thekalalochlodge.com](http://thekalalochlodge.com).

**EAT HERE**

Buy fresh crab legs, smoked salmon, and, of course, oysters to eat on the **Oysterville Sea Farms** deck along with the house-blend red or white wine.

A Pacific Northwest-inspired locavore menu, craft cocktails, and a long view over the Pacific makes **Pickled Fish** the best place to dine and imbibe in Long Beach. Start the day with lattes and savory and sweet pastries at **Red Velvet Bakery by the Sea**, a sidewalk-side café in the heart of Seabrook.

Go for the rich, stick-to-your-ribs salmon hash at **River's Edge**, a down-home café overlooking the Quileute harbor.

The simple, fishing cabin decor belies a sophisticated menu and wine list at **Kalaloch Lodge's Creekside Restaurant**.

**DRIVE HERE**

Enjoy the ultimate road trip freedom with a classic, well-maintained pop-top Volkswagen Eurovan rental from **Road Trip Oregon**. Even if you don't plan to sleep in the surprisingly comfortable bunk, the van comes in handy for wardrobe changes and naps. Rates start at \$80 per night; [roadtriporegon.com](http://roadtriporegon.com).



La Push



Kalaloch Lodge

the yellow and orange salmonberries hiding in the greenery, so we move slowly, stopping for snacks.

At the beach, basalt rock towers punctuate the vast stretch of sand like shark fins. Kids climb around the bases and pose for photographs inside the natural arches. Tufts of grass and delicate flowers cling to the rock pillars, the last remaining remnants of a continent succumbing to an ocean. We sit Ada in a rock's shadow to dig into the sand while we soak up the sun.

I had intended to camp the VW at the Kalaloch Campground seven miles south of Ruby Beach on our final night, but it's Thursday, the sun is back out, and the campground is full. Which proves to be a blessing. We order Dungeness crab salad and a locally sourced elk burger, and take cold beers to the beach at nearby Kalaloch Lodge, a cedar-shingle gem of the National Park system with a scattering of cottage rentals and a surprisingly good kitchen. We find a driftwood log to lean against and we eat.

With limited options for the night (the lodge books out months ahead), we drive up 101 and check out a promising clearing tucked into the trees off the road and abutting a steep cliff to the beach.

"We're staying here, aren't we?" my wife asks, her instincts for road-trip serendipity as strong as ever. She parks the van with a view over the Pacific. We pop the camper top and face our folding chairs toward the setting sun. The waves drown out occasional 101 traffic. The sky turns purple. This is just the kind of random, solitary place I'd seek out when I first came to this coast. Back when I never thought solitude could include anyone but me. But there's room out here for these two new, favorite people. We sleep peacefully as the ocean and time tirelessly pull at the land below.

National Park. Receiving 12 to 14 feet of rain per year, the Hoh is best witnessed when wet. On the Hall of Mosses trail, the dense canopy 15 stories overhead reduces the rain to a slow drip. Intermittent sun refracts through the green layers as if through stained glass windows. Moss covers the trunks of trees broad enough to swallow a compact car. I hold Ada up so she can sink her tiny hands into the cool, fuzzy moss.

When I first lived out here, we'd hike deep into the Hoh, camping in cedar groves as silent as caves. Today, with Ada in a backpack, we stick to the short loop with the other day hikers. A part of me still itches to flee into the wilderness, but for now I find a nurse log, a downed tree harboring new growth, and I press my hand into its thick carpet of moss.

We choose to sleep that night in the van at a beachside campground in La Push, a quiet Quileute fishing village on a majestic stretch of sea stack-strewn coast. The pop-top camper tent keeps us dry, and the rhythmic surf brings deep sleep. The next morning, we eat fresh salmon hash at the River's Edge Restaurant, a high-ceilinged former Coast Guard office with a massive window looking out to the harbor. A Quileute fisherman in an old wooden boat putters out to the gray sea, readying his haulers for crab traps. We linger in the booth, feeling very much like temporary travelers among these people who've thrived here for thousands of years.

From La Push we retrace our route, returning south down Highway 101 with one more day of exploring. The sun reappears, slanting through the tall spruce and firs separating the highway from the coast. Outside of a few backcountry beaches that require long hikes to reach, Ruby Beach is the most dramatic accessible beach on the Olympic Coast. We walk down the quarter-mile trail under the forest canopy. By now Ada can recognize



## THE POP-TOP CAMPER TENT KEEPS US DRY, AND THE RHYTHMIC SURF BRINGS SLEEP