

WEEKLY

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OUTDOORS

To the Sea

BY PADDLE AND FOOT

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, February 1, 2012



Sometimes, in the doldrums of winter, I get the urge to smell the ocean.

I have found a most excellent remedy for this unassailable desire: a trip to the wilderness coast of the Olympic Peninsula, where the salty wind can be tasted on the continent's tumultuous edge. I think of the Yellow Banks, a lonely and sufficiently wind-blown stretch of Olympic National Park.

First we must get to the trailhead at Lake Ozette, which begins with a drive to the Keystone Ferry and the blustery cruise across to Port Townsend. Melancholy gulls serenade us as we cross the gunmetal gray waters of Puget Sound. A leisurely drive through the dripping greenery of the

Olympic Peninsula takes us to the end of the road beside mist-shrouded Lake Ozette, a few scant miles from our destination—the sea.

As we load our backpacks into the canoe, the mists begin to lift. We push out into the placid water, disturbing reflections of sky and willowy clouds as we paddle up the lake to Erickson's Bay, where we pitch our tent and watch the clouds dance as evening settles over us.

In the morning we break camp, load the canoe and continue up the lake in glorious sunshine. We locate the old trail on the lakeshore, stash the canoe in the underbrush, hoist our packs and hike westward toward the ocean. The old trail is little used and a bit tumbledown, but presents no significant difficulties as it leads through the moss gardens and green shadows of the rainforest. Before long, the soothing music of the surf can be heard through the trees and our steps quicken.

We exit the trees and step onto the beach, turning south, tracing the edge of the sea. Clouds hang on the parapets as we make our way down the coast, working our way around outcroppings of dark, somber rocks.

We drop our packs among twisted and picturesque trees and wander down the foggy beach, exploring tide pools filled with purple starfish and swaying anemones. The light is magic, illuminating the soft blankets of sea spray and mist.

As darkness descends, we light a small fire of driftwood and sit close to it in the circle of flickering light. The waves crash in the darkness and the wind jostles the trees beneath the headland.

The morning dawns misty and still. The roaring of the surf is muffled and the birds are quiet. Packs loaded, we climb back up into the coastal forest. Ancient trees rise into a great canopy and although the sun is now out, the light in the forest is dim and green.

Quite suddenly we find ourselves at the lakeshore again in the gleaming sunlight. What a difference a few miles makes. We retrieve the canoe from the brush and load our gear.

Paddling out into the lake, we make our way slowly toward the distant boat launch, savoring the sun and silence. We find ourselves back at the road far too quickly and sit by the water for a few minutes, reluctant to leave.

For more info about Olympic National Park, go to <http://www.nps.gov>