

On Trail

Northwest Explorer »

You can pick a route. You can get the maps and pack your gear. But, you can't tell Mother Nature how to behave. Particularly when you hike in winter, your best-laid plans might call for last-minute adjustments.

Plan B: Shi-Shi Beach

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With the words “*tent-bound*” and “*struggling to stay warm*,” the wilderness ranger is well on his way to convincing us to abandon our plan.

That plan: to spend a few winter nights in the high country of the Olympic Mountains, exploring Obstruction Point on snowshoes.

The problem: a storm is coming and the forecast calls for whiteout conditions and snow with temperatures in the mid-teens and winds of 25 miles per hour.

After much discussion and a little math (with wind chill, it will be 22 degrees *below zero*), we have to agree with the ranger. We resort to Plan B: the north wilderness coast. Three hours later, we are hiking to Shi-Shi Beach in brilliant, warm sunshine. So far, so good.

The trail across the Makah Reservation is a marvel of ingenuity. We cross hobbit bridges in the sun-dappled forest. The tribe built this section of trail, replacing the old route that led through the woods via the muddiest road in the west. Of course, the marvelous new trail deposits us back into the mud when it abruptly ends, but who’s complaining?

We exit Makah lands and enter Olympic National Park, climbing down the headland to reach the always sublime Shi-Shi Beach. We

hike down an empty beach toward the spectacle of the Point of the Arches, fording Petroleum Creek and making camp at a well-used campsite at the edge of the forest. A standing dead tree is covered in an impressive collection of hanging buoys, floats and boat fenders; a “float-’em” pole. The site comes with a driftwood dinette set and complimentary giant tarp. Life is good.

Taking advantage of the low tide, we drop our packs and set off toward the point in the sweet sunshine. Point of the Arches is truly a natural marvel—a line of stone dragon’s teeth stretching out into the blue Pacific, some of them undercut to form soaring sea arches. We climb to the top of one of the arches and take in the wild panorama of rock and waves. Small succulents are flowering near the top, delicate petals standing in contrast with the rugged rocks.

We round this point on slippery seaweed-covered boulders. At the next crescent beach, we flop out in the sun and bask like seals. Bull kelp bobs in the reflections of the sea stacks, glinting in the elegant light. Sea gulls chastise us, and puffy clouds dance across the horizon. My friends head back to camp, and I explore the tidepools and rocks as the sun goes down, painting the water orange and purple as it falls.

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The sky is dark by the time I head back down the beach toward camp, but the sand is illuminated by a gibbous moon. We sit beside a crackling fire until the lullaby of the waves calls us one by one into our tents.

In the morning, the wind is howling and a succession of rain squalls blows over us. A bit of hail thrown in adds variety. By early afternoon the clouds begin to break up and shafts of sunlight break through, illuminating the breakers in dramatic light.

We round another point on the outgoing tide and hike up the beach, weaving our way through rocks the size of SUVs. Boulder-hopping around the next point, we slip through a double arch and gain entrance to a little pocket beach. A tiny half-moon of sand is surrounded by tortured sea-lashed rocks.

Climbing a headland with the aid of fixed ropes, we follow a little path along a knife-edge ridge to the highest point, a small green aerie with a bird's-eye view of the magnificent coastline. Below us, momentous waves pound the cliffs and spray shoots high into the air, to be carried away by the whipping wind.

We descend the ropes and head back toward camp amongst the fluttering foam, blowing across the beach like a flurry of white birds. An eagle passes overhead, its dinner dangling from its talons. As evening falls, we return to camp and enjoy our own dinner, lingering around the smoky fire as the moon bathes us in luxurious light.

We agree on this: Plan B can turn out pretty well indeed. ♦

John D'Onofrio is a regular contributor to numerous publications including *Adventures Northwest*, *Washington Trails* and *Cascadia Weekly*. His photography and essays can also be found at www.jdonofrio.com.



Hike Details

Shi-Shi Beach. *Olympic National Park, Makah Nation*

Distance: 8 miles roundtrip

Elevation change: 200 feet to sea level

Map: Custom Correct North Olympic Coast, Green Trails Cape Flattery No. 98S

Permits: Obtain permits by phone or in person at the Wilderness Information Center in Port Angeles, (360) 565-3100. Contact the WIC for other locations where permits are issued.

Points to Remember

- Hard-sided food containers like bear canisters are required to store all food, garbage and scented items. You can pick these up at the Wilderness Information Center.
- Pets, weapons and wheeled devices are prohibited on coastal beaches and trails.
- A Makah Recreation Pass must be purchased in Neah Bay prior to arriving at any trailheads on the Makah Indian Reservation.
- Overnight parking for Shi-Shi is allowed only at designated private parking lots.
- Build campfires on the beach and use only driftwood to protect tree roots in forested areas.
- Petroleum Creek can be difficult to cross in winter during heavy rains.
- When traveling along the coast, know the tides. Bring a map and tide chart to plan your route. Be prepared to hike over headland trails during high tides. Some headlands cannot be rounded even during the lowest of tides.