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Conquering the Wild West Coast Trail!

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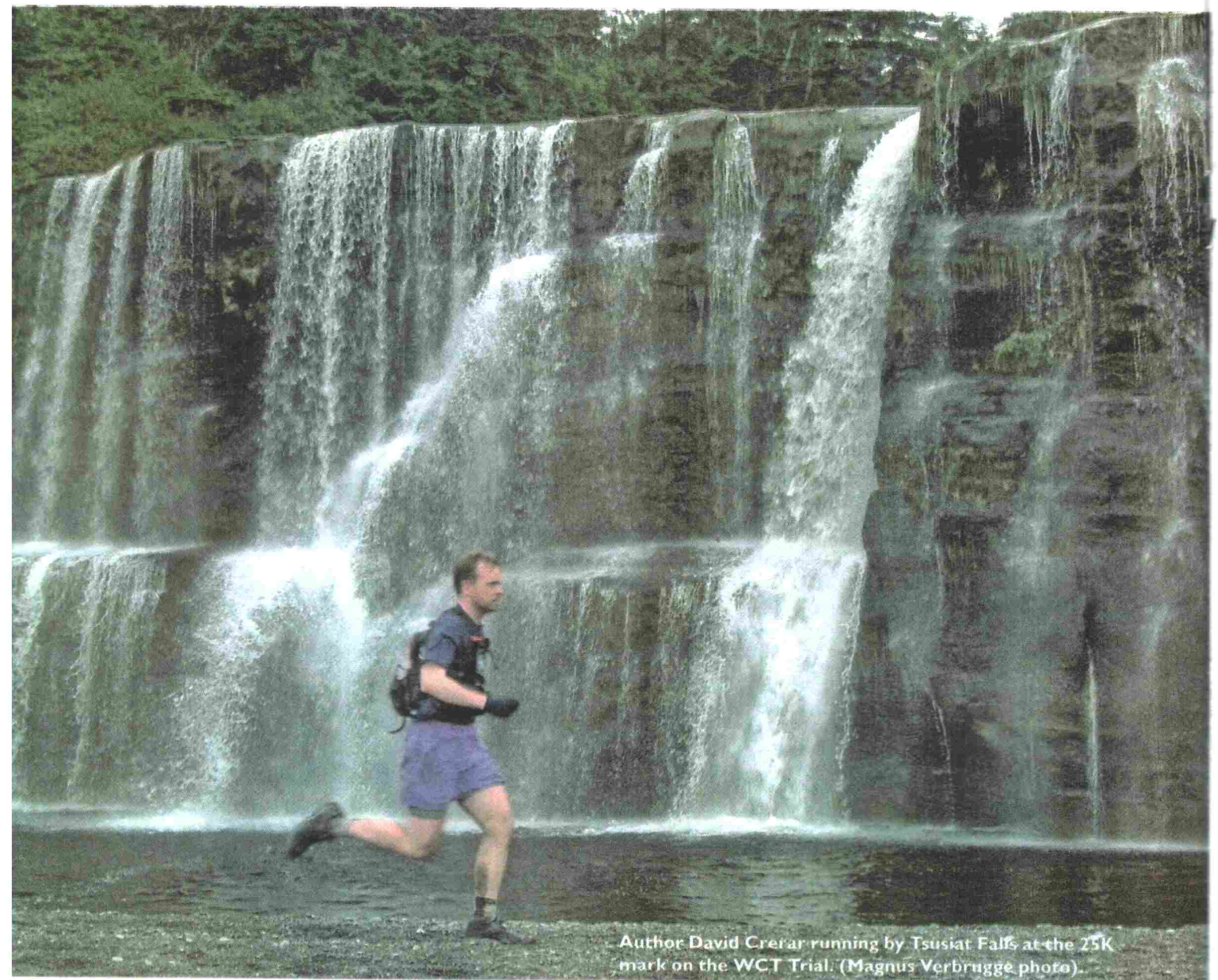
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It took more
than running
to cover the
WCT in a day.





Author David Crerar running by Tsusiat Falls at the 25K mark on the WCT Trial. (Magnus Verbrugge photo).

Adventure Run

Running Canada's Wild West Coast Trail

By David Crerar

A trail run from along the famous 75-kilometer (47-mile) trail along the west coast of Vancouver Island is possible, accessible, and unforgettable, if a little muddy.

Night was falling in the dark forest as I staggered through kilometers 70 to 75. Fallen trees cradled dark lairs and an ancient logging cable snaked up from the ground. By now, no hikers were before or behind me; all were encamped for the night. It was now very much a solo run. The only companions

were those that I could not see, and those I hoped that I would not see: the cougars, bears, and wolves that had been spotted in this area in the days leading up to my run, and as had been duly reported at the trailhead. Downhill slopes offered no encouragement; within minutes there was an inevitable uphill slog, usually via a series of ladders. The yellow kilometer markers that had cheerily reported the passing distance at the northern end of the trail now somberly advised how little distance was



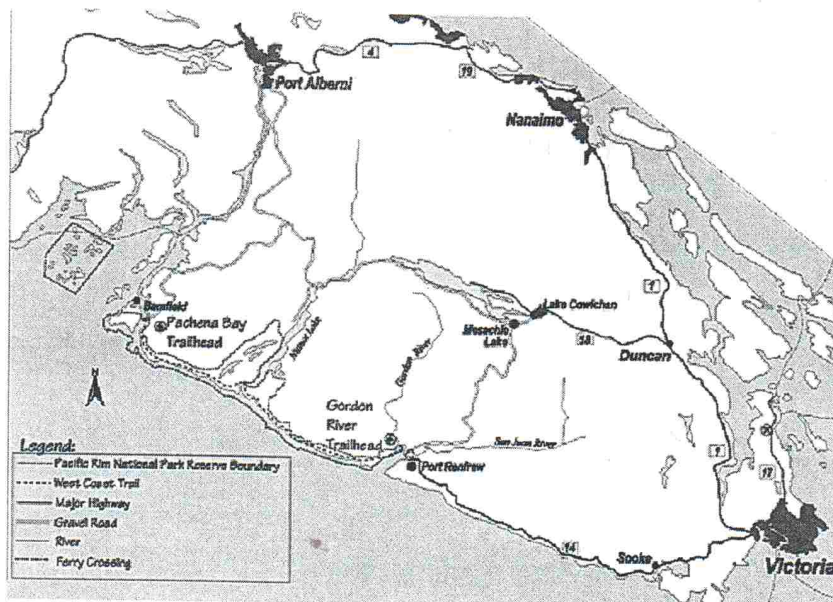
Over the Tscowis Creek Suspension Bridge, at the 17K mark. (Photo by author)

gained from so much pain. I had been warned by the ferryman that he would not wait past 8pm to pick me up from the southern trailhead; if I made it out of the woods I might still face a swim where the Gordon River meets the waves of the Pacific Ocean, with unknown currents and tides. Nothing like a little anxiety to pick up flagging feet!

Since the 75-kilometer West Coast Trail was something of a great white whale for me, I kept trying to forget how Moby Dick ends. This solo run was my second running of the trail in a month. Four weeks earlier my usual running pal and I had cajoled our patient and loving wives to bring our young families across Vancouver Island for a holiday while we ran the trail. Our initial plan was to charter a float plane from Bamfield to the southern trailhead at Port Renfrew. Steep fuel prices gave us cold feet; we decided to drive along logging roads and leave a vehicle at each end. Eternally hapless, we left too late, and the logging roads turned out to be slow and harrowing dust-storm death-traps. We pulled the plug on running the whole trail, contenting ourselves with running a 65km there-and-back on the very runnable north half. After we returned home this compromised run proved more tantalizing than mollifying; I found myself sleepless with the desire to return and complete the task. The only available trail pass reservation date necessitated me travelling to the Island on our tenth wedding anniversary. At this point, I recognized that I had a problem. My beloved wife saw my delusional state and urged me on my way. On August 27, I stepped into the morning fog to the sound of crashing waves, and began running.

I left from the trail's northern trailhead at 6:15 a.m., 15 minutes or so before official sunrise, but illuminated enough by the moon off the open ocean to run. The trail starts six kilometers south of Bamfield, at Pachena Beach, a perfect cove of golden sand, but now barely visible in the morning fog and darkness. Aside from a new series of ladders at the start of the trail, the first 10 kilometers is a fine and speedy trail run, gently meandering up and down creek valleys, following the old lifesaving road that was the genesis of the trail. The trail is bounded and canopied by trees, from gnarled shore pines to giant ancient cedars. Ferns and salal berries abound; the runner will discover a myriad of mushrooms: chanterelles, coral mushrooms, and weird lavender-hued caps. Thanks to the de rigueur policy of bilingualism for Canada's national parks you quickly learn the French term for "footbridge" – passerelle – as these are duly labeled from one to about 150 (I stopped counting). If you are feeling energetic at kilometer 9, an unmarked side trail leads to an exhilarating, noisy and malodorous view of basking sea lions. At km 10, a shorter side trail leads to the red and white tower of the 98-year-old Pachena Lighthouse, the last original wooden lighthouse on Canada's west coast.

At km12 comes Michigan Beach, named after the steamship wrecked in 1893 on the rocky foreshore; its massive boiler is still visible at low tide. Throughout your run you will see why this stretch of ocean was called the "Graveyard of the Pacific": kelp-encrusted anchors, and crushed hulls litter the shore. The two-kilometer stretch of obligatory beach-running along Michigan Beach is rock-to-rock hopping; you quickly learn to read where a given foothold is steady or slick with algae. To avoid the wet of tidal pools and the slip of rocks, it is prudent, if less interesting, to run closest to the forest, above the usual high-tide line. At km14, the trail rejoins the forest; the trail access is marked, as throughout the trail, by multicoloured nautical floats and buoys hanging from trees. On Michigan Beach, as is



The West Coast Trail route on the western side of Vancouver Island

the case for about half of the trail's distance, you can continue along the beach if the tides are cooperating. For the runner concerned with conserving time and energy, it is generally preferable to stick to the forest, and admire the beaches from above; all but one beach (Carmanah's nicely-packed sand, at kms44-48) will leave you exhausted as your feet sink down with every step. That being said, the beaches, with their basalt sea-stacks topped by twisted pines, their soaring bald eagles, their barking sea-lions, their migrating whales, their teeming crabs, urchins and anemones, are sublime.

Over the Tsocowis River, at km17, you meet the first in a series of impressive wilderness engineering feats: a suspension bridge over the river far below. This canyon, as with many along the trail, offers a humbling V-shaped view of the ocean, framed by trees and headland on either side. A kilometer later another viewpoint at Valencia Bluffs reveals the cruel rocky ledges that in 1906 trapped the iron steamer *Valencia*; 133 of the 160 passengers and crew perished. Those on the trail should pause to remember these unfortunate martyrs for the trail; their deaths, and their inability to trek through the impenetrable forest to get help, led to the creation of the Shipwrecked Mariners' Trail that formed the basis of the present trail.

After passing an abandoned steam donkey engine, used to haul trees during the creation of the trail, you return to the beach at the site of a large rusted anchor. A jog over rocks and sand leads to the Klanawa River, and the first of five cable cars over the trail's widest rivers. These too are impressive for their engineering and their views. The exhilarating whoosh of the car to the center of the cable over the river is soon replaced by inertia, and the surprisingly tiring pulling of the cable to reach the other side. The Klanawa also marks the start of the most beautiful stretch of the trail. At km25 one passes over Tsusiat Falls which tumbles off an innocuous-enough-looking creek in a perfect wide curtain. Here, we will immediately go back on our advice about avoiding beaches; if you have never hiked the trail at leisure, you should descend to see these incredible falls, no matter how unappealing the series of ladders appears. At the base of Tsusiat Falls you will also find one of your last

water sources for a while, as well as a gorgeous beach often used for nude sunbathing when not shrouded in mist. A kilometer to the east is Hole-in-the-Rock, a natural land bridge that can be passed under when tides are below 9 feet. Sweeping beach, sea stacks, sea caves, and tumbled boulders like abandoned giant dice make this stretch deserving of your awe no matter how fast you are trying to run.

Around this time I encountered some of the first early-rising hikers. Although some, staggering under 80-pound packs in what they considered to be the greatest adventure of their lives, appeared offended by the sight of a solo trailrunner attempting the trail in a single day, most hikers were encouraging. The same goodwill glow of marathon spectators rubbed off and hastened my step. I in turn gave them the tale of the crazed trailrunner to add to their bevy of post-trail anecdotes back in civilization.

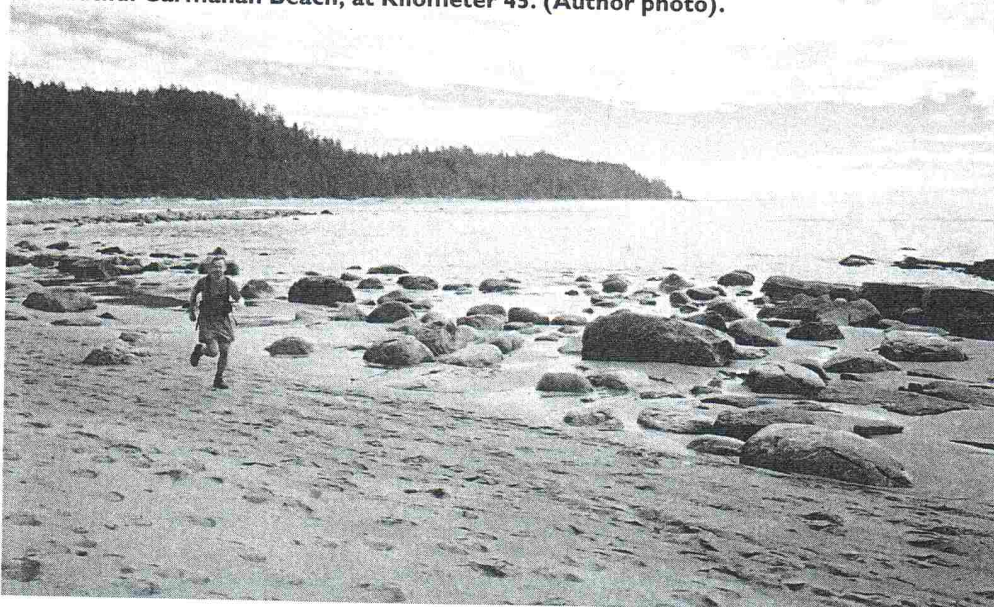
At km29 you must return to the forest. The trail rises, providing a series of impressive views of inaccessible coves bounded by headland cliffs. These make for some heroic trail-running photographs. Only a thin fringe of salal bushes buffers you from a death akin to that of Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*, so watch your footing. It would be a lovely setting for your demise, though. These bluffs will also give you some of the best vantage points in your life to see whales cresting on the ocean.

The inevitable injury—fortunately not a bad one

It was in a forested part of this stretch that I had my only quasi-injury on the run. During some fancy toe-work descending a muddy stretch my leg fell into a wooden lasso created by a jutting tree root. For a minute I thought that I had broken my leg, but happily it left only a nasty gash and bruise. The trail offers infinite possibilities for ankle rolls and tumbles. A cautious and respectful approach will generally steer experienced trail runners to safety. The only time I rolled ankles was on easier passages when I daydreamed about how well the run was going; the trail gods sent a humbling reminder. Although catastrophic injury is unlikely, people have died on the trail. And even though other hikers would find you if you hurt yourself, Parks Canada warns that medical help may be 24 hours' away; I don't think that they are making this up. Every year about 90 people are medivacked off the trail. Although trail runners, unencumbered by huge backpacks and hefty boots, are less likely to harm themselves (and the trail, for that matter) than the typical hiker geared up for a 5-7 day trek, one or two injured trail runners could lead to a running ban and spoil the fun for the rest of us.

The trail is cut in two at km32 by the Nitinat Narrows, a tidal river linking Nitinat Lake to the ocean. You may be disoriented upon arrival to see the water flowing back upstream at high tide. Although one might be tempted to swim, reports of tidal bores and whirlpools present a compelling dissuasion. A 10-person ferry shuttles people across the Narrows. As the pilot waits for sufficient numbers of hikers to gather at one side before ferrying over, you may lose precious time (I had to wait for about forty minutes, which I would have liked having back towards the end of the run). While waiting, impress the

Beautiful Carmanah Beach, at Kilometer 45. (Author photo).



waiting hikers with nonchalant references to running the trail in a single day, while watching friendly seals, river otters, and martens swim past.

The south half of the trail is notoriously more difficult than the north half, but the really hardest terrain doesn't start until after Walbran Creek, with the final 22 kilometers. Nitinat to Walbran is a series of generally well-maintained boardwalks, with some reasonable trail running, and of course gorgeous beaches. Cheewhat River is spanned by a pleasing wooden suspension bridge; the water of the river, which translates from the Ditidaht language as "River of Urine" is presumably less pleasing. Drinking water in this stretch is scarce, so be sure to have filled up earlier. After Cheewhat, the trail goes through an elevated bog over boardwalks; for a portion a detour was in effect as a beaver dam had flooded the trail. The side trip, although muddy, was pleasant as I met several tree and pond frogs on the way.

A hamburger along the way

You will celebrate your arrival at Carmanah for the view of the four-kilometer long beach bounded by rocky headlands, on the northernmost of which rests the Carmanah Lighthouse. The other reason for celebration is Chez Monique's, an anomalous but welcome tent selling bottled water, candy, and huge burgers. The hard-packed sand of Carmanah Beach offers a perfect running surface, and in times of lower run-off you will probably feel like leaping across Carmanah Creek and skipping the cable car. Bonilla Point at km48 features some of the most picturesque sea-stacks on the trail, and a waterfall that doubles as a shower.

It was during this stretch of the run that the sun came out gloriously. During the 13.5-hour run, I experienced hot sun, impenetrable fog, light cloud, light rain, and heavy rain. This wild weather is wholly typical of the west coast of the Island. You will monitor weather websites hourly in the week leading up to your run, all for naught. The weather forcecasts change by the minute, and you must be prepared for anything.

Given the challenges of the southernmost 22 kilometers, you should consider Bonilla Point to be the practical half-way

mark of the trail, and reevaluate at this point whether you have sufficient remaining hours in the day to reach the end of the trail. If you've consumed two-thirds of the day getting to this point, you will not be able to finish. There is no shame in taking shelter on this paradisaical beach, under a driftwood lean-to, and finishing the run the next morning.

Walbran Creek at km53 offers the most beautiful cable-car trip on the trail, over a pool boarded by caves and cliffs. It also serves as a River Styx, demarcating the beginning of the markedly toughest stretch of the trail. Apart from the occasional boardwalk, the next 10 kilometers offer less sustained running. The trail's infamous ladders

come fast and furious, and soon your arms are as tired as your legs. The top of the triple-length ladders at either end provide a good view of the suspension bridge spanning Logan Creek (at km56) – such is the juxtaposition of beauty and pain on this stretch. You will then go down and up the sides of the Cullite Creek canyon at km58, climbing over 200 feet of ladders on each side. Both horizontal and vertical bring their challenges. Every 10 meters brings a new microclimate; from exposed elevated bog, to moist rainforest, to rocky valley; unfortunately the dominant climate is mud. It was muddy in the dry August when I did this run; when I hiked the trail in May it was an unmitigated quagmire.

At km70 you pass the last possible camping spot before the end, at Thrasher Cove. For most runners, it will be a lonely haul from here to the end. The trail is actually decent for running, with some spongy bark-mulch underfooting distracting you slightly from the fact that this stretch crosses the most contours lines of the trail. To keep the aforementioned bears, cougars and wolves away in the twilight, I yelled "hai" very thirty seconds or so; the Japanese believe that loud random screams can strengthen your resolve, and I was willing to try this out. Once, a branch snapped loudly just meters behind me, and I let out a battery of yells; whatever it was, if it was anything, left quickly. As I hit km73 at 7pm, the time my children Harry and Pippa were going to bed far away in North Vancouver, I scared away the big animals by yelling out the bedtime songs that I ought to have been singing to my children at that time; this helped too.

At last there is a downward stretch that doesn't seem to have a creek, with an inevitable ladder on the other side. The yellow marker reads "75km". Through the trees I see water and lights of the shacks across the river. I raise a buoy on a tree to signal to the ferry pilot. Within an hour I am back at the hotel drinking a beer; the bathwater turning as murky as the mud holes I had just sloshed through. The clothes that I had mailed to myself care of the hotel had arrived safe, sound, and clean. So had the cookies, chocolates and photograph of my family that my wife had secretly sent to the hotel. When I staggered on board the Nanaimo ferry to return home the next day, I saw that the

entire family had traveled to the Island to meet me. Wasted and wounded, battered and bruised, this was the finest wedding anniversary one could have ever imagined.

Running the West Coast Trail was grand exhilarating folly. It is one of the most beautiful adventure runs that you will ever go on, but this beauty will also make you feel foolish if you only run it. I can only write this account in good conscience if I urge you to hike the trail properly, to spend the day exploring the sea caves at Carmanah, swimming at Walbran Creek, and basking in the sun under the roar of Tsusiat Falls. Why not run it one way and hike it back, simplifying your logistics, and heightening your sense of the sublime?

Logistics

Although the Trail is well-served, the logistics of running it are almost as challenging as running the trail itself.

Trailheads: Pachena Bay (Bamfield, north): (250) 728-3234
Gordon River (Port Renfrew, south): (250) 647-5434

Cost: A permit costs CAN\$110, plus \$28 for the two ferry fees, for total of about US\$115. They check the passes at the ferry-crossings so 'ghosting' is not recommended.

Reservations: If you want to run or hike during peak season of July or August, reservations are recommended (1-800-435-5622; a \$25 fee is charged). You can also turn up at the Information Center at either end and get a pass on stand-by, usually within one or two days of waiting.

Orientation: you must arrive by 1pm the day before your adventure to check in, pick up your pass, and have an orientation session. The orientation is enormously useful, and the staff at Parks Canada are enthusiastic and helpful (thank you, Dawn). If you telephone ahead and advise that you will be late, Parks Canada will usually not give away your pass.

Getting There: To Vancouver Island: most come by ferry. Bamfield (north end) is about three hours west of Nanaimo. Ferries arrive at Nanaimo from West Vancouver (to the north of Vancouver: www.bcferries.ca), Tsawwassen (south of Vancouver, near the US border: BC Ferries), and downtown Vancouver (passengers-only ferry: www.harbourlynx.com). Port Renfrew (south end) is more easily accessible: about 2 hours northwest of Victoria, which is serviced by ferries from Tsawwassen (BC Ferries) and Seattle (<http://www.victoriaclipper.com>). There are also regular floatplane trips to Nanaimo and Victoria from Vancouver downtown (www.harbour-air.com).

Between trailheads: if you have limited time and lots of money, the ideal approach would be to drive to take one car to Bamfield, then charter a float plane (www.wcwild.com) to the Gordon River (Port Renfrew) trailhead at dawn, and then run south to north. The West Coast Trail Express (www.trailbus.com) runs an excellent 3.5-hour shuttle service between the trailheads on logging roads, as well as from the trailheads to Nanaimo and Victoria. Or you can do the two-car option. Give yourself plenty of time to travel both ways on the logging roads. Note that if the gate on the Renfrew Hookup Road southeast of Cayuse is open, you can save about an hour's drive.

Trailhead Towns: Bamfield (north): take care with making reservations in Bamfield. Old Bamfield, where most of the accommodations are located, is located on an peninsula, and accessible only by water-taxi, making an early start or late finish difficult. Port Renfrew (south): The West Coast Trail Hotel (250 647 5565) and Coastal Kitchen (250-647-5545) are recommended.

NW Races Presented By *Total Health Events*

Birch Bay International Road Race

15K - 30K

April 9 2006

9:00 am

Birch Bay, Washington

www.birchbayroadrace.com

(360) 325-0715

OVER THE DAM RUN

5K - 10K

1/2 Marathon

May 14, 2006

Grand Coulee Dam
Washington

www.overthedamrun.com

(360) 325-0715

Direction: I ran the trail north (Bamfield/Pachena) to south (Port Renfrew/Gordon River) but would advise the opposite direction. This way, you get the difficult parts out of the way early; if pressed for time, it is easier to run the home stretch into Bamfield in the twilight. You would also avoid the stress of crossing the Gordon River at the south end at the end of your run. If you are a strong swimmer and had a light running pack, you could swim across the Gordon River to the shacks and pier about 150 meters away; but at the end of the run, in the dark, and with some unusual currents in this ice-cold river, it is not recommended.

The difficulty with the south-to-north route is that the normal ferry crossing does not start until 9am; you will have a better chance of persuading the ferry pilot (Butch Jack Ferry (250) 647-5517) to make a special late pickup than of persuading him to wake up at 5 am for you.

Season: The trail, with operating ferries, is open from May 1 until September 30.

Sunrise and Sunset: These are key considerations. On August 27, the day I ran the trail, sunrise was 6:30 am, and sunset 8:12 pm in the area. The longest day in 2005 was June 20: 5:16 am to 9:28 pm.

Tides: You do not need tide tables if you plan to stick to the forest trail wherever possible. If you prefer the exhaustion and beauty of beach running, you will need tide tables for Port Renfrew (south) or Tofino (north) to avoid being cut off by high tides at certain spots: www.lau.chs-shc.dfo-mpo.gc.ca.

Water: Iodine pills or purifiers are recommended to avoid contracting giardia, or beaver fever. That being said, on my two runs I drank directly from streams with flowing water and did not suffer. You can also buy bottled water from Chez Monique and, at times, the Nitinat ferry. Plan water stops in advance and mark them on the map: late in the season, many streams turn into unpalatable trickles, while major water bodies—Klanawa, Nitinat, and Cheewhat—are tidal and undrinkable.

Gear: We mostly laugh off gear lists, but this trail makes some gear necessary. You will hate life if you do not wear gaiters on this trail; my REI Desert Gaiters, modified with Gaiter-Aids (mini-bungee cords with tightening straps), worked perfectly. Gloves are also crucial for cable-car crossings, and avoiding stigmata-like injuries on tree branches. Bring a running pack with a big bladder. Although every campsite has an outhouse, it is b.y.o.t.p. Bring an emergency whistle. A camera is a must—bring a water-resistant one that takes a good photograph through mist; disposables and cheap digital camera do not work well in this climate. Cell phones work on many beaches. Bring cash for Chez Monique's.

If there is any doubt about your ability to finish, consider bringing a lightweight sleeping bag or tent—you really don't want to endure an overnight west coast rain storm under a fallen tree, even cuddled up to bears and cougars.

Maps and Books: The best map is the one that comes with your reservation fee, published by Parks Canada. It is waterproof, and folds handily into a baggie for ready reference. As the trail is linear and well marked, a map is barely necessary.

Web Resources: Parks Canada website: http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/bc/pacificrim/activ/activ6a_e.asp

Quu'as Trail Society: www.alberni.net/quuas/trail.htm

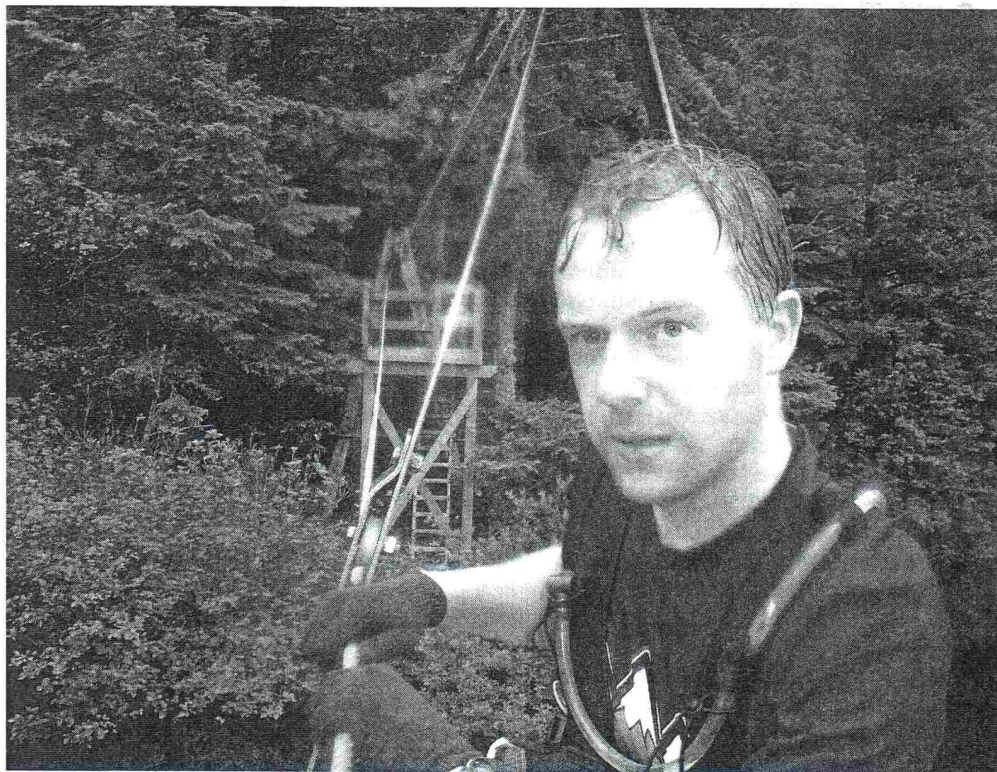
General information: <http://www.i-needtoknow.com/wct>

Best photographs: <http://www.bluepeak.net/canada/wct/index.html#>

Running the West Coast Trail: <http://www.multisports.com/news/1062208333.shtml>

Timing: You will want to allot yourself the whole day for the run, not only for safety, but also to savour the beauty. It took me 13.5 hours to run the 75km; about 13 if you don't count the Nitinat wait. To gauge your own anticipated time, consider that I am not especially fast (3:25 average marathon) but I am used to slippery and rooty technical west-coast trail runs.

Trail Running Record: Frank Wolf and Kevin Vallely of North Vancouver, British Columbia hold the record of 10 hours and 13 minutes. They set it on 24 July 1997, 10 days after finishing first and second in the North Vancouver Kneeknacker Race. The time measurement is from Bamfield Trailhead to the end of the trail on the west shore of the Gordon River. It includes all stopping time, including the wait for the Nitinat Ferry. This is a good and fair convention for measuring the time of future runs. •



David Crerar is a trial attorney practicing in Vancouver, British Columbia. He looks forward to running the Chuckanut 50KM for the first time, and is currently training for the Western States 100 Mile Run.