

Going coastal

Olympic National Park features scenic beaches, hikes and ocean sunsets

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DAILY EMERALD FREELANCE REPORTER

When in pursuit of the perfect beach, backpackers know that sometimes the Oregon coast won't suffice. In many areas, summer homes break up the scenery while high-pitched squeals from All-Terrain Vehicles drown out the sounds of the surf. However, for hikers interested in getting away from it all, Washington's Olympic Peninsula has enough solitude to go around.

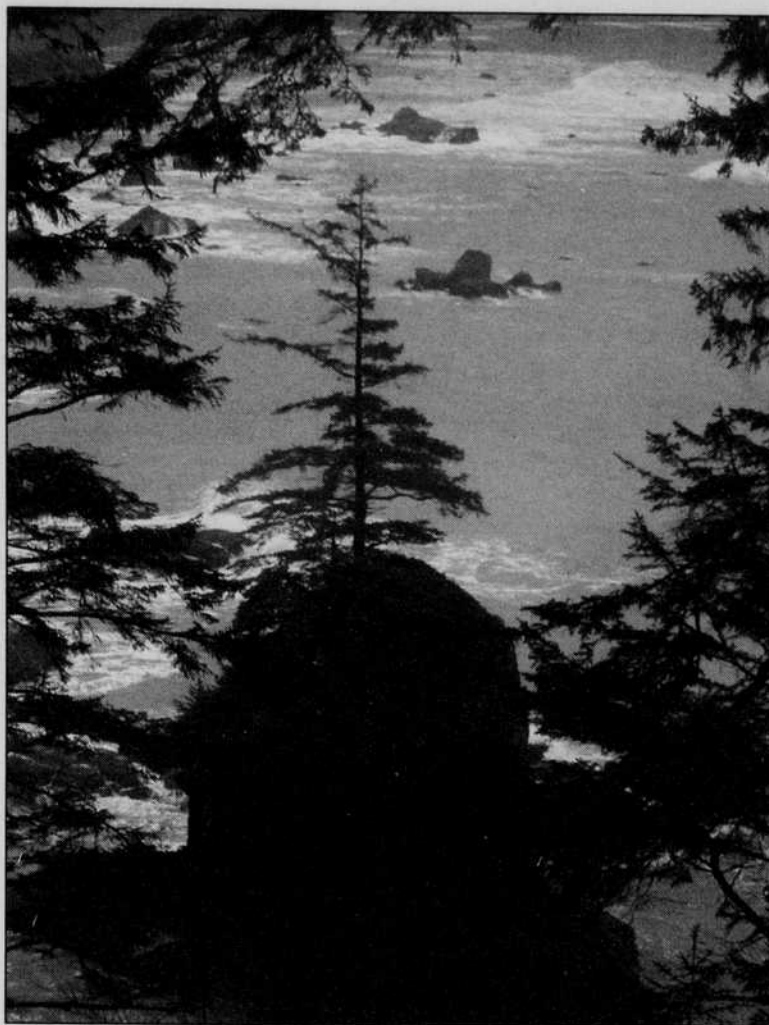
With 65 miles of pristine shoreline, the coastal strip of Olympic National Park holds the distinction of being the longest wilderness coast in the lower 48 states. Most beaches are accessible only by foot and require multiple days of hiking to access. Because of its remote nature, the area is a haven for wildlife watchers, amateur geologists and sunset fanatics alike.

A 22-mile stretch of tide pools and craggy shores known as the Shipwreck Coast has earned a reputation as one of the park's most grueling hikes. According to the National Park Service, each year rangers remove five to 10 injured hikers and expect one or two fatalities.

"We call it the death march," said retiree Lucy Dougall, who has hiked the less-than-hospitable terrain for more than 40 years. "People say you must be crazy to come out here when the ocean is roughest, but that's when it's the most beautiful."

Dougall was inspired to explore the secluded coastline after reading about U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas' historic hike along these same shores. In 1958, Justice Douglas and 70 hikers walked south from Lake Ozette to Rialto Beach in protest of an initiative to build a road and several hot dog stands along the coast. The proposal was soon quashed, and today Washington's northern shoreline looks much the same as it did in centuries past.

The hike traverses beaches of eye-catching pastel pebbles suitable for the bins at museum gift shops. Bald eagle sightings are commonplace, and both deer and mountain lion tracks appear in the morning sand. Inland campsites furnished with rope swings and makeshift driftwood shanties compel tired hikers to call it a day, while the evening sun dips behind sea stacks, setting the sky ablaze in vibrant hues of purple and orange. When conditions are at their worst, hikers can expect to perform balancing acts on drift logs and sea-slick boulders. Barnacles provide their only traction. Crossing muddy promontories requires help



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Shorelines along the Olympic National park give hikers and campers the opportunity to test the limits of the human spirit.

from well-placed rope ladders.

There's also the weather to contend with. On average, more than 10 feet of rain fall on the Olympic coast every year. The region receives so much precipitation that Olympic National Park is also home to one of the world's three temperate rain forests.

"Some people take the gamble and come out here expecting storms," said Wilderness Coast District Ranger Mark O'Neill. "If you decide to hike in the winter, prepare for everything you own to get soaked."

On an overcast Saturday morning this past month, high tide confined Eric Mullen, 21, and Jordan Hirsch, 23, to their peninsula campsite. With nowhere to go, the two students from the University of Montana started the day looking for dry firewood. The two hikers had hoped to spend spring break living out what Mullen dubs "an epic adventure." Unfortunately, the Pacific Northwest greeted the pair with a 24-hour deluge.

"We'll see how far you can take the human spirit before it finally breaks," said a soggy Mullen, while doing jumping jacks to keep warm.

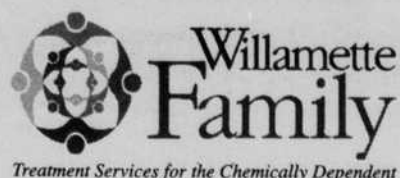
"Actually we came out here for the challenge of building a fire in a storm,"

added Hirsch, who drizzled some of his camp fuel onto a modest fire.

Regardless of weather conditions, the abundance of flotsam on the Shipwreck Coast makes for an entertaining walk. With focused eyes, hikers can easily pass the hours scouring the rocky shores for buoys, pieces of sea glass and choice agates. Occasionally, glass Japanese fishing floats wash up on the beaches. These attractive orbs are prized by beachcombers and take at least a year to cross the Pacific Ocean.

"We once found a safe the size of a television on Shi Shi Beach," O'Neill said. "I have no idea how it got there."

While the Shipwreck Coast offers many opportunities to view wildlife, visitors are required to keep their food in hard-sided containers to discourage animals from frequenting campsites in search of a free meal. Bear canisters are available at local ranger stations for a \$3 donation to the park service. Hikers should also bring extra garbage bags to remove debris from the remote beaches. On April 23, the park hosts its sixth annual Olympic Coast Cleanup, and 300 to 500 volunteers are expected to attend.



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