



Olympic Peninsula Odyssey

By Judith Altruda

Imagine: A dark world of mist-shrouded forests and remote beaches; lonely, exposed, and spectacularly beautiful. There are no footprints on the sand except your own. You hear the ceaseless crashing of waves punctuated by the cry of bald eagles. Between forest and shore, a jumble of driftwood stacked like giant bones conceal tide-swept treasures. Washington State's Olympic Peninsula offers sublime beauty, the rich culture of eight Indian tribes, and the largest temperate rainforest on the planet.



The Route:

Early one winter morning, my friend Marcy and I headed north from my home in Tokeland on Highway 101 to explore the Pacific coast of the Olympic Peninsula. We had an appointment to tour John's Beachcombing museum in Forks (about three hours away), and planned to stop at the beaches along the way. Except for the occasional log truck, there was no other traffic as we headed into the lush Olympic Peninsula. Because it gets about 150 inches of rain per year, everything is carpeted in moss.

We stopped at Lake Quinault to see the World's Largest Spruce Tree, one of six champion trees in the "Valley of the Rainforest Giants." The sun came out, illuminating droplet-tipped branches like diamonds and brightening moss to a glowing shade of Kelly green. We headed back the way we came, passing the Quinault Mercantile, a great place to get a salmon burger. We continued north on Highway 101.



Top: Ruby Beach, Jefferson County, Washington

Below left: World's Largest Spruce Tree

Below right: Spruce Burl Trail Loop

The Wild Coast

About 25 miles north of Lake Quinault, the highway hugs the coast, allowing access to four beaches, named Beach 1, 2, 3, and 4. Watch for road signs and park along the highway to access the shore. One of my favorite places is Beach 1, where we stopped to stretch our legs. Spruce Burl Trail Loop, a short trail that winds through a grove of Sitka spruce studded with bulbous growths of enormous proportions is a must-see.

The Salt Spray Forest of Beach 3 is aptly named. Evergreen trees stunted by wind and salt air, slant towards land. These are not the happy trees of a Bob Ross painting, but shaped and given beauty by the struggles of surviving in a harsh environment. Access the beach by a trail, and visit tide pools, hunt for agates and obsidian jasper, and beachcomb for glass balls.

We stopped to fuel the car and get a snack at the Queets Trading post, the only gas station for the next 40 miles. Nearby Kalaloch Lodge features sea-view rental cabins, a good restaurant, and a small convenience store. It is a great location to stay and visit the nearby Hoh Rain-forest or beachcomb to your heart's content.



Make your reservation early if you're planning a summer stay at Kalaloch Lodge—it's a popular place to stay in Olympic National Park.

Our next stop was Ruby Beach, one of the most scenic beaches on the coast. Ranked number 1 of 42 things to do on the peninsula, it's great for beachcombing, wildlife sightings, bird watching, and tide pooling. Picturesque sea stacks and driftwood piled on the beach make for beautiful photos. Continuing north on Highway 101 from Ruby Beach to Forks, the only stops we made in 27 miles were to view herds of elk.



Not just another roadside attraction

As we drove through Forks, the town made famous as the fictional setting for the *Twilight* books and movies, we spotted a tower encrusted with colorful buoys. John Anderson, a silver-haired man with a relaxed, low key manner, greeted us outside a cavernous two-story building, which now houses John's Beachcombing Museum.

We go inside and I have sensory overload. Every surface from floor to ceiling bears the bounty of 44 years of beachcombing. The walls are lined with bottles of all shape and sizes. The displays are neatly arranged by category: barnacle encrusted fishing gear, industrial, military, plastic, container spills, children's toys, toothbrushes, cigarette lighters, shells, rocks, fossils, bones, sea glass, and more.

Treasure Trove

In the center of room, a netted enclosure filled with Japanese glass fishing floats reminds me of a McDonald's ball pit. Next to it, a sand table with plastic toys and cars entertains the youngest visitors so their adults can browse.



Much of the treasure was found by John, a retired plumber, on the Olympic Peninsula. Bizarre finds include a Boeing 727 engine spinner cone, an assortment of raggedy Ann doll heads (the result of a container spill), and a pair of shoes found one year apart. John's most prized treasures include a 15th-century anchor chain and a jumbo double float. In a smaller room, cases display unusual shaped glass floats in rare colors, a Pleistocene era mammoth tooth, and a grey whale skull.

We flip through a scrapbook filled with messages found in bottles. Most are sent by school children, and John answers every one. One bottle, sent to sea in 1975 from a nearby beach, was found two years ago. John surmises it was carried out to sea for years until strangely returning to the same beach forty years later.

John tries to return items to their original owners when he can. He combed debris from the 2011 Japanese tsunami, and a section of the museum dedicated to these finds sits off to the side. The story of how John and

two other beachcombers traveled to Japan to return items they found on Pacific coast beaches to their original owners is the topic of the poignant documentary, *Lost and Found* ([imdb.com/title/tt3574590/](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3574590/)).

More impressive than any one piece of the collection is John's passion for what he does and his willingness to share it. John's beachcombing tip: April and May are the best months for this part of the coast. The museum is open during the summer or by appointment at (360) 640-0320.

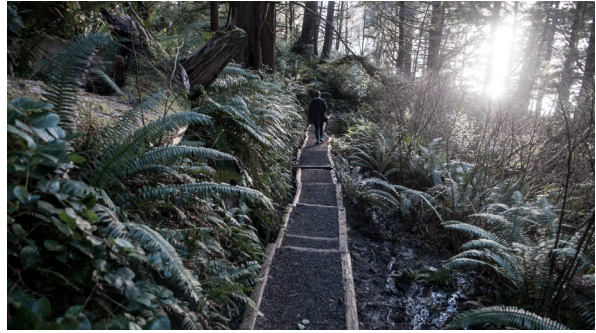
Twilight

We left the museum around and headed to La Push, 30 minutes away. On the Quileute Indian reservation, we pass a general store and rental cabins near the harbor. We hike a half-mile through velvety green woods, the sound of the sea intensifying as we near the trail's end. The low winter sun glinted through bare branches, framing a view of the beach. Marcy and I climb over dense jumbles of driftwood that lay between forest and sea. Thinking about the glass balls we'd just seen, I scout the nooks and crannies, just in case.

The entire Olympic Peninsula loop is about 331 miles. Plan on at least three days to experience the pristine forests, hunt for sea glass, and experience the wild coastline of Washington.

For more information on beachcombing the beaches of the West Coast read *Beachcombers Guide to the Northwest* by Walt Pich.

All photos by Marcy Merrill except the photo of Ruby Beach by Lindsay Snow.



Top : Hike to La Push beach

Above: La Push Beach