

as a spinning left-hander ricocheted off a black spire at the far south end of the beach. The sacrifice was a simple one to make.

Comen and Niera enjoyed several runs in the coarse black sand down to the fast, hollow left, ideal for two goofy-footers. It was one of those spots that if you were at home it would've been packed, but it was the kind of spot you hope to find on a trip with so many unknowns.

## The Rugged North

I think it's safe to assume the farther north you go, the more rugged it gets. Everything is magnified. Storms are more frequent, savage, and last longer. Winter arrives sooner and stretches into spring. The teeming ocean is colder and darker. Bull kelp bulbs are as big as softballs and bob like buoys. Wildlife encounters occur more often, and instead of swaying in the wind, throngs of sea palms endure the rush of swell. The air is saltier, moister, crisper, and its bite more piercing.

However, it's the Lost Coast's daunting topography that ironically slows the heart rate. Whether it's sunny and warm or gray and drizzly, paddling amongst jagged sea stacks, waterfalls cascading off towering cliff tops, and gaping sea grottos inhaling swell and swirling current regurgitating frothy whitewater thereafter, all of the Lost Coast's natural wonders are on full display, its energy thundering away on wave-battered crags. Somehow I felt relaxed.

Outside of Alaska and Canada, the Lost Coast offers North America's largest span of pristine beach and shoreline on the Pacific coast. For 80 unpaved miles, one can lose themselves in the sheer coastal peaks, riparian-choked valleys, and lonely beaches home to flotsams of mangled driftwood and tattered fishing gear. Paddling our kayaks offered us the opportunity to explore this great escape of nooks and crannies that a motorboat couldn't reach or that were inaccessible on foot.

## Flight of the Osprey

None of us would say, but I think a pair of seafaring ospreys led us to a fun little right-hander...at least I'd like to think so. They swooped from snag to snag, hugging the cliff faces that rose above us. The opportunistic raptor's high-whistled k-yewks were heard above the crashing surf.

We followed their flight, with Comen leading the way toward a cluster of toothy rock outcroppings. Just south and inside those crags was a right-hander reeling over reef running along the cliffs, a boulder-strewn stretch of coast leading back toward the osprey's lofty perch.

Just beyond the peeling right-hander we paddled around a colossal sea stack. Over millenniums the surf had



It's there if you want it. (Opposite) Sea stacks, caves, and black-sand beach camping mark the transition zone from Med climate to Pacific Northwest pinescape. The crew initially thought whitney would be a concern. Turns out it was the black bears that had their attention. Dave Niera (above) found this glassy nugget after a day-long paddle.

bored a dank, gaping tunnel through the western face of the sheer pillar. We paddled through it for 30 yards feeling the surge from the short interval combo swell lifting us toward its ceiling. We ended up in a hidden keyhole-shaped cove looking for a place to land.

It wasn't always easy finding a spot to stretch our legs with so many cliffs tumbling into the ocean. Near Bear Harbor we landed on a black boulder-strewn drainage strangled in willows. While hoisting our kayaks up the steep rocks, the footing was tricky as we attempted to move quickly before the next wave arrived.

When we thought we were high enough on the rocks, stuffing food in our mouths, one wave nixed that notion. The water deepened just off the rocks, so the waves didn't break until they hit the round black boulders. Swells picked up momentum coming out of deep water and exploded, sweeping across the boulders. It all happened in slow motion, a larger six-foot wave catching us off guard. Comen's boat was closest to the water. The rear hatch flipped open, his board strapped to the bow, and then impact. As the wave tried to yank his boat out to sea, Comen braced himself and held the bow with a death grip until the tumult was over. As quickly as the wave dissipated, it was serene again in this nameless cove.

On our last day I poked my head out of my soggy tent greeted by warm sun. Instead of damp, smelly wetsuits, we paddled uncumbered in trunks, sunglasses, and hats. Common murre reveled in the aqua blue water. Before, when we could barely tell a cliff from a beach, the Lost Coast glistened in brilliant light. Potential surf spots appeared along several crags, their offshore wafting above an untamed wilderness, the way it should be. ☺



## For all I knew, the sandbar at Virgin Creek could've been an ideal setup along the rugged coast of Chile.

For Northern Californian Craig Comen, Chile is his home away from home, and this stretch of NorCal mimics that South American strip.

After trading perfect five-foot offshore for 30 minutes, another local on a puke-green longboard paddled

out, certainly enough surf to feed this crowd. They knew each other, as I would expect in the smaller northern towns along Highway 1.

Between sets, Craig told him of our impending kayaking/surfing venture into the Lost Coast, and, of course, the topic of great whites came up in the conversation. "Fall is the high season for great whites," said the mid-fifties local with saltwater filtering through his dense brown mustache like the bristles of a baleen whale.

That caught my attention. "Why is that?" I asked, as Comen took off on another hooking left-hander under overcast skies.

"The salmon are running, which means the sea lions are frothing," he replied simply. "That makes the whites react."

It made perfect sense to me. The food web in all its fury, something I couldn't help to consider while paddling the Lost Coast. Those words reiterated in my head as Craig, his pal, local waterman Dave Niera, and I approached Sea Lion Rock a few days later. Several burly beach masters guarded the broad, guano-caked outcropping, so we gave their hangout a wide berth. However, as we paddled what I thought was a safe distance away, a horde of sea lions dove into the dark water. The younger sea lions strained their elongated necks to get a good look, but the bulls with their knobby heads exploded toward our paddling flotilla of plastic boats. They briefly gave chase, then lost interest as we paddled farther into the gloom.

## Black is Beautiful

"Did you bring a bear box?" asked Comen, as we attempted to pick a beach to camp on, straining to see in the poor visibility I had to think for a minute. It must have been the dense, dewy trees and spindly willows, a moist ceiling hovering above the impenetrable forest, prime black bear habitat spurring Craig to inquire. I was always required to have one while hiking and climbing in the high eastern Sierra. "We'll keep the fire burning, bury our food in the hulls of our kayaks, and hope for the best," I stated somewhat confidently.

I was tempted to change my mind after we chose a beautifully deserted black-sand beach near Usal Beach. There were fresh mama black bear prints, followed closely by a tiny, undoubtedly hungry cub. Then there was the solitary male. His prints were bigger, sunk in the black sand a little deeper, the apex land predator of the Lost Coast, but they weren't the only carnivores on the beach. Freshwater springs dribbled out of several shale-choked gulches down to the beach. Mountain lion tracks meandered beneath those steep cliffs, finely detailed in the compacted black sand. Then our attention was diverted

## Lost Coast Sojourn

BY CHUCK GRAHAM

