Alberta-based outdoor enthusiasts Cathy and Andy Harris spent a week last summer completing the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island in British Columbia with their teenage daughters, Emily and Madeleine, and their cousin Livvy. This is Cathy's account of the trip, and of how the outdoor clothing and equipment they took with them stood up to the conditions.

A trek in British Columbia

Day 1: Gordon River to Thrasher Cove

5 kilometres in 5 hours

Ready, steady, go! Our packs weighed a tonne (we should definitely have weighed them before we set out); they felt like 30 kilos each. Everyone was smiling and keen to get this show—walking the famous West Coast Trail, a 75-kilometre (46.6 miles) long backpacking trail following the south-western edge of Vancouver Island in British Columbia—on the road. Our first cumbersome move was to get on and off the 30-second ferry crossing from Gordon River, on the southwest coast of the island, to the southern section of the trailhead. We moved gingerly along watching every step through the trees and bushes. This is a rainforest after all; no trails here that are trampled and manicured—this is rugged country.

With lovely, clean, comfortable boots from Garmont, treated with an aftercare proofing product from UK-based Granger's for water repellency, and nylon gaiters from Canadian outdoor brand Mountain Equipment Company (MEC), we celebrated the ease of the first kilometre. I must say that I wore the Garmont hiking boots with some trepidation. I was paranoid that Emily and I had not done enough miles in ours. So far so good—they were behaving, but probably because we were moving slower than the slugs out there. Never leave home without the Bridgedale socks, the combination of great boots and superb comfy socks is now my favourite way to travel. Your



A view of the Pacific Ocean from the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island.

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feet get hot and bothered, but the boots breathe and so do the socks, with a cold sea foot wash to look forward to on reaching camp at night. We were getting to know our backpacks step by step, and here we were, actually on the edge of the Pacific, knowing that we had 75 kilometres to go along a rugged and wild coastal path unlike any other you could imagine. There were cedar trunks the size of small houses that had been blown over by massive storms in 2007, which gave me a whole new appreciation for the power of the Pacific.

Girlie backpacks, like the Gregory Deva ones we had from MEC, are now the way to go; they fit on your hips perfectly, are not too wide across the back and have soft cushioning on the back padding. There are great side pockets on the pack and even hip belt pockets for keeping those little healthy snacks readily available, not to mention the camera. It's a really well thought-out pack for girlie items. They also have a great waterproof pocket to keep your two-litre water holder or bladder in, away from the clothes and sleeping bag—what a great idea. We had our water in Source water bladders that we bought from MEC and which we could reach through tubes to be able to drink without stopping the hike. No more clunking bottles on the outside of your pack, hurrah! The water bladders open up top so you can clean them on the trail if need be. We made sure that the girls drank two litres a day; that was their goal and they managed it just fine. The taste of plastic diminished day by day too—thank you Source.

Putting up the three-man MEC Tarn tent was fun; it took a matter of seconds, essential in these climes—the weather had been kind to us so far but we knew were not going to get through the week without some real 'weather'. We slept on the beach and had Therm-a-Rest mattresses from Seattle-based Cascade Designs, which were great on the sand. The waves were banging and crashing and, like all good hikers, our bodies were in dire need of rest and recovery from the first day, which took five hours of arduous trampling.

Day 2: Thrasher Cove to Camper Bay

8 kilometres in 5 hours

The day started at 0600 because it took us two hours each morning to get up and pack up. Also, along with everyone else on the trail, we had to make progress at low tide so at least there was no need to be quiet. Going around Owen Point it was a great beach day, and we took advantage of the zip-off leg sections on the lightweight Chlorophyll trousers we were wearing. This was quite marvellous, a revelation. I had always thought these detachable trouser-legs looked scratchily annoying with their zips, and thought they may rub the inner thighs, but I loved them. I wore them for seven days.





(Top) Andy Harris, with Livvy, on the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island, carrying an 80-litre Palisade Gregory backpack.

(bottom) Cathy Harris with her daughter Madeleine. The Deva 60-litre Gregory backpack has several women-specific design features.

Cathy Harris

Cool mornings and humid days make for lots of layers, thin layers preferably. Icebreaker tops in merino wool are the only way to go. Emily wore her merino wool socks every day; they did not stretch, get wet or soggy and she loved them. We now regard these socks as another 'anti blister must have'. The weather was still fine and this was a great day, with sea caves, sand shelves, the sinking sand and the thought of the girls eating another day of food was welcoming because of the effect on the weight in my backpack. Marmot make these great wind shell jackets that are extremely lightweight and great for the cool early mornings as a base-, mid- or outer layer. A super-light Primaloft vest kept Andy warm; he even used it as a pillow at night.

A slight drizzle made for packing up the tent quite a soggy exercise and we resented every extra ounce of moisture. I was not sure after one night that the three-man Tarn is the tent for us. Being the middle-aged maid that I am, I often

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need to relieve myself in the middle of the night. On the plus side on this trip, this gave me the chance to check out the stars along the way, and what a spectacular show that was. However, to keep the weight down to three kilos, this tent has only one zip and one opening, so I had to climb over Andy to get out. I must confess to missing a Sierra Design tent that I love so much, a two-man tent with space and a zip on either side. The girls, however, had a Eureka four-man tent that I must say was fabulous; they had enough room for the three of them and plenty of space for packs, two entryways and space at both vestibules for boots. Getting ventilation right is always key, not too open due to the moisture and precipitation at night-time, but not too tight either for fear of collecting too much condensation.

The Garmont boots showed their value again on day two when Madeleine fell feet-first into the bog after the boardwalk gave way. She did not get wet, although I think the combination of the boots and the gaiters was the key. I have a whole new respect for those MEC nylon-based Gore-Tex top gaiters and their waxy appearance. We climbed over boulders, the size of small vehicles with thousands of barnacles attached, which actually aided the gripping technique when we were sliding down the other side. We tackled the green grease on the sandstone shelf, the sea bed of beautiful moss when the tide is in, and saw an array of sea life underneath our weary feet. Who needs to look up, when all that is below is fascinating to see? Everything was moving: the anemones were purple, the crabs were green, the fungus was a bright orange, there was so much life to be seen.

We made it to Camper Bay—a fabulous scene. We stretched and did yoga on the beach, went for a dip and made camp, not forgetting the washing line. The MSR stove was worked hard for the demands of our food because our gourmet, vacuum-packed casseroles took a while to heat up. Candied salmon, salmon jerky, vacuum packed casseroles—gourmet camping is the only way to go, with camp fires on the beach every night and the girls performing acrobatics, cartwheels and somersaults on the beach, before bed-time at 8:00 pm.

The Hybrid MEC 50% down and 50% synthetic material sleeping-bag turned out to be the perfect bag for sleeping. The brand uses its own 'Hyperloft' synthetic insulation with 575 fill-power duck down, with a polyester microfibre outer shell and a nylon lining. It was spacious enough to kick about in; the girls were quite adamant about being able to stretch out in their bags and I agreed because I do not like to feel restricted in any shape or form either. Getting the hybrid into a compression bag was tricky. It does not squish down into a small enough section of the backpack and the bottom section of the Deva Backpack is quite tight and narrow. I now wish we had purchased 100% down-filled bags for an extra $50 each, but oh well.



Area of West Coast Trail.
NASA/Wikipedia

Day 3: Camper Bay to Walbran Creek
9 kilometres in 6 hours

Another morning of precipitation presented us with our daily test of not only our equipment but our mental fortitude. The backpacks were still heavy despite a third day of eating the 'heavy' food. Today was the endless ladder extravaganza as the trail moved between the beach and paths on higher ground. Madeleine counted 100 ladders, with the longest having 69 rungs, but all three girls embraced every ladder. There were also suspension bridges, some of them 60 metres up. We hobbled along logs and got stuck in some bogs. It reminded me so



The long ladder climb with full backpack.
Cathy Harris

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much of the children's book, The Bear in the Woods: if you can't get over it, or under it, you have to go through it.

We made it to Walbran Creek in the precipitation and found the best spot on the beach, sheltered by the trees, where someone had kindly left us a tarpaulin for our shelter and a washing line. The girls went for a dip in the river and down came the rain! We had the best set-up and we dined underneath the shelter whilst watching the fire burn away the night. Another glorious day on the trail. But we had one slight problem: a water filter and pump we had bought from MSR, which eliminates parasites and uses carbon technology to make water taste sweet had become stuck and gritty and we had to clean the filter every day from that point on.

Day 4: Walbran Creek to Carmanah Point

12 kilometres in 6.5 hours

The sun shone and the mist lifted as we made our way to Carmanah Point. Emily announced excitedly that she could see a burger joint on the beach:'Chez Monique'. Today was the last of the good food days! I had enough gourmet, vacuum-packed food for four days and then it was down to couscous from this point on, so I told the girls to fill up at the burger bar. The beach was flat and the weather fine and three hours later we had managed a whole nine kilometres, fuelled by the burger joint of course, and helped along with a $5 beer (for the adults) and a Snickers bar. We were tired and starting to slow down, but thanks to the joys of fast food, the girls were still going strong. Oh the joys of fast food. It was not hard to part with the $30 per person, let me tell you. That was our first piece of bread in four days and an incredibly good-tasting beer (well earned, I might add).

Day 5: Cribbs Creek to Tsousiat Falls

16 kilometres in 10 hours

This was the hardest day, I must say. All of our gear had been officially tried and tested by now. Our bodies had been tried and tested, too, and our minds were now having to kick in big time. We were proud of the girls' ability and their attitudes to this hard day. Their spirit had been overwhelming throughout, but this was an arduous day, one of the hardest I have had to endure in my life. It was fantastic that they were there too and I have more appreciation for them now than ever before. To say it rained would not be fair; to say it poured would still be an understatement. It was what can only be described as torrential rain; it was teeming down on top of our heads. Our backpacks were soaked, our clothes were stuck to our legs, our

Inventory for the trip

- MEC Tarn three-man tent
- Eureka Mountain Lite four-man tent
- Thermarest sleeping pads
- 4 x Deva 60-litre Gregory women's backpacks
- 1 x 80-litre Palisade Gregory men's backpack
- 1 x MSR stove
- MSR water filter
- 4 hybrid MEC sleeping bags
- 4 petzl Tikki headlamps
- 4 x MEC X one sunglasses
- 3 x Garmont hiking boots treated with Grangers proofing
- 20 pairs of Bridgedale hiking socks
- Icebreaker merino wool thin layer tops
- Patagonia capilene under garments
- Arc'teryx Gore-Tex shell rain jackets, gourmet food and chocolate
- Marmot wind shirt
- MEC Primaloft insulated jacket
- Assorted headwear; Leatherman multi-tool and knife
- Oritaksu folding plates and bowls
- MEC heavy duty recycled plastic cutlery
- Trangia cookware
- Buff neck/head wear
- MEC Gore-Tex gaiters
- Floss used for running repairs
- Home-assembled first-aid kit
- Good ol' duct tape.
- Siltarp—nylon tarp for pack and cooking shelter.



MEC Tarn three-man tent at Thrasher Cove.

Cathy Harris

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heads were soggy, and there was only one way to go—forward into more rain. Good job we had heavy duty garbage sacks and dry stuff sacks for dry clothes. Gore-Tex does work okay in our experience, but less so when it's teeming down. The wicking towels we bought were not going to help us out today. We came across a local native's shack, a welcome sight and they even offered hot-brewed fresh cowboy coffee, a wood-burning stove and a place to take shelter and warm up the girls. We took our jackets off and hoped that they might dry for a few minutes, but we stayed for an hour, as we watched the rain continue to come down. There was no reprieve, so we decided to stop here and make lunch happen on their stove. They were kind and very hospitable. We said our farewells and headed through the next bog, which extended over all of one kilometre, but seemed to go on for ever to get through to the crossing at Nitinat Ferry. The Ferry crossing consisted of a dock, an open-house shelter with another wood-burning stove, so we dried off again. It was another welcome visit, with fresh salmon, another gourmet meal, to cheer the girls up. On arriving at Tsousiat Falls we met a couple who were taking refuge underneath the one and only tree. They had built a tarp-style shelter and a fire and they invited the girls to go and warm up while Andy and I put the tents up in the rain. We were sheltered once again thanks to mental fortitude, good fortune and good people—what more can one ask for?

Arc'teryx Gore-Tex jackets were the most expensive purchase we made for the trek, and they were now becoming the best purchase of the trip. We were dry at the core; we may have had wet legs and wet heads but our core was dry and the hoods were fabulous, they even move forward over your head like a turtle shell—great design and superb protection. It was an essential item, even if only for that one long, wet, 10-hour day. Thank you Arc'teryx.

Day 6: Tsousiat Falls to Darling River

11 kilometres in 6 hours

The last supper: jambalaya and lentils. The food was nearly finished I was celebrating because it meant no more aching back, hips and bones. My backpack was 4.5 kilos lighter and the sun was out finally for our return journey home. We had our sunset, a glorious sunset. We were all exhausted and our damp gear was drying superbly on the line. This was the finale and we were all loving it. We were dry, the tents were dry and there was only one more day and 14 kilometres to go before we got back to civilisation, running water, flush toilets and chocolate.

Day 7: Darling River to Pachena Bay, near Bamfield

14 kilometres in 5 hours

Well, the speed at which we hiked 14 kilometres seemed positively explosive, even though the last two kilometres felt like 20. The girls have talked a lot about what they take for granted at home, all the conveniences of living in a home with all that luxury, shelter and protection from the elements. We were nomads for a week, we were self-sufficient and we carried all of our food and heat on our back. We made our own fire each night, we washed in the creeks and we slept by the raging wild ocean that rocked us to sleep. What a remarkable journey, one to be repeated, perhaps with even better gear next time round.

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