

Don Bodger

News Leader Pictorial

Virtually every step on the 75-kilometre West Coast Trail between Port Renfrew and Pachena Bay is a potential tripping or slipping hazard.

There are enormous obstacles to overcome on the path — thick mud pits, broken boardwalks, shaky logs across creeks and ravines, extensive tree roots, giant fallen trees from last November's severe storms, heavy sand during the beach stretches and ladders that reach far enough into the sky to make your head spin.

This is certainly no walk in the park.

But for all the possible downfalls, the trail provides an uplifting experience in the form of spectacular natural scenery, breathtaking views, interesting artifacts from the countless shipwrecks along the coast, two illuminating lighthouses and a backpacking adventure that's hard to match anywhere in the world.

It's an environment that's as hard for the adult chaperones to conquer as the students who've been making the trek since it became a Duncan Christian School tradition.

Tom Veenstra, 46, who orchestrated the first school trip in September of 1992, completed the trail for an incredible 16th time last Wednesday as the leader of a 16-person contingent of eight chaperones and eight students that included myself as a first-timer and started from the south end the previous Friday. Two other groups of students and chaperones began at the north end two days apart.

Veenstra has made it from start to finish 14 times with school groups and twice with his family. But the trail doesn't recognize seniority and he was denied another notch on his completion list last year after being airlifted five days into the weeklong trip due to a foot infection.

"Before I did that first year of the West Coast trail, I wasn't a hiker or an overnight camper at all," said Veenstra.

The initial DCS trip set the tone when two groups left from the north. The idea wasn't necessarily to complete the trail and, if it became too difficult, the groups could turn around and go back without tackling the more unforgiving terrain in the south.

The hikers ended up at Tsusiat Falls together and decided to press on when dicey weather conditions improved. They made it as far as Thrasher Cove, just six kilometres from the finish, and realized it could be done.

"If we had gone back the easy end that year, I don't think we'd have been doing the trip to this day," reasoned Veenstra.

The trip's place in the DCS timetable has since bounced around between May and September while switching from the Grade 12 students to the Grade 11s. The Grade 12s now do a Missions trip to Mexico at the same time the Grade 11s are on the trail.

"This is a bonding thing that needs to happen at the beginning of the year — not in May," reasoned Teunis Verhoog, 52, chair of the DCS board, who successfully finished the trail for a fifth time Friday with the North 2 group.

Only once since '92 have DCS groups not gone the distance. The trip started in 1997, but a severe weather forecast resulted in the closure of the trail.

"We hiked part of the Juan de Fuca (trail) that year a few weeks later," Veenstra pointed out.

Even with a blueprint from previous years, the trip requires several months of planning and meetings to familiarize participants with their backpacks and trail protocol. Students

are also required to attend practice hikes during the summer to prepare themselves for the rigours of the trail.

No Grade 11 student is ever denied the chance to do the WCT.

“Everybody looks forward to it,” said Veenstra. “One reason I love it, we try to encourage every single student in the class.”

Of course, there are legendary tales of hardship, too, that make some students a tad nervous when it’s their turn.

Kurtis Briggs, a member of the south group, heard plenty about the trip from his brother Nathan last year.

“It’s not as tough as I expected,” he said. “My brother told me before I would hate it.”

“My brother Harry told me it would be kind of hard,” said Ryan Pearce, also of the south group. “He went four or five years ago at the school.

“It’s a little hard at first, but when you get used to it, it might be easy.”

“I love the feeling of accomplishment that the students feel that I feel,” added Veenstra, who received a boost from having his niece Alicia Raycraft from Cobourg, Ontario along with him this time.

Veenstra’s sister Donna put Alicia up for adoption at birth and he only met her for the first time last summer.

“It was certainly a very special thing to hike with her,” said Veenstra. “It’s quite adventurous of her in a sense to meet me for the first time and then come on this trail.”

Weather conditions play a key part in each group’s ability and determination to finish.

That mettle was severely tested at times by this year’s groups, with each hitting at least a day of miserable conditions.

“I think this year was probably the most challenging,” said Veenstra. “Because it was the most challenging, I also grew as a leader.

“Now I know I just became a little more capable of dealing with rain.”

The DCS support network for the WCT is incredible. Parents who no longer have children at the school and former students are still involved as chaperones.

And there wouldn’t be a trip without medical personnel. Veenstra’s south group had three nurses — Raycraft, Griffin Halme and Meredith McAdam.

They were challenged from the beginning when chaperone Darren Colyn, the Christian Reformed Church pastor, suffered a nasty fall from a ladder just an hour and a half into the hike. Halme attended to him quickly and Colyn finished the first day but couldn’t continue due to a sprained thumb and a shoulder injury.

Parent Linda Lee later injured her knee after slipping on a bridge and wound up being airlifted the second day with Colyn from Camper Bay.

“We’ve got two nurses and a Dutch gazelle,” DCS Principal and North 1 leader Kevin Visscher, a rookie on the trail, said of his group.

Nurses Geri Seinen and Affie Duifhuis were doing the trail for the 10th and ninth times, respectively, and chaperone Marius Popma’s exploits are legendary. When student Leanne Vanderschaaf suffered an ankle injury, Popma packed her one kilometre to a more accessible location for assistance.

Vanderschaaf and mom Brenda, who went as a chaperone, were evacuated as soon as arrangements could be made.

Verhoog’s North 2 group, led by DCS teacher Norm Brandsma, was not without its drawbacks.

Kathryn Coopsie, one of the group's nurses with AnnaMarie Rutishauser, and Wendy Percy couldn't continue the hike from the final campsite at Thrasher Bay. Coopsie had a badly infected toe.

"I could not imagine the pain she kept dealing with," said Verhoog. "The pressure up against her boot put too much pressure on her toenail."

Percy eventually succumbed to exhaustion.

The group left them behind at the campsite and continued hiking to a higher point where cell phone reception was possible.

By that time, the park's efficient staff had already found the ladies and transported them to Port Renfrew.

Next week: More teamwork on the trail and conquering fears.

On the Web: Read Diary of a Mad Backpacker, Don Bodger's account of the south group's highs and lows, trials and tribulations at www.cowichanewsleader.com.

