

BY ROE OSBORN



Old-growth trees near the tree line in the Canadian Rockies are tall and thin with dense trunks **(1)**. In Washington's temperate rain forests, trees—like this giant red cedar **(2)**—are much larger. Another rain forest “champion” is this giant Sitka spruce **(3)**.

Forest of Champions

I grew up in New England, where old-growth forests flourish only in history books or in the dreams of old carpenters like me. On recent trips to the Canadian Rockies and the Olympic Peninsula, I had a chance to see my old-growth dreams become reality.

While my wife and I were hiking near Moraine Lake, in Alberta, I asked our guide where the old-growth forests were. On cue, she stopped the group, gestured around, and said, “You’re looking at ‘em.” Out of her backpack, she pulled a “tree cookie”—a thin cross section about 4 inches across of white-bark pine. On it, dots bunched together in a radius from the center—each dot representing a decade of growth. This tree—tiny even by New England standards—was more than 150 years old. She quipped that the trees along the path that were a foot or more in diameter were probably more than 500 years old **(1)**. She explained that the altitude and cold, harsh mountain climate make for a slow growth rate.

From Canada, we made our way to western Washington state, where an abundance of moisture and a milder climate had produced trees on a whole different scale. In the rain forests, graceful giants shrouded in moss kept the understory cool and damp despite the hot, dry weather in the area.

Then, on the drive back to Seattle for our flight home, we saw signs for “The World’s Largest Cedar Tree.” As a tourist, I felt the “hook,” as if being sucked in to see the world’s biggest ball of string. And as a tree nut, I couldn’t resist. A short detour and a brief walk brought us to a mammoth gnarly red cedar, a large chunk of which had fallen off in 2012. The base of the tree had rotted a bit and I could walk inside the trunk **(2)**. On the outside of the cedar, many other trees had rooted in its cracks and crevices—trees with trunks that had much larger diameters than the trees we’d seen in Canada.

A little farther down the road was another sign, for “The World’s Largest Sitka Spruce,” near the shore of Lake Quinault. A short scenic drive and walk brought us to an enormous spruce tree **(3)**. Unlike the giant cedar we had visited, this tree was solid and looked as healthy as the day it sprouted—estimated at more than 1,000 years ago. This so-called “champion tree” is listed by American Forests as being 191 feet tall and just less than 59 feet in circumference.

Back home, I learned that the area is called “Valley of the Rain Forest Giants” and is home to four more “champion trees.” I only hope that this oldish-growth human will have the chance to revisit the area someday and see them.

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Photos by Laurie Sullivan