



Photos: David Morrison

CLIFFHOUSE COTTAGE

Snug at the Edge of Paradise

David Morrison

Totting up all the ‘Wow’s, ‘Awesome’s, ‘Oh my God’s and assorted gasps, I’d say that Galiano Island’s wild beauty elicited around 314 exclamations of wonder between Susan and I in a single weekend. But while there is plenty of breathtaking scenery to be had, it is not only the wealth of this Southern Gulf Island’s visual riches that inspires awe, but also the way it feels. Some places simply possess that indefinable X-factor that seduces a visitor, and Galiano Island is one of them.

We’d fortuitously experienced a teasing taste of what might lay in store two weeks prior, when out with friends on their boat. Heading nowhere in particular, we ended up mooring at Montague Harbour Marina to refuel, taking the opportunity to stretch our legs with a brief exploration. A leisurely amble took us to the gently curved midden beach of Montague Harbour Provincial Park, once an ancient fishing village, where we sat on logs drinking in the quietude of the picturesque cove. As introductions to new destinations go, it was perfect, heightening our anticipation for a return visit that would see us indulge in as many more highlights as time would allow.

Fourteen days later, we stood atop the towering cliffs of Bluffs Park, with ‘Wow’s and ‘Awesome’s uttered in



ON GALLIANO ISLAND



clusters as we gazed out at the stunning views. The sun sparkled like gemstones on the sea as a ferry slid silently from Active Pass on its way to Tsawwassen. Famous for a 1967 mermaid sighting (!) this narrow channel separates Galliano from Mayne Island, the shoreline of which was abuzz with frenzied gull activity as they fished for returning salmon.

Later, as we drove to Bodega Ridge's spectacular Lover's Leap viewpoint along Porlier Pass Road, an eagle—we swear it was Golden—passed overhead in the opposite direction. Seemingly flying dead centre along the route, the tips of its vast wingspan all but brushed the tops of the trees lining the way. An amazing sight, yet one of many these two days.

PETER BARRETT AND LINDSAY WILLIAMS

Photo: Peter Barrett

At Retreat Cove we admired another example of classic B.C. coastline in the beautiful sandstone galleries shaped over millennia by wind and waves. But in contrast to this natural marvel, a spellbinding experience came from dropping by a significant site of the island's human history: Galiano Cemetery.

Unobviously located near the Mt. Galiano trailhead at the island's south end, this atmospheric graveyard is set in a pretty waterfront wood overlooking Georgeson Bay, where seals lollop about in the shallows of Collinson Reef. It's a serene location, where the silence was broken only by unobtrusive wind chimes, rustling branches or the occasional seal bark. The graves here differ greatly, from simple burial mounds marked by humble home-made tributes to the more traditional and decorative, many bearing personal effects laid down by family and friends. Like any cemetery it offers an intimate, moving and fascinating look into the past of the community it serves, so should be considered a must-see.

Our tour of the final resting place of many of the island's earliest settlers came highly recommended by Lindsay Williams and Peter Barrett, our delightful young hosts for the weekend. They run a remarkable accommodation - our principal reason for visiting Galiano - and when I say remarkable, I mean exactly that.

There are two choices available here: The Treehouse, and our preference, Cliffhouse Cottage. As accommodation locations go, it rarely gets more dramatic than this.

While The Treehouse and the rest of the property are set back a way, Cliffhouse Cottage is situated, as its name may suggest, right at the very edge of a tall cliff.

Facing the layered land-and-seascape of Trincomali Channel, Salt Spring Island and Vancouver Island beyond, the views are sensational. Also in view are the 400-acre Parker Island, sheltering Montague Harbour, and the tiny Ballingall Islets. For nearly eight decades the Juniper trees on these specks of land have provided homes for flights of Double-crested Cormorants. The birds put on quite a show, constantly diving for fish in the clear waters below.

With such a vista before us the 'Oh my God's flowed freely throughout the weekend - especially when it was bathed by the bright light of a timely full moon - but from the moment of our arrival the all-wooden accommodation also firmly gripped our imagination. It is such a confident, yet simple design, making great use of the limited space of its cliff-edge setting, though obviously constructed to enhance and blend with the natural magnificence all around it.

The entrance to Cliffhouse Cottage is on one side, off a large deck leading from a set of natural stone steps snaking from the main area above. (Another set winds down from the cottage to the water's edge, where guests can watch the sunset from a park bench.) The rusticity and snugness of the cottage are immediately established when entering the combined kitchen, dining and sit-

ting area, but like the rest of the accommodation this space is dominated by the views afforded by its picture windows. Continuing through the cottage there is a small sunroom and cosy lounge, off of which is another, smaller deck. Stairs lead from the lounge entrance up to the lovely bedroom, which has a vaulted ceiling, and a window-side soaker tub overlooking that view. It's a truly gorgeous little property, the perfect romantic getaway, and we decided within four minutes that we wished to move in immediately! Particularly appreciated was the attention paid to the little touches and home comforts that make all the difference: the telescope, a flower bud on the toilet tissue, a fine selection of books and so much more. That the neighbours include cute Pacific Tree Frogs just adds to the away-from-it-all 'desert island' ambience.

Cliffhouse Cottage and its sister accommodation have interesting origins, as Lindsay explains: "In 1973 a very nice man named Dan Christian came to the island to visit his friend in what is now our house. (Lindsay and Peter's dwelling is at the back of, and entrance to, the 2-acre complex.) He said to her: Do you mind if I build myself a lean-to, a little summer shack? She said: Sure! So, using entirely found materials, he built the Cliffhouse and hung out here for years."

"It was the first house he ever built in his life," continues Peter. "Over time he added and added to it, then he met a woman named Kim and they ended up buying this property after it went on sale."

"He did all of the stone work," Lindsay goes on, "and he built the (outdoor, wood-heated) sauna and finished the main house, then around 1996 he built The Treehouse. They ran the property together for about 12 years."

Lindsay and Peter now run this fabulous oasis for the current owners, Teresa Lamontagna and Franck Berry, but despite the hard work involved they feel, having escaped the rat race, like they're truly living a dream. Lindsay was working long hours for a Vancouver documentary film company and Peter, with a background in neuropsychology, was earning as a children's mental health therapist - but both were desperate for fresh challenges far from the madding crowd.

"We were both working what seemed like a thousand hours a week in Vancouver," says Peter. "We had pretty stressful jobs and we'd come home really late at night, get on the Internet and look at 'island properties.' We had no money at all so just wanted to dream or escape, I guess. We'd visited Galiano once a year for several years, usually for seven days, and stayed at several different B&Bs. Anyway, my job was so intense it was actually giving me nightmares, so I just had to quit. I went online to find a place to get away to and figure out what my next step was, and I rented a house here for a month. Then on the ferry back I read a local magazine and in the classifieds there was a job - this job right here. (He points to the ad, now framed for posterity.)"



Photo: Stephen L. Manzi

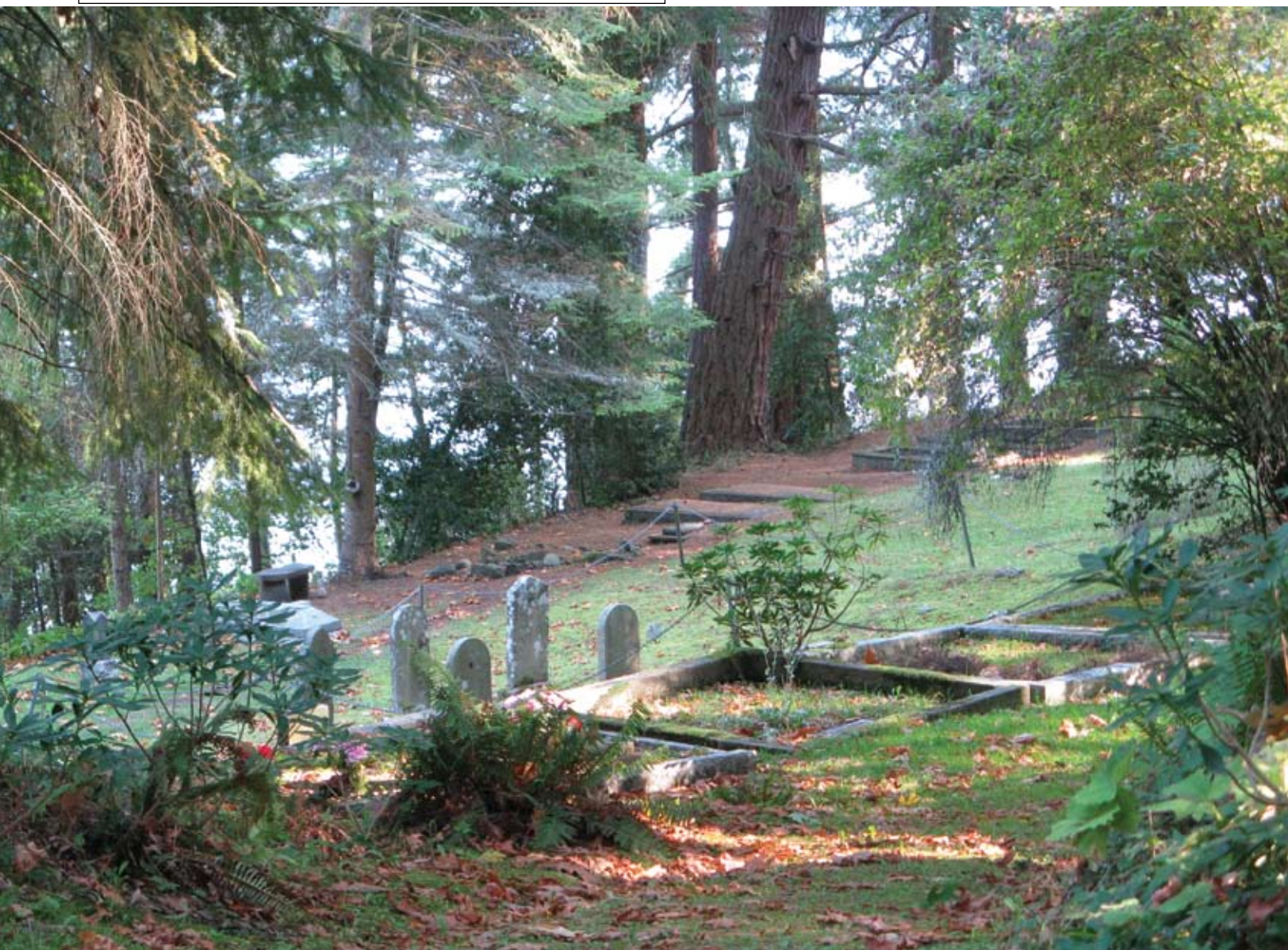


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GALIANO CEMETERY



Cutting to the chase, the couple - without any experience whatsoever in hospitality - decided to throw everything at applying for that job. Amazed to even be granted an interview, they were further astonished after a series of nailbiting meetings with Teresa, Franck and Kim to bag the position of caretakers of The Treehouse and Cliffhouse Cottage. They were, and remain, as happy as the day is long for the opportunity they were unexpectedly presented with to start an exciting new life on an island that had held them entranced for so many years.

Both Lindsay and Peter also work part-time at one of the island's two hubs, Galiano Island Books (the other being the excellent Hummingbird Inn, where Bart the fluffball ginger tom offers a most warm welcome), and certainly see their immediate future on this beautiful strip of land. After a few months of understandable adjustment to decompress from city life and find the rhythm of their new environment, they have now been

resident on Galiano for three happy years, expertly caring for guests at one of the more extraordinary accommodations in this part of the world. They love Galiano and the charming idiosyncracies of its creative community, Peter saying: "It's a magical, healing place that really feels like you've been cast back in time to simpler days." We wholeheartedly agree with Peter's sentiment and bet you a penny to a pound that his and Lindsay's 'Wow's, 'Awesome's and 'Oh My God's count will by now be up in the billions. ●

Booking details and more information about Cliffhouse Cottage and The Treehouse can be found at www.cliffhousecottages.com or by contacting Lindsay Williams and Peter Barrett on (250) 539-5239, or by email at info@cliffhousecottages.com.