



CUERA CLIFFS COTTAGE ON THETIS ISLAND:

Birds in their little nests agree

By David Morrison

A few years ago the people of Thetis Island invited The Honourable Iona Campagnolo, then Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, for a visit. The hope was that she might be interested in presenting a retirement award to Harry Armstrong, a lifelong servant of the Vancouver and Thetis Island fire departments. To their delight, the esteemed dignitary accepted. On the big day she was greeted by a reception committee including “mayor for the day,” current Thetis Island Fire Department Deputy Chief, Graeme Shelford. Imagine the visiting party’s amusement when setting eyes on the island’s ceremonial representative, resplendent in mayoral chains crafted from a Christmas decoration and a coffee can lid with a smiley face on it!

You hardly need me to tell you that this delightful episode relates plenty about the tiny community of Thetis Island, but I want to put it out there anyway. It speaks, of course, of how they value the contributions and achievements of their own, and of the trouble they will go to, to see them recognized. This in itself illustrates the level of local pride and how life on this gorgeous little island is communally approached with a lightness of heart. Consequently, I find myself utterly charmed by this tale.

As someone who grew up in a huge city I am fascinated by the functionality of small communities. Thetis Island appears to me as a classic case of how such societies can be successfully ordered. The Thetis Island Phone Book is little more than a pamphlet, yet you could bet your bottom dollar that most-to-all of the names



BEAUTIFUL PILKEY POINT

Photos: David Morrison

appearing in it have their individual roles to play in the daily workings of the island. The phone book is compiled every two years or so by Graeme Shelford's wife, Veronica. Also editor of the island's quarterly magazine, responsible for the visitors guide and website and involved in the Ratepayers and Community Associations, Veronica implicitly understands what it takes to keep things moving along here: if everyone doesn't muck in, you'll have problems.

"It's what we love about an island like this," she tells me. "There's such a small population that everybody matters. If you want a functioning community, it's up to everybody. For me that is just enchanting. Just like a family you might not be wild about everybody, but there's an interdependence, which is tremendously valuable. As far as we're concerned it's a big part of why we're here."

Graeme, Thetis' ad hoc ambassador that day, was born in South Africa and arrived in Canada to study at Montreal's McGill University via Malawi, Zimbabwe and an English education. As if fated, he met Veronica on just his second day in the country. They married seven years later. Today, aside from their many other combined roles on Thetis, they own and run Cufra Cliffs Cottage, essentially a B&B annex of their home. It offers visitors a world of blissful peace, stunning views and natural wonders.

Set atop one of the island's high points, this lovely open plan accommodation is a simple, snug cottage of modern build, but the setting is everything. Because it is set amongst and surrounded by trees—those at the back of the cottage sloping sharply downwards to Cufra Inlet 300 feet below, then rising up from the chasm into thick forest at the other side—there is a sensation of being in a forest canopy. This is considerably promoted by the astonishing profusion of winged life.

In our weekend at this lovely cottage we spent a lot of time sitting in the garden area spellbound by the frenzied feeding and territorial battling of hundreds of Rufous Hummingbirds. The Shelfords have 11 hefty feeders hung along two sides of their house and the front of the cottage, ensuring a non-stop display from these zippy Lilliputians of the skies. The constant lightsaber hum of their flight fills the air as they zoom around the property, so many of them that Graeme revealed they get through 12 litres of sugar water per day at the height of summer. It is worth travelling to Thetis to stay at Cufra Cliffs Cottage for this dazzling spectacle alone, not to mention the Brown-headed Cowbirds, Hairy Woodpeckers, Steller's Jays and other birds that visit their own dedicated feeders all day long. Why, it's like appearing in a wildlife documentary, expecting David Attenborough to pop out from behind a tree at any moment!

As if such close-up encounters with the natural world

FERRY ARRIVES FROM CHEMAINUS



Photos: David Morrison

VERONICA & GRAEME SHELFORD

are not enough, this accommodation presents the opportunity to get back to nature in an entirely human way. Graeme and Veronica are naturists, stating that if guests wish to wander about au naturel, that is entirely fine and they will not bat an eyelid.

“But we’re not institutional naturists,” Veronica says. “We live in the country on our own and sometimes it’s more convenient not to wear clothes; it really isn’t a big deal one way or the other. But going to a resort purposefully to not wear clothes with other people not wearing clothes is not for us. For some it’s almost a belief system, which doesn’t enter into it at all for us.”

As far as I’m aware there is just one naturist resort on Vancouver Island—the Sol Sante Club in Cobble Hill—and, in the Sunny Trails Club at Lake Errock, just one other in BC. Considering the privacy offered by Cufra Cliffs Cottage, it is no surprise that naturists have travelled from far and wide to stay at the Shelford’s idyllic B&B. In 2008, 30 percent of their business came from naturist guests.

“We’ve had people from as far away as Holland,” Veronica continues. “The thing is there are not many naturists out there, and if you have a B&B with multiple rooms and want them all filled, you can’t wait around for them to be filled by naturists. With only one room it doesn’t matter, so whoever comes is fine! If people want to wear clothes, that’s fine; if they don’t, that’s equally cool!” Naturally, we too entered into the spirit of things... but only shyly, shedding our kit for a romantic hot tub soak as the sun sank to turn the sky a blazing orange.

This gentle, sweet couple fell in love with Thetis Island when on a Gulf Island-hopping vacation in 1988. They were introduced to the bare land on which their house and cottage now stand by born-and-bred islander, Adam Hunter, whose family has lived on Thetis for over a century. Graeme and Veronica bought it, started building the house in 1995 and moved permanently from Vancouver in 1996.

Photo: Veronica Shelford



HUMMINGBIRDS AT CUFRA COTTAGE

“We didn’t have the idea of running a B&B at that time,” Graeme says. “My idea for a retirement project was to become a consultant in the aircraft industry (that he’d been in for many years), which worked for a while. Then of course 9-11 happened, which devastated the airline industry, so consulting contracts were non-existent. We had to look for other means of income. The idea came when the guy was delivering windows for the cottage I was building as an extra bedroom, as there is only one bedroom in the house. He said: ‘Wow, this would make a great B&B,’ so it was him that planted the seed by chance. We opened it up as a B&B and have been enjoying it ever since.” Where can I find this window delivery guy? I’d like to buy him a beer!

It is clear, I’m sure, from my enthusiastic narrative and the accompanying images that Cufra Cliffs Cottage



COUPLE ENJOYING THE VIEW AT PILKEY POINT

is a very special place. It truly is. But it is also important to note that Thetis Island is a quiet, rural destination. It boasts a few pretty views—like at Pilkey Point—and the picturesque Telegraph Harbour Marina, a couple of stores, one pub (serving the best clam chowder on earth), a clutch of Bible camps and...that's pretty much it. There are no public parks, no malls and no attractions of obvious touristic appeal. It is simply a place to bathe in quietude and appreciate natural beauty with no distractions beyond it. And this is exactly how the 350 or so residents want it to forever remain. What they have is rare and unspoiled, tranquil and precious, so for

its magic to endure it is how it must stay. Anyone intent on upsetting this particular appletart will be given short thrift, that's for sure. This interdependent community knows how it wishes to live—by working hard with a smile on its face—and experiencing this lifestyle for even a weekend is a real privilege.

To make a booking or for more information about Cufra Cliffs Cottage on Thetis Island, visit www.thetisland.net/business/cufraciffs or contact Graeme and Veronica Shelford by phone on (250) 246-1509 or email at veronica@thetisland.net.



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