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A World Apart On My Doorstep

David Morrison

My wife Susan and I sat on the Descanso Bay-bound ferry under a clear, coal black sky. Constellations of coruscating stars provided us with quite some display, further intensifying in brightness as the light pollution of downtown Nanaimo receded. Off the boat, we hit the South Road to head for Jupiter Ranch, our base for a weekend of exploration.

The fun commenced early on Saturday after an incredible breakfast—about which, more later. The first obvious stop was just a few minutes east along South Road, one for which the island is famed: the petroglyphs. For the clueless, a petroglyph is a prehistoric (or if not, darned old) rock carving. The most visible of seventy-odd on Gabriola are found at ground level on rock slabs at the end of a short trail behind the United Church. We viewed these ancient carvings in awe, the atmospheric forest around us filling with birdsong as the day came to life.

What became apparent about Gabriola Island during our stay was how un-trumpeted even the most famous sights are, as exemplified by the faded information boards at the head of the petroglyph trail. Before anyone jumps on me, this is not a criticism, as I find this approach rather quaint. It's obvious how proud the residents are of the island's attractions, but there's no "Look at me! Look at me!" shoutiness about the way Gabriola promotes itself. As one who appreciates the under-

stated, this, I like. Some may view this attitude as lax or neglectful, but I see it as mirroring the laid-back pace of life enjoyed here.

Continuing east, we swung by tranquil Degnen Bay to gaze at its loveliness awhile, then onto the magnificent Drumbeg Provincial Park. Occupying the far southeast corner of Gabriola, there can be few more gorgeous places on this earth than Drumbeg when bathed in the kind of glorious weather we were blessed with this morning.

A natural bay of limpid pale green water opens out to the ocean, small verdant islands providing protection just offshore, with Valdes Island situated across Gabriola Passage to the south. The beaches, classic B.C., are littered

Petroglyph





Malaspina Galleries, Gabriola Island

with haphazardly angled logs and driftwood. The sea sparkled like diamonds as we followed a path rising just above sea-sculpted sandstone ledges. Temporarily forgetting there was any element of work involved with our visit, we sauntered along in a blissful state, sucking in the cleanest imaginable air.

Next on the itinerary was pretty Silva Bay on the eastern shore, home to a charming wooden church and, on this day, the only eighteen-limbed starfish we'd ever seen. I never knew an echinoderm could possess so many

arms ... er, legs ... er, whatever they're called. Another, less limbed, but more spectacularly coloured, hung back off a jetty post as if angling for a chat, like Peach in *Finding Nemo*.

I was born and raised in an industrial city of over two million people, and Susan has spent over twenty years living in Vancouver. So, imagine our sense of otherworldliness a little later when, stood in a serene rural landscape in hazy morning sunshine, we looked southeast to see *fourteen* bald eagles at once, silently circling at differ-

ent heights in the distance. We were outside Seawind Farm on the North Road, barely able to contain our joy at the sensory overload Gabriola Island was offering up.

As if placed there deliberately to send us over the edge, not a mile further on along "The Tunnel" (so named for the tall trees lining much of North Road), we had an eagle encounter to top them all. Just fifteen feet back from the road in a forest opening, a baldy sat menacingly on a fallen tree. It was bigger than our friends' five year-old son! I knew

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Sylvie Milman, proprietor of Jupiter Ranch

these birds were hefty, but when you get that close to one a new level of respect develops rather rapidly.

The general mellowness and artistic leanings of Gabriola's community seem well reflected in a quiet neighbourhood on the north shore. We cruised quietly around, enthralled by street names plucked straight from *Moby Dick*. Captain Ahab's Terrace, Tashtego Crescent and, indeed, Moby Dick's Way all boast enviable real estate like most everywhere else on Gabriola; it's not difficult to understand why property is so in demand here.

To the west of where I know I'm not the first to call, ahem, "Melville," lies Sandwell Provincial Park, another stretch of rugged coastline offering peek-a-boo views of Entrance Island from the sheltered trail above the beach. As we ambled along in thrall to the natural beauty around us, the rat-a-tat of woodpeckers hammering at distant trees soundtracked our stroll.

We had to sit down awhile and recharge for the next stretch. What better way than with a specialty coffee in Gabriola Artworks' café? A true hub, this dazzling store encapsulates the creative spirit of this unique community in more ways than vending the wares of over one hundred and fifty of its visual artists. Located in the heart of Folklife Village, a natural focus of the island as the principal shopping area, the store—or, more accurately, "cultural centre"—is owned by the irrepresible Kathy

Ramsey, an islander for seventeen years.

"It's just *here!* You know, we've got water, trees, beautiful sunny days, a nice climate ... it's just, er ... !" I understand why Kathy struggled to define the magnetic appeal this blob of land has for creative types. Gabriola certainly possesses an abundance of inspiring *je ne sais quoi*.

"To live on an island you have to be somewhat of a system buckler, and the people that really stick here are very creative in how they get by," Kathy continued. "They get three jobs, and a lot of egos get left at the door as people say, 'You know what? I don't care if I have to wash windows and clean floors if it gives me the chance to do my art.'" She went on to emphasize there's a tight-knit, supportive network, a fact echoed later by Laura Dobb of Twin Beaches Bookstore. "There's great support and a deep love of the arts here," she told us. "There are some great venues and, for example, the Gabriola Poetry Society is fantastic!"

Refreshed by Artworks' rich mochas, our exploration continued. Next came the famous Malaspina Galleries on the shoreline of Gabriola's westernmost tip. Beautiful, almost sensual rock formations shaped by millennia of sea and wind erosion, they cast a haunting spell on the visitor. From here it was on to the stunning stretch of northwest coast along Berry Point Road to Orlebar Point, punctuated by a brief stop at Gabriola Sands Provincial Park, or "Twin Beaches."

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Though they may be the tools of my trade, it's sometimes difficult, like here, to find words to express the wonders of nature. As with Drumbeg, we're talking about "supernature," with eagles atop majestic firs, calling out for their mates as hummingbirds pinged about like winged bullets. This was a first for us both—the smallest and largest birds we'd ever seen in the wild, both in the same frame. Awesome.

Wandering contentedly along the road, soaking up this scene at the very edge of the land, we came across The Cottage Garden. Akin to something you'd find in Tolkien's Hobbiton, this delightful little store is essentially just a prettified shed. It appears to operate on

been "incredible." "If there's ever a tragedy or people needing help," she says, "the whole community pitches in."

Robert drew up the plans for the remarkable Jupiter Ranch in 2005. Built mainly by local craftsmen, construction commenced in 2006, to be completed last year. I've stayed in some splendid accommodations around the world, but nothing quite like the place he and Sylvie have created. Modestly marketing itself as a B & B—officially accurate as a member of the island's collaborative B & B association—it is, with just two bedrooms, more like a retreat, where a contemplative atmosphere seems guaranteed. The slogans designed to express what guests are in for are succinct: "A



The breakfasts alone are worth an overnight stay

the honour system, a feature of life in communities such as this. As with the bread on sale outside Seawind Farm, you're trusted to leave what it costs in a box if you decide to purchase. We did, bagging a blue anchor fridge magnet in exchange for a blue bill.

Back at Jupiter Ranch, we related our wonderful day to proprietor Sylvie Milman and her gorgeous pooch Zöe, who was most interested in our attentions. Sylvie has been resident here since 1993, so was delighted at the positivity with which we viewed her home and community. The people of Gabriola are very precious to her, having rallied solidly since the passing of her husband Robert last year. She emphasizes they've

far out place to stay," and "Zen living in a pastoral setting."

My favourite description for Jupiter Ranch is 'Pastoral Modern,' at once suiting the striking modernity of design and its heavenly location. Sited facing the sea against a backdrop of firs at the rear of a 2.5-acre lot, the setting is undeniably dramatic.

Passively solar heated, Jupiter Ranch offers the height of luxury accommodation, with every conceivable detail attended to by Sylvie, a fact recognised by Canada Select with a four-and-a-half star rating. "I like to undersell, but over-deliver!" Sylvie says of the service she provides.

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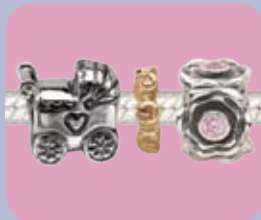
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Drumbeg Provincial Park

is not enough, the breakfasts are alone worth an overnight stay. Over two mornings, we gorged on such as ham and asparagus crêpes; locally produced Buffalo Sausage, Grand Marnier® French toast, orange and banana smoothies, yoghurt parfait ... mmmmm ... all produced in the state-of-the-art kitchen of Jupiter Ranch's focal point, the "Big Room." "I was born a caterer," Sylvie announced. Hey, no kidding! We didn't need to eat again until dinner.

Born in Quebec City, Sylvie's professional background includes many years as a paramedic and as many within service industries. She's also traveled extensively, taking note of how things are done everywhere she's stayed. Having formulated a customer service ethic from a combination of what impressed her, what she considered missing and some fresh ideas of her own, Milman is applying her service industry expertise to Jupiter Ranch to great effect.

"I'm trying to provide something very, very unique, where it's not about the amount of people, but the quality I can provide to the people that are here," she told us in partial explanation of why there are just two suites.

The rest of the explanation is simple. "The land was actually bought to build a home, but the project evolved quite a lot," Sylvie reveals. "It seemed like a calling that we thought it was the perfect setting for a bed and breakfast. The rooms were already designed as en-

suite, but it wasn't originally designed as a bed and breakfast!"

On the afternoon of the day we reluctantly had to leave Sylvie and Zöe behind to return to normality, a party was held to celebrate the launch of the Jupiter Ranch Art Studio. A converted garage alongside the main building, it now stages workshops and exhibitions as another aspect of the Jupiter Ranch experience. As a keen supporter of local artists and collector of their work, Sylvie sees this as a natural progression for her business. Sadly unable to attend the shindig, we bade Sylvie a fond farewell, wishing her luck and continued success.

Our final stop before heading home was to pay our respects to departed islanders at Gabriola Community Cemetery. You may think this unusual, but Susan and I are both fascinated by cemeteries, as they hold so many stories. It seems so fitting that in a graveyard on an island heavily populated with highly creative individuals, I should find the perfect epitaph with which to conclude this report. On the headstone for Maurice Harrison (1920-1995)—a fellow writer, I'd like to think—the following is inscribed: "The moving finger writes, and, having writ, moves on." ■

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