

Photo: David Morrison

And to Think That We Saw it on Mulberry Lane

By David Morrison

To the casual eye, there is not one thing remotely unusual about Mulberry Lane. Like thousands of similarly sleepy cul-de-sacs the world over, it presents a clutch of attractive dwellings spectacular only in their ordinariness. A micro-community perfectly content in its anonymity, this little corner of Comox seems pretty much that and only that. But is it?

Closer scrutiny, you see, reveals that within one of these houses, #1526, things are far from ordinary. This particular address serves not only as a beautiful home, but also as a wonderful B&B—part of a multi-faceted business fuelled by enough talent, positive thinking and creative energy to short out the National Grid.

As your roving reporter on Central Vancouver Island’s more idiosyncratic accommodation choices, I was attracted to #1526 like a moth to a light bulb. I had never before seen an accommodation website quite like that for “mulBerryLand,” its online presence so playful and engaging it seemed conceivable the B&B might be a valid tourist destination in itself! And so it proved...

mulBerryLand’s irrepresible young owners, Naomi and Nico teWinkel, had their house built to their own specifications, moving in at Christmas 2001 as tolerated guests of their cats, Mikey and Teddi. (You know how it is, fellow feline fanciers!) At that time, the self-confessed tech-nerds were both working in the computer software industry Nico still freelances for. When they decided to expand the property by building a suite above the separate double garage, it was originally intended as Naomi’s art space. Thoughts of it as a potential B&B were entertained only when suggested by a neighbour.

Hmmm, a good idea, they thought, yet neither had even the faintest experience in hospitality. In fact, incredibly, their inexperience in this area runs deeper, as Naomi explained: “Ironically, we’ve never *stayed* in a B&B before. Never!”

I say “incredibly” as the teWinkels are total naturals as hosts and at emphatically delivering the goods. That much should become apparent as you read on, but their infectious, fun-loving personalities alone are enough to guarantee a great time in the environment they have so lovingly created.

Launched in 2005, mulBerryLand’s B&B suite is an im-

maculate, bright and airy, open-plan accommodation with a cozy, cottage-like feel. As a base for local events like the Filberg Festival (July 31-August 3), Vancouver Island MusicFest (July 10-12), The Big Time Out (August 14-16) and the bounteous attractions of the Comox Valley, it is simply perfect. Tucked away from it all, peace and quiet is assured between your revelling.

The design is all Naomi’s, the delicious colour scheme dominated by apple-y pastel green and rich reds. But while much around you is alive with colour, the suite is the calming, kickback space any traveler would hope for. As my wife and



Photo: David Morrison

mulBerryLand’s scrumptious fare passes the Morrison breakfast test.

I see it, this is simply because there is so much in it that succeeds in its collective aim to make you smile, and smiling feels rather agreeable.

Apart from its considerable comfort, much of mulBerryLand’s feel-good factor is generated by what is, to steal a previous guest’s comment book summation, the “whimsical aesthetic” Naomi and Nico have created here. There are some delightful touches in the suite, such as the homemade, bent fork coat hooks and a small, but obviously thoughtfully selected library including such titles as Linnea Lundgren and Laura Kramer’s *The Best Places to Kiss in the Northwest* and, of course, *Favourite Cat Stories*. Alongside the expected (and welcome) tourism leaflets and local business fliers, you’ll find wooden puzzles, and you’re



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“The cobble path leading from it snakes around the garden to reveal surprise after enchanting surprise...”

expected to help yourself to the complimentary microwave popcorn. Talking of heat, also available for guests (to hire) is an infrared sauna, situated next door in the house.

The fully equipped, high-end, tiled and pine-fitted kitchen merges seamlessly with the dining area, which in turn adjoins a living space complete with futon (accommodating two adults), television and, should the in-house selection fail to please, access to the teWinkels’ gargantuan DVD library. The double bed is sited at the rear of the room, opposite the bathroom, boasting the most comfortable mattress we’ve ever slept on away from home. Resplendent with a claw-foot tub and deep red walls, the bathroom is a meeting of funky design and cool retro fittings.

And to cap it all off, there’s the walls. As is the case with most every vertical surface in the adjacent teWinkel home, they pulsate with the principal source of those aforementioned colours: Naomi’s paintings. Above the bed hangs a typical example of her work: two fish in a fishbowl, kissing. It’s utterly delightful, full of humour, simple in form and as bright as a Tofino sunset. Another shows several pairs of legs, their owners attired in dazzlingly gaudy apparel. And in glorious synchronicity, above the window overlooking the cul-de-sac hangs a reproduction of the jacket of Dr. Seuss’ *And to Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street*. It’s lovely, but, ridiculously, considering she now makes a decent living from her work, Naomi is an untrained artist who’s only been at it for the proverbial five minutes.

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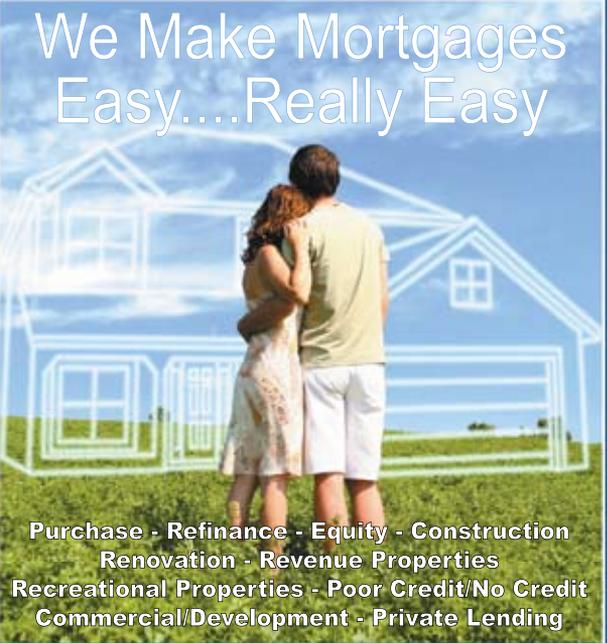
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“Above the bed hangs a typical example of her work: two fish in a fishbowl, kissing.”

“I haven’t been painting for very long,” she explained, my jaw slackening. “When we built the house and the dust settled, I started looking around at all these blank walls and wanted something to hang there. I thought ‘I wonder if I could try painting?’ and started replicating things like the Dr. Seuss book cover. So I started that way and thought, ‘Hey, this is fun!’” “The next thing you know,” interjects Dutch-born Nico, “she’s in an art show in Victoria!”

Naomi started her art career in 2003, but her output is now off the scale. She reproduces her paintings as high quality prints and cards and on clothing, also creating equally vibrant papier-mâché sculptures. Another pursuit is “furniture”—yes, that’s spelled correctly—whereby Naomi takes her brushes and imagination to such as wardrobes and desks, the results a joy to behold.

A gallery for more of her work is currently under construction at the side of the house, the hope being it can be lit by solar power. Green issues are dear to the teWinkels’ hearts, Nico especially putting in the hours by researching alternative energies, electric vehicles and so forth, musings on which can be found at his West Coast Hippie website. He’d like to dedicate considerably more time to it, shifting from his concerns as a hobby to making his living in a way that contributes to the health of our planet.

“Yeah, that would be my ideal, but it hasn’t happened yet,” he told me with a resigned sigh, “as the computer thing is like the mob—once you get in, you can’t get out!”



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“...their infectious, fun-loving personalities alone are enough to guarantee a great time in the environment they have so lovingly created.”

Nonetheless, he thoroughly enjoys running the B&B, though remains surprised at the success they’ve had with it to date.

“We have online friends in Ontario who run a B&B and they told us not to expect anything for the first five years or so, but our first summer was just non-stop, one after the other coming in,” he told us. “It keeps being more than we expected,” Naomi added in confirmation. “And we’ve *always* had awesome guests!”

Hoping they’d consider that trend unbroken after we’d hopped it, we complimented Naomi on her scrummy breakfast. “I grew up with a Ukrainian mama who *loved* to cook,” she chirruped. Delivered to the suite with tangible pride,

the mouth-watering West Coast Eggs Benedict with smoked salmon and spinach on dark rye bread, plus a fresh fruit salad (melon, kiwi, blueberry, banana, orange and pear) with natural yoghurt, was the perfect way to kick-start the day. With bellies full, we capped our mulBerryLand experience in exploration of its extraordinary garden.

A cluster of two dozen, eighty-foot firs and red cedars naturally dominate, an entrance to the copse created by a freestanding red door! The cobbled path leading from it snakes around the garden to reveal surprise after enchanting surprise: a pair of little red clogs; signs pointing to ‘Here’ and ‘There;’ tree-bound metal fairies, wacky sculptures, birdhouses and plenty more. One corner of the outside area is devoted to a separate, fenced Serenity Garden, a gorgeous Zen-space for meditative moments. In direct contrast, the scene is completed by a giant chessboard alongside, presumably a nod to *Alice in Wonderland* and adding further charm to a garden overflowing with simple pleasures.

“Are you huggers?” asked Naomi, spreading her arms wide



Photos: David Morrison

as we readied to go. “Oh yes!” I replied, squeezing each host in turn. We’d been at mulBerryLand less than twenty-four hours, but did not wish to leave. It’s such a unique and welcoming accommodation abundantly reflecting the energy, quirky humour and upbeat outlook of its mischievous owners, so departing such inspiring circumstances came with unexpectedly heavy hearts. But leave we had to, yet in excitement for those who’d follow us to mulBerryLand, a magical world of whimsy in the sedate heart of suburbia.

To book a stay at mulBerryLand in Comox, telephone Naomi and Nico at 250-339-3723 or email relax@mulberryland.com. Further information about mulBerryLand, Naomi’s art and merchandise, Nico’s West Coast Hippy project and their Nerd Herd computer consulting company can be accessed from the mulBerryLand website homepage: www.mulberryland.com. ■



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