

THE GEORGIA

# Straight

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# folk fest

B.C. rising star **Hayley Sales** is one of several young artists who are broadening the appeal of the annual event at Jericho Beach Park



# Cortes captures bygone era's coastal charm

If you'd welcome a little local culture shock of the mellowest possible kind, consider heading to Cortes Island, a place time forgot. And within a day's travel of the Lower Mainland. How could this be?

At first glance, it might appear that most Cortesians simply yawned when the yuppie-led era of conspicuous consumption superseded voluntary simplicity elsewhere in the 1980s. Nowhere on this kite-shaped island does the "excess equals success" ethos seem to hold true. Take a leisurely spin around Cortes, which measures about 25 kilometres long by 13 kilometres wide. As the northern half is almost entirely unroaded, most of the island's 1,100 full-time residents live on the southern portion.

No monster homes. Not a tinted-windowed Cadillac Escalade in sight. Instead, wherever you look, long (mostly white) beards, tie-dyed shirts, and sandals set the tone. If you ever wondered what happened to artist Robert Crumb's comic-book character Mr. Natural, he's likely been chilling on Cortes, waiting for the Wii to blow over while hanging out with his sometime neighbour from Arizona, pioneer wellness physician Andrew Weil, who himself bears a passing resemblance to Crumb's gowned guru. The coolest part is that no one has to try hard to hide in a place that's already well hidden.

Of course, with the dawning of the new age of slow travel, it helps that this time capsule sits northwest of Vancouver, at the top of the Strait of Georgia. When viewed from beach level, high points on nearby islands blend with more distant mountain ridges along Desolation Sound to the east. Not that this makes Cortes seem lonely—simply comfortably removed. The quiet that pervades the air is remarkable. Perhaps this is the preservative elixir at work in a 1960s sort of way. In any case, the best place to



Cortes Island's Smelt Bay is a great place to set adrift in a small boat and admire the marine life. Louise Christie photo.

listen for the voice of the peace-and-love generation behind the silence is as close to the ocean as possible.

When it comes to sussing out the best beaches on Cortes, you'll find the ones at Smelt Bay Provincial Park and nearby at the island's most popular resort, Hollyhock, are pretty much it. But that's all you need. Each is big enough to soak up all comers and still look empty. The coastal calm here feels thick enough to slice or bottle. Indeed, serenity is the absolute reward for journeying here—that and the island's most famous export, oysters.

While some forms of aquaculture,

such as fish farms, receive a failing grade from marine biologists, the same criticisms cannot be applied to oyster farms. You can eat the ones grown from large rafts anchored off Cortes with a clear conscience.

The only trick is finding a local source. One of the most popular places is Hollyhock. On Thursday evenings throughout the summer, the wellness resort hosts a popular oyster feast on its beach, where staff naturalist Bill Ophoff grills up cameo-sized gems alongside jumbo *Crassostrea gigas*. Dinner reservations are a must.

While not all visitors to Cortes can

stomach mollusks, few are immune to the charms of marine life in the waters of Smelt Bay. The best way to view flatfish, eccentric sand dollars, seals, sea stars, and a host of colourful seaweeds is to drift in a small boat. The easiest place to launch is from the provincial park's white-sand beach. A paddle journey from there around Sutil Point to the island's south side takes about 90 minutes. By then, you'll have lost all track of time. ♦

**ACCESS:** As many as six daily 45-minute B.C. Ferries sailings link Cortes with the far larger and more worldly Quadra Island. Campbell River on central Vancouver Island sits a short 10-minute ferry crossing

west of Quadra. With good timing, and a little luck, you can breakfast in Vancouver and be quaffing oysters on a beach on Cortes by mid-afternoon. If possible, in summer months travel on days other than Sundays, when clients at Hollyhock arrive and depart, as ferry space between Quadra and Cortes is limited. For a complete schedule of northern Gulf Islands sailings, contact B.C. Ferries at 1-888-223-3779 or visit [www.bcferries.com/](http://www.bcferries.com/).

Try to stay as close to Smelt Bay as possible, either at one of the provincial park's 22 campsites or at a private cottage, of which a number are available for rent. For information on Smelt Bay Provincial Park, including campsite reservations, visit [bcparcs.ca/](http://bcparcs.ca/). Cottages can be found through [cortesislandvacationrentals.com/](http://cortesislandvacationrentals.com/).

Even if you aren't attending a summer program, arrangements can be made with Hollyhock for either campsite or cabin accommodations. Call 1-800-933-6339 or visit [www.hollyhock.ca/](http://www.hollyhock.ca/) for details.

Cortes Island oysters and other local seafood are available at Crabby Bob's on the pier south of the B.C. Ferries terminal in downtown Campbell River. Frozen seafood is also available at the Cortes Island farmers markets, held at Mansons Landing on Fridays and Squirrel Cove on Wednesdays and Sundays.

While it's possible to travel to Cortes Island by either seaplane or bicycle, a car is handy, particularly if you bring a hand-launched boat to explore the ocean shoreline and the island's large, freshwater Hague Lake. Cyclists will find the central and east portions of Cortes much hillier than along the route from the ferry landing at Whaletown Bay south to Mansons Landing, one of the island's two commercial centres, as well as to Hollyhock and Smelt Bay along Sutil Point Road.

Outside  
Jack Christie

