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Escape to Hollyhock in B.C.

BY PAUL J. HENDERSON, THE TIMES BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT

STORY PHOTOS (1)



Hollyhock Centre on Cortes Island, B.C.
Photograph by: Handout photo, Greg Osoba/Tourism BC

There's an old yogic saying that goes something like: there is no noise in the city, there is no peace in the country, it is all within you.

Nice notion, but for everyday life this is bunk. Sometimes we need to escape.

Hollyhock Educational Retreat Centre on Cortes Island in British Columbia is a universe away in terms of visceral experience.

This is really getting away.

Those who have spent any time on the Gulf or Discover Islands may have noticed that the smaller the island and the more ferries it takes to get there, the more eclectic the island tends to be.

Cortes falls into this category as it's three ferries away from the mainland and is home to an interesting mix of--to grossly oversimplify--wealthy retired folks with Subaru station wagons, off-the-radar backwoodsmen with rusting pickup trucks, and earthy back-to-the-landers trying to live a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle.

Hollyhock was founded by a few of these latter folks in 1982. The 44-acre oceanside retreat has private cabins, a number of unique buildings for yoga and meditation, outdoor hot tubs and a lush garden with a commitment to sustainability; a garden I am told is known as the "heart of Hollyhock."

My wife, baby daughter and I headed to Hollyhock in early April for a long weekend. Cortes Island isn't necessarily hard to get to, but it certainly can be, and if all goes smoothly it will take you at least eight hours from Chilliwack--drive to Horseshoe Bay, ferry to Nanaimo, drive to Campbell River, ferry to Quadra Island, drive across Quadra, ferry to Cortes Island, drive to Hollyhock. (Of course, you could take a one-hour floatplane directly from Vancouver to Cortes.)

We left on a particularly windy day, one that saw trees down, power out and ferries cancelled. One thing about living in this most beautiful corner of the country--a modern civilization with good roads, safe communities and a generally reliable day-to-day life, is that all it takes is one windstorm/snowstorm/hailstorm to bring us back to the 1800s.

After an all-day adventure on Friday from Nanaimo, we finally make it to Heriot Bay on Quadra where the second last ferry to Cortes is cancelled. However, we discover the Heriot Bay Inn, a fabulously renovated heritage inn, pub and restaurant from about 1900, which is right beside the ferry lineup. Our already long journey and further delay is assuaged with a couple of pints of beer, a bowl of should-have-been-better clam and smoked salmon chowder and some bruschetta.

Finally we catch the ferry to Whaletown on Cortes as the sun sets and the waves roll in the Strait of Georgia near the entrance to Desolation Sound--the waves are massive and the small boat, the MV Tenaka and its 30-or-so cars, lurches from side to side, making for a stomach-churning experience.

On Cortes we find much of the island in darkness, but we find Hollyhock. We arrive and about four people staying at the retreat--"seekers" as they call themselves--are hanging around in the main lodge, huddled with blankets around a roaring fire trying to get warm before they go to their cold beds in oceanside cabins.

After some confusion about where we are staying, an old friend of mine, and sometimes-Hollyhock employee helps us to our private cabin overlooking the ocean. Luckily we have a wood stove so the three of us huddle in a pull-out bed in front of a roaring fire.

The next morning I go for a walk with the baby out to see the sea, to find some coffee at the main lodge and chat with some people, the few visitors around in this off-season.

Just about an hour before power is restored to the area around Hollyhock, we get a tour of the grounds by marketing manager Greg Osoba. Paths lead through the mostly-treed property to cabins located all over the grounds. One meditation building through an old grove of fruit trees is a cob house with stonework walls and a green roof.

Adjacent to the main lodge is the large main garden where the retreat's chefs try to get as much as possible for the daily organic vegetarian feasts. Off in the distance can be seen Hornby Island to the south and, much closer, Twin Islands and Hernando Island.

We have an utterly relaxing day, a little tour around the island, some calm and peace in our room. Once the power comes back on, things feel different. We arrived Friday to be kept warm by a crackling fire in a powerless night, but the next day we are in the same room, heated with baseboard heaters, checking e-mail with wi-fi access.

The power outage puts into stark clarity the difference between the busyness and anxiety that can come with our "regular" life and the simplicity and downsizing that seems to be part of the spirit of Hollyhock.

After our visit to Hollyhock, my wife said, "We need to simplify."

(Easier said than done as after our trip we returned to a brand new sectional and a mountain of Swedish cabinetry for me to assemble in our newly painted basement.)

There is a lot of far-out new age talk at Hollyhock but even for those who might be turned off by this, it's easy enough to wade through. I have interest in sustainability, organic local food, notions of living closer with the earth, and all of those are entry points enough into a visit to Hollyhock.

About 2,000 to 2,500 people come to Hollyhock each year between May and October and Hollyhock Foundation CEO Dana Solomon tells me that her hope is that those who visit the retreat take the lessons learned "back into their homes and into their workplaces."

Courses offered range from the practical (Cooking; Social Media for Social Change; Writing Your Memoir) to the much more esoteric (Earth Wisdom, Horse Wisdom, What to Remember When Waking; Sacred Energy Arts).

At dinner on Saturday we finally see everyone who is currently staying at the retreat: about a dozen others in this shoulder season. A few are "seekers"--those that are there to get away and meditate or do whatever on their own time. Others are the karmic yogis--people who pay a small fee to say for the month, are required to work 22 hours a week, but get all the meals covered and can participate in yoga and other sessions on offer.

Dinner is a green and red salad with two dressings, one a yeast concoction I am told is "legendary and has been written about." Fresh oysters pan-seared with two different sauces and fresh clam chowder and corn chowder along with luxuriously fresh Hollyhock bread make for the main meal, one that we are told is a particular treat as even seafood is rarely served.

Hollyhock is a place to go for, pardon the cliché, a good spiritual rejuvenation. It's not a place you would necessarily go to if you require creature comforts morning, noon and night. But having said that, the retreat is not without its decadent, if off-the-grid, pleasures: delicious food, oceanside hot tubs, a driftwood littered beach and, I almost forgot to mention, spa treatments galore.

- For more information about what is on offer and how to get there, visit [www.hollyhock.ca](#).

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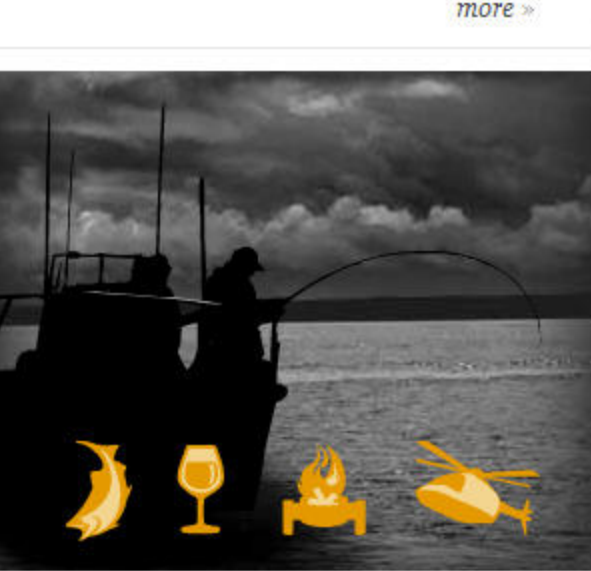
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