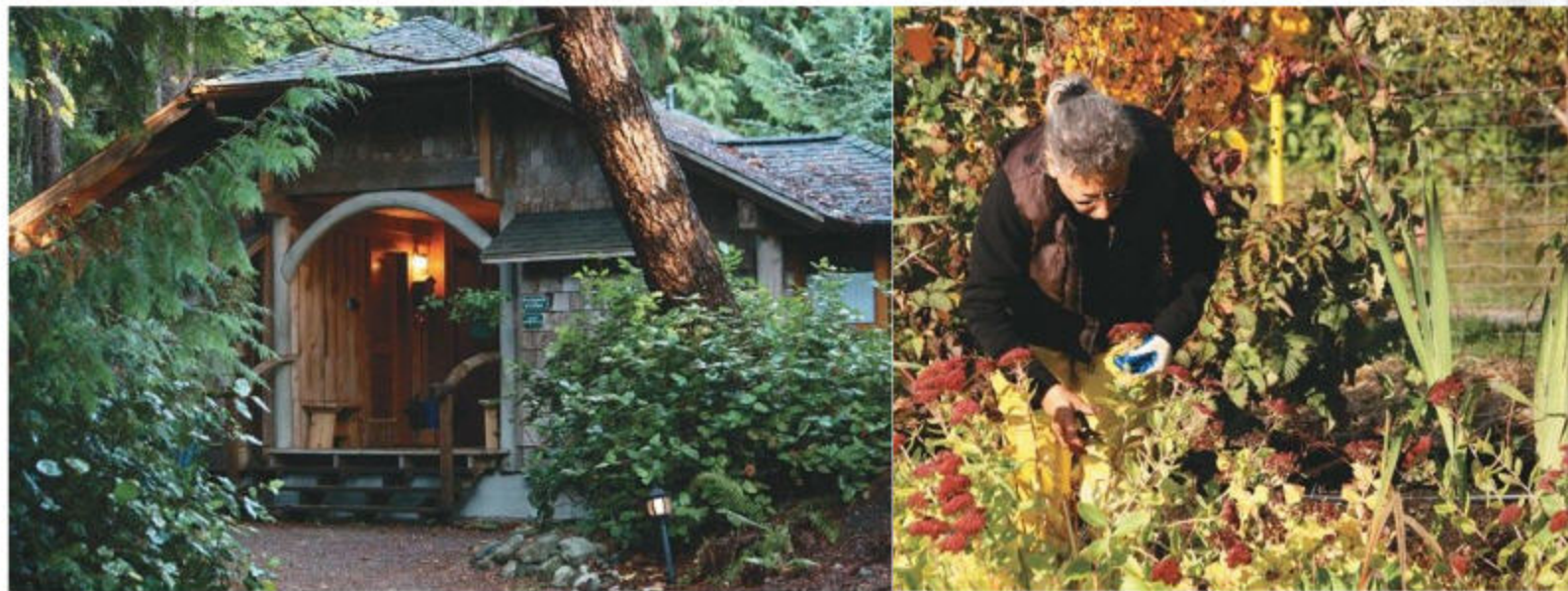


Hollyhock: a retreat for learning as well as rejuvenation



RAIN FALLS SOFTLY through misted evergreens in the grey, pre-dawn light as I stand on the balcony of our room at Hollyhock, inhaling ocean air freshened by the overnight rainfall.

It's my first morning at this educational retreat centre located on the southeastern tip of Cortes Island, two ferry rides from Campbell River.

I'm here to learn what it's like to spend a few days at what many consider a New Age nexus.

Will I, as some might fear, be charmed to death or discover a fantastic travel destination that many Victorians overlook?

It's not surprising that Hollyhock conjures up images that would surely send a Don Cherry or Rex Murphy running for cover. After all, it grew out of the ashes of the Cold Mountain Institute, a Gestalt therapy centre with California connections established here in the 1960s. A gypsy fortune-teller figured in its creation in 1982 by a group of self-confessed "dreamers."

But as I'm about to discover, Hollyhock is more than a refuge for the terminally mystical.

After a delicious breakfast of scrambled eggs, cheesy cornbread, fresh fruit, and Salt Spring Island coffee in the comfortable fir-floored dining hall of the lodge (and despite the now-pouring rain), my wife and I join Operations Director David Drysdale for a tour of the 17-hectare site.

We start in the expansive garden, which provides much of the organic produce and all of the flowers used here. Leading us out of the garden and onto the network of trails that crisscross the heavily forested site, Drysdale, a Victoria businessman before he moved here, explains that Hollyhock was struggling financially when he and CEO Dana Bass Solomon came on board, and it's taken a decade to turn it around.

A CHANGE IN STATUS

Change has meant expanding program offerings and turning a former "triple bottom line" (people, planet, profit) business that was losing \$250,000 per year into a break-even, not-for-profit organization with charitable status.

While maintaining an emphasis on personal well-being, Hollyhock hosts conferences, offers outdoor adventure programs, caters to the arts communities and has established a leadership institute dedicated to social and environmental change.

For those not seeking specific programs, it offers getaways and holidays for individuals and families.

We wander through an orchard and pause at the Sanctuary, a curving, cob-built meditation building that could be right out of a J.R.R. Tolkien story. Next we visit Kiakum. Nestled in the forest and built with local woods, this circular meeting hall, complete



Click to zoom in

The buildings, garden, food and activities create an atmosphere of replenishment. And the hot tub has a great view.



with cushions and backrests, exudes warmth and silence.

Back in the lodge, my wife and I cosy up to a fire tended by Kyra Dyer, a 20-year-old from Lopez Island who has recently joined Karma Yoga, a work-study program billed as “an experience of service and transformation.” Dyer explains that participants attend for a month or more, working 30 hours per week and participate in sessions offered by Hollyhock teachers. “It’s great,” she says, noting the diverse participants, including 68-year-old Bill Seigler, a former TV producer from New York, who wanders in as we’re talking. He tells us he’s enjoying the experience, particularly his early morning “meditations” in a hot tub overlooking the ocean.

HIS AND HERS HOLLYHOCK

During lunch — another delicious meal that includes tomato basil soup and polenta with white beans and pesto sauce — we decide to experience both sides of Hollyhock. My wife will brave the rain for a guided nature hike, while I attend a workshop presented by a Buddhist teacher from Portland.

I enter Kiakum with reservations. I don’t like touchy-feely sessions and, although I do have a background in

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meditation and some acquaintance with Buddhism, I really don't know what to expect.

Two hours later I emerge invigorated. The presenter, Robert Beatty, has taken us through a thought-provoking and eminently sensible discussion of the "Four Noble Truths" of Buddhism and introduced us to a simple "mindfulness" meditation that seems quite practical.

My wife has returned wet but ecstatic from her hike, where she's learned about the self-pruning ways of evergreens, the aerial acrobatics of copulating slugs and the antics of the resident Cortes wolf population, among other fascinating bits of naturalist lore.

Evening finds us enjoying an oyster barbecue under cover on the lodge deck (normally it happens on the beach) followed by another fabulous meal that includes pesto-baked salmon.

We chat with two artists attending a workshop on the business of art led by the co-ordinator of the West Vancouver Art Gallery. We're enjoying the place but what about these guys?

Reinier deSmit, an affable 50-year-old photo artist, remarks on "the sense of peace and quiet focus" he's experienced and says Hollyhock gives guests "the freedom to do what you need to do to be here," noting that not only was his group able to bring wine to their dinner last night but that Hollyhock even provides an outdoor "smoking temple" for those requiring a tobacco fix.

Remarking on the mainly vegetarian diet, Dave Denson, a 41-year-old painter and self-confessed "bad eater" who prefers meat, says, "Everything I've tasted is delicious." He also remarks on the friendly, relaxed nature of the place.

Although we haven't experienced everything on offer — we've chosen sleep, for example, over the early morning group meditation and yoga session and haven't had massages in the Bodywork Studio — we have had a rich, relaxing experience and certainly haven't been inundated by aura-massaging crazies.

Best of all, the next morning I awake feeling more deeply rested than I have in weeks. The rain has stopped. Patches of blue appear in the lightening sky. The sun will soon be out.

At Hollyhock, accommodation ranges from tent sites to beachfront cabins. Packages (\$79-\$274 per person per day) include accommodation, meals, guided nature hikes, morning meditations, yoga sessions, hot tubs, library, Internet and periodic evening presentations. Programs and bodywork sessions are extra. See the website hollyhock.ca and/or request a calendar for a complete rundown of upcoming programs. Discounts are available in May and October. See hollyhock.ca or call 1-800-933-6339. **VB**



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