

Discovering Seafest and Cortes Island



CHERIE THIESSEN

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View from the Boathouse Deck. *CHERIE THIESSEN*

The aromas hit us first: the union of shiro miso with sake, the tang of garlic mixing with Sriracha sauce,

the yeasty bouquet of fresh baked breads. Thank heavens this lineup is moving briskly.



Patrons lineup for oysters at Seafest. *RICHARD TRUEMAN*

Soon we're staring down at oysters in miso sauce, oysters in a delectable lime marmalade glaze, mussels luxuriating in white wine, steamed clams Bordelaise, and prawns in sweet chili Thai sauce.

"*Sautéed*, poached, steamed, or barbecued, and we have new recipes every year," says oyster grower, Kristen Scholfield-Sweet, who along with her partner John Shook, has organized the Cortes Island Seafood Association's Seafest since 2009.

We shoehorn them all onto our plates and move to the gazebo, close to the entertainment. Alongside the pond, the beer garden is doing a rousing business while local musicians David Blinzinger and Steffano Perdisa stoke up a little jazz on saxophone and guitar, the first of myriad acts.

For the past three years Seafest has been held at Gorge Harbour Marina on the Saturday of the May long weekend, and with ten acres of grassy fields, an orchard campsite, a well-stocked store, restaurant, good facilities and awesome water views, this is one sweet place to hold it.

This popular culinary event is only one of myriad things to take in on Cortes.

For the art lover in me, the Old Schoolhouse Art Gallery and the craft shop at Squirrel Cove have both opened up for the season.

For the foodie me there's a farmers' market at the community hall in Manson's Landing where I can score some hard-so-come-by fresh produce, and for the inner gourmand, I can hit the organic, well stocked Food Co-op across the street, the island's year-round social and culinary hub, where bread and baking goodies mix with coffee and buzz.

Then my inner child wants an early season swim in the locals' favourite playground, Hague Lake, with its sugar sand and topaz waters. We've also booked a Mansons Lagoon tour with long time resident, Lynne Jordan, who has been giving enthralled visitors close up looks for years at the lives of the lagoon's critters in the inter tidal zone, in return for donations to the Cortes Island Museum and Archives.

"Cortes has wonderful parks. Be sure to visit Smelt Bay Park too. It's a sandy beach that's swimmable, where you can walk for ages. The annual August Sandcastle Day is held there on the day of the full moon," says our host, realtor Martha Abelson.

"Whaletown Commons is an inland park with magnificent trails that take you through a different forest with cedars and fir and beautiful tall maple trees and fern covered ravines. It's a different experience."



Steve Pocock of Sawmill Bay Shellfish barbecuing Oysters Rockefeller. *ESTER STRIJBOS*



Hollyhock's spring garden. *CHERI THIESSEN*

And there is a short but steep hike up to Easter Bluff with views west to the Gorge and the mountains of Vancouver Island and east to Cortes Bay.



Lynne Jordan's Manson' Landing lagoon. *CHERIE THIESSEN*

And there is Smelt Bay, along with nearby Hollyhock Leadership Institute, now 35-years old, whose gardens, accommodations, classes and instructors have drawn guests from around the world and whose organic buffets are also open to the public.

We also must visit the museum, which Schofield-Sweet enthuses about. "It's a must-see. It's shocking in the scale and diversity of its constantly changing exhibits and territorial knowledge. The newest exhibit, curated by artist, educator and writer, Judith Williams, is on the history of Refuge Cove, an historical and colourful settlement on nearby West Redonda Island." When people get this excited about a museum on a small island, we know we have to go!

Cortes is one of the Discovery Islands, the unofficial but widely used name given to the archipelago of islands lying along the Inside Passage at the Strait of Georgia's northern end between Campbell River, north-central Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia.

With a population just over 1000, comprised of long established Klahoose First Nations, descendants of 19th Century settlers and more recent arrivals looking for a causal and more independent lifestyle, Cortes is definitely off the beaten track. Named in 1793 after the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernando Cortes, it's approximately 25-km. long and 130-sq. kilometres in area. Its remoteness and large tracts of wilderness are part of the lure for both islanders and visitors.

If you go:

From Tsawwassen take the ferry to Duke Point and then drive to Campbell River (164-km) or from Horseshoe Bay to Departure Bay in Nanaimo (152-km.).

The Quadra Island ferry leaves from Campbell River. It's nine kilometers to the Heriot Bay terminal on Quadra. The *MV Tenaka* makes the 40-minute crossing to Cortes approximately six times daily. If you are going for SEAFEST, take advantage of the free shuttle service, which meets every ferry on the day. cortesconnection@gmail.com (<mailto:cortesconnection@gmail.com>).

- Questions regarding Seafest. Kristen Scholfield-Sweet at usualmagic@gmail.com (<mailto:usualmagic@gmail.com>).
- Cortes Tourism and Seafest info. [ourcortes.com](http://www.ourcortes.com) (<http://www.ourcortes.com>) and www.cortesisland.com (<http://www.cortesisland.com>) (very useful and constantly updated news magazine listing all events).
- Our beachfront nirvana: The Boathouse. www.cortesislandboathouse.com (<http://www.cortesislandboathouse.com>). Also choose from Hollyhock Centre, hosted B & Bs, airbnb, the Cortes Motel, or vacation rentals. Check <http://www.cortesisland.com> (<http://www.cortesisland.com>) for all accommodations. There are also campsites at Gorge Harbour Marina (fully serviced.) www.gorgeharbour.com (<http://www.gorgeharbour.com>), or Smelt Bay Provincial Park. (Basic).
- Misty Isles Adventures. Guided paddles, kayak rentals, excursions aboard the schooner, Misty Isles. [MistyIslesAdventures.com](http://www.MistyIslesAdventures.com) (<http://www.MistyIslesAdventures.com>).
- Hollyhock Leadership Institute. <https://hollyhock.ca>.
- Mansons Lagoon tour (Book through the museum. 250-935-6340.)