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Hollyhock heaven: A little utopia on Cortes Island

BY CHRISTIE GRAHAM, SPECIAL TO THE SUN OCTOBER 19, 2013

"We're going to a hippie retreat, to do yoga, meditation, sing Kumbaya and eat flowers," my husband told his friends, tongue-in-cheek, about our summer holiday plans to Hollyhock, Cortes Island.

His amusing description of our unique "new age" adventure was close to the mark. With morning yoga in the forest, garden-inspired organic meals and nature walks, all we had to do was learn to relax, and "be in the moment."

While Cortes is not easy to get to, it's well worth the journey.

Situated by the boating paradise, Desolation Sound, it is one of the most magical of the Discovery Islands with sandy beaches, arbutus trees, and gleaming granite bluffs.

Hollyhock has a stunning location on the sunny southeastern tip of Cortes.

Within a couple hours of our ferry journey, we felt transported to a new world and time disappeared. The mental shift began the moment we landed on peaceful Quadra Island. Here we enjoyed a glass of organic wine at a local gem called the Heriot Bay Inn.

The pace of life continued to slow as we feasted our eyes on the Mainland Coast Mountains behind us during the final spectacular ferry ride to Whaletown, Cortes.

Our pilgrimage continued upon arrival at Hollyhock, guided by a woman who radiated a pure B.C.-island-lifelook, to our "Gingerbread House" cabin.

The centrepiece of this teeming-with-life-utopia is the garden of herbs, edible flowers, ripening fruits and vegetables, and, of course, tall brightly coloured hollyhocks, which stood beside the indoor /outdoor oceanside dining hall. In this social hub, we enjoyed organic meals created by master chefs, including a most delicious pad Thai with tofu, salmon, pesto pasta (with gluten-free options), dolmades, beets, garbanzo beans with basil sauce, homemade garden soups, and always gorgeous salads of wild greens with kale, arugula, bean sprouts with homemade dressings, and their signature fresh baked bread: spelt walnut. Meals were a marvellous harvest feast, a time for social

engagement, or solitude and contemplative thought. The sense of community reminded me of childhood summer camp days, but now we feasted on delicious health foods with fellow seekers of enlightenment. Throughout the grounds, people were breaking out in song and dance, or excitedly discussing new insights, ideas, or discoveries.

As neophytes into the world of "holistic health" retreats, my husband and I opted for the "restorative getaway," rather than a full program. Even with our more limited package, we had plenty of opportunities for engagement - one of our favourites being sunrise yoga in the open-roof Raven House, which we enjoyed to the sound of morning birds along with spontaneous viewings of herons flying above. Other beautiful moments included bicycle rides, beach, nature and garden walks, and simply watching a deer and fawn eating from the falling apples in the orchards.

The last night of our trip, my husband, the initially reluctant participant, ran into the ocean in the buff under moonlight. We laughed like children at this au natural earthly experience. This new age spiritual skeptic jumped in with both feet, with nothing holding him back! We look forward to going back for more amazing gourmet and soul food, to this special world that makes one feel in love with being alive! It was a truly organic experience - a wonderful abundance of the "Nature vitamin," enriching personal insights, inspiring community connections, and the gift of our bodies and spirits feeling better than ever.

Getting there: Take a 40-minute ferry ride from Quadra Island, which is accessed by a 10-minute ferry from Campbell River.

www.discoveryislands.ca; www.cortesislandtourism.ca; www.hollyhock.ca.

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