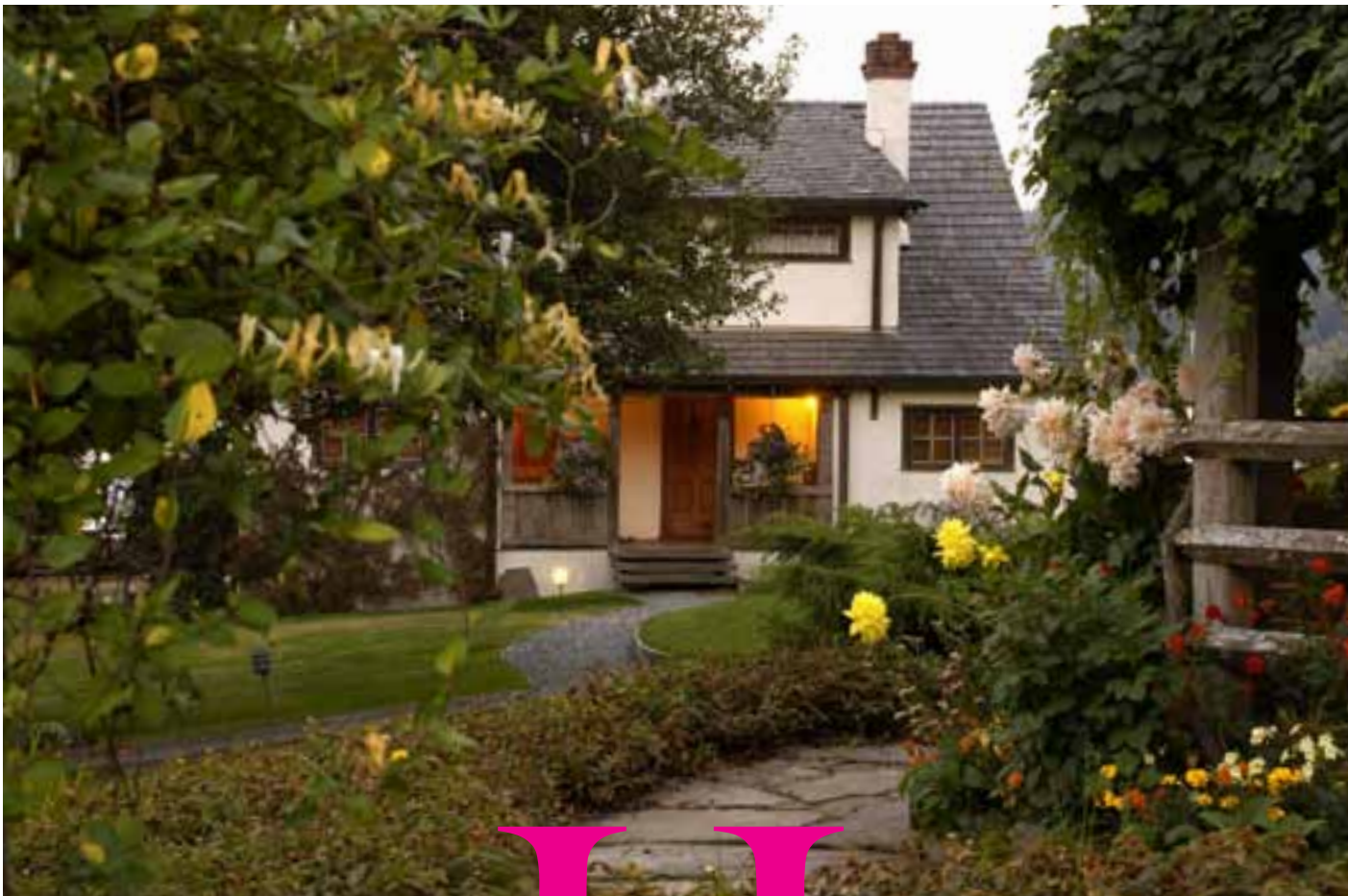


# EASY on the SALT

B.C.'s Salt Spring Island offers a relaxing  
respite from the rest of the world

BY CRAI S. BOWER



The farmhouse at Hastings House.



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ow different can the Gulf Islands really be, given they are part of the same origin as the San Juan Islands, an archipelago divided by a border in political name only? Given the impending summer of ferry queues and lengthy border crossings, is it worth our while to add the time to create a Canadian island vacation?

My answer, having just returned from dining, kayaking and generally hanging out on and around Salt Spring Island, remains a resounding “Yes!”

Formed from tectonic plate clashes and uplift, the 10 or so largest islands take cool Canada to a whole new vibration of artistic mellow, a mosaic of galleries, cafés and outdoorsy enticements. But what really sets all of the more than 200 islands apart is the conservation effort. The Gulf Islands are divided into provincial parks, marine parks and ecological reserves culminating with the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve of Canada, which includes 16 national parks scattered throughout the region. That’s a lot of parks.

Culturally, amazing artists spill oils and bend metal throughout the islands. Painter and Salt Spring resident Robert Bateman is among them, and considered by many to be the finest wildlife realist in the world. Musicians congregate at the Tree House Cafe, which boasts live music for more than 100 consecutive nights during the summer, when the outer walls come down and diners spread out beneath the comforting limbs of a mature plum tree. Secure within this arboreal embrace, I extend my Tree House Cheese Burger and Salt Spring Golden Ale lunch well past afternoon tea.

Not just a harbor for the bohemian Canuck, Salt Spring Island also possesses Hastings House, which perennially ranks near the top of “Best Inns in

Canada/North America” lists. Hastings House spreads out above the Ganges harbor, an easy stroll from town, especially when I slip out among the arbutus trees along the back path to Moby’s, a locals’ pub, with terrace seating and live music on weekends. No need for awnings or heat lamps here; the Gulf Islands sit squarely in the legendary rain shadow, receiving just 30 inches of rainfall a year.



Above: Starfish discovery by the author.  
Below: Spruce hanging lanterns by artist Brent Comber at Duthie Gallery.



More reminiscent of Great Britain than North America, Hastings is actually comprised of several cottages and converted outbuildings built by Warren Hastings, who designed the Manor House to resemble his family’s 11th century home. Not all is Sussex Tudor here, though it’s tough to look past afternoon tea in the Living Room and The Snug, a cellar of sorts with an honor bar of fine scotches. And the Farmhouse, housing two guest suites, is one of the coolest domiciles I’ve seen on the West Coast.

Since I don’t know how to nap, I leave the terraced gardens for an afternoon kayak to Chocolate Beach Island, named for the chocolate lilies that appear in late spring. Wildflowers (and meadow walks) abound here, including fawn lilies, sea blush and the small-flowered prairie stars. Out on the water, I slow my kayak to study several stars of the marine world, including a gorgeous sunflower star, the area’s largest sea star and, traveling up to 3 feet per minute, one of the speediest. I check out various other species, including purple and leather stars, before paddling out of the Goat Island lee to the beach.

Chocolate Beach is known more for its moon than its stars, as the tiny island possesses one of the world’s most beautiful outhouses, carved by Micah Booy, a master carpenter, as a gift to the island. I kayak for exercise and to access nature like the orcas, gray and humpback whales that regularly appear, but I have to admit the detail of this outhouse, from the lunar window to the inlaid wooden seat, is well worth the paddle.

Inspired by the outhouse craftsmanship, I continue my artisan tour back on land at Duthie Gallery, home to spruce lamps, mixed medium “Heli-Desks” and chests of drawers so whimsical, I can’t believe they’re solid wood and not images within a Dr. Seuss book. The gallery hosts the *Night Gallery*, its hugely popular outdoor illuminated sculpture exhibition that runs from 9 to 11 p.m. Thursday through Monday nights in July and August. Extensive studio tours are available on several islands.

Island life has always intrigued me, a forced mellow if you will, dependent on ferry and, in this case, Saltspring Air schedules. (If you take the 25-minute flight from Vancouver Airport’s float plane terminal, spend the night before at the Fairmont Vancouver Airport, considered the best airport hotel on the continent.)

Call it my island dream, but I can’t help envisioning my family visiting the Saturday Market, paddling side-by-side to the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve for a picnic or swaying to music beside a world-renowned visual artist on a regular basis. The fact my dream speaks with a Canadian accent is all the better. ¶

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DESIGN PICS/PAVEN REGAN; THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF HASTINGS HOUSE

FROM TOP: JACK ROSEN; CRAI S. BOWER

## IF YOU GO...

Pick up a copy of the *Western Canada & Alaska TourBook®* at your local AAA office. (See pg. 4 for locations.)

**Salt Spring Island Tourism**  
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**Island Escapades (Kayaking)**  
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