

Luxurious camping experience revives Sunshine Coast institution

Rockwater Secret Cove Resort is a deluxe canvas retreat

BY MARGO PFEIFF

I'm trekking 640 sea-scented metres along a boardwalk through a forest of Douglas fir, cedar and red-barked arbutus trees to my digs for the night, a tent overlooking Secret Cove on the Sunshine Coast.

But this is a tent like no other. My five-star canvas retreat comes complete with a fireplace, radiant heating to warm the slate floors, linen with a massive thread count, a Jacuzzi the size of a small lake and gourmet room service.

Now, this is my idea of camping. Rockwater Secret Cove Resort is the reincarnation of the half-century-old Lord Jim's Resort Hotel, just north of the town of Sechelt.

It was a coastal institution that had slipped into decline on a spectacular piece of real estate.

Enter Kevin Toth, a Fairmont Hotels veteran, and his partner, who upgraded the outdated resort in 2004 and added a unique Spa Without Walls — a mosquito-netted massage and beauty treatment tent in the woods.

Could they extend that intimate outdoor immersion to overnight guests, they wondered?

They wanted to tread as lightly on the hillside forest as possible, so they decided on luxury tents built on wooden platforms.

"We're green guys," says Toth, "and we didn't want to disturb the delicate old pillows of lichen or the trees." In the end, nature dictated the loca-

tion of the 15 tenthouse suites and the route of a zigzag boardwalk that travels over half a kilometre and feels like a treetop canopy walk. Only seven trees had to be removed during construction.

The Sunshine Coast is just north of Vancouver, reached by a 40-minute ferry ride from the Horseshoe Bay terminal to Langdale on the Sechelt Peninsula. Rockwater is another 45 minutes north by car from the ferry.

Or you can catch a float plane flight from the Vancouver harbour straight to Sechelt.

The Sunshine Coast is beginning to become known for its first few luxury retreats, such as Rockwater. The "sunshine" part of the name is based on Environment Canada's logging some 2,400 tonnes of wood a year — an impressive 200 days annually — making it sunnier and drier than anywhere else along soggy coastal British Columbia.

The tenthouse roofs are Goretex, which keeps out the rain and sheds the occasional snowfall.

The walls are cotton from a mill in India, but designed and constructed by a local tent-and-swinging outfit that produces products such as teepees for the movie industry.

The tenthouses are comfortable and warm, with the propane "wood" stoves dispelling any seaside dampness. They also bring out the weather's best moments while retaining the camping feeling, including the outdoor sounds of birds and trees swaying in the breeze and the occasional flap of canvas.

Think five-star northern prospector



Rockwater Secret Cove Resort aims to tread as lightly on the hillside forest as possible, so they decided on boardwalks linking a series of luxury tents built on wooden platforms nestled among the arbutus trees.

boutique hotel. The resort offers a full-service spa, swimming pool and nearby horseback riding, fishing and golf.

The dining room in the main lodge is the domain of chef Steven Ewing, formerly of Napa Valley's French Laundry and Vancouver's Raincity Grill, and his offerings are decidedly fresh, seasonal West Coast: local Dungeness crab cakes and smoked Alaskan black cod with baby bok choy in a sour apple dashi.

A special treat from spring to fall is the Gourmet Moonlight Kayak Expedition. Everyone from beginner to master paddler heads off to nearby Thorndy Island during full moon evenings to dine in a secluded spot on a three-course meal prepared on the spot by the chef.

My tenthouse was No. 65, the unofficial honeymoon suite since it's at the end of the boardwalk and the most secluded.

Rockwater specializes in weddings and has 44 scheduled for this summer, 75 per cent of them booking out the entire resort.

After an invigorating Jacuzzi, I wrap myself in my dressing gown and head for my own private balcony at dusk.

From my lounge chair I watch prawn fishing boats heading in for the night and herons winging past on their way to a nearby rookery.

The air is faintly scented with cedar and it's so darn quiet I swear I can hear the barnacles breathing on the beach below.

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If you go . . .

Rockwater Secret Cove Resort
5356 Ole's Cove Road, Halfmoon Bay
Cost: Tenthouse suites from \$299 per night including breakfast, based on double occupancy.

Contacts: 1-877-296-4593 or www.rockwatersecretcove.com

Gourmet Moonlight Kayaking Package: Two nights in a tenthouse suite for two, including two breakfasts, one lunch, guided kayaking and a three-course candlelit dinner with wine on a remote beach is \$429 per person, based on double occupancy. Upcoming full moon nights are July 29 and 30, Aug. 28 and 29 and Sept. 26 and 27.

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