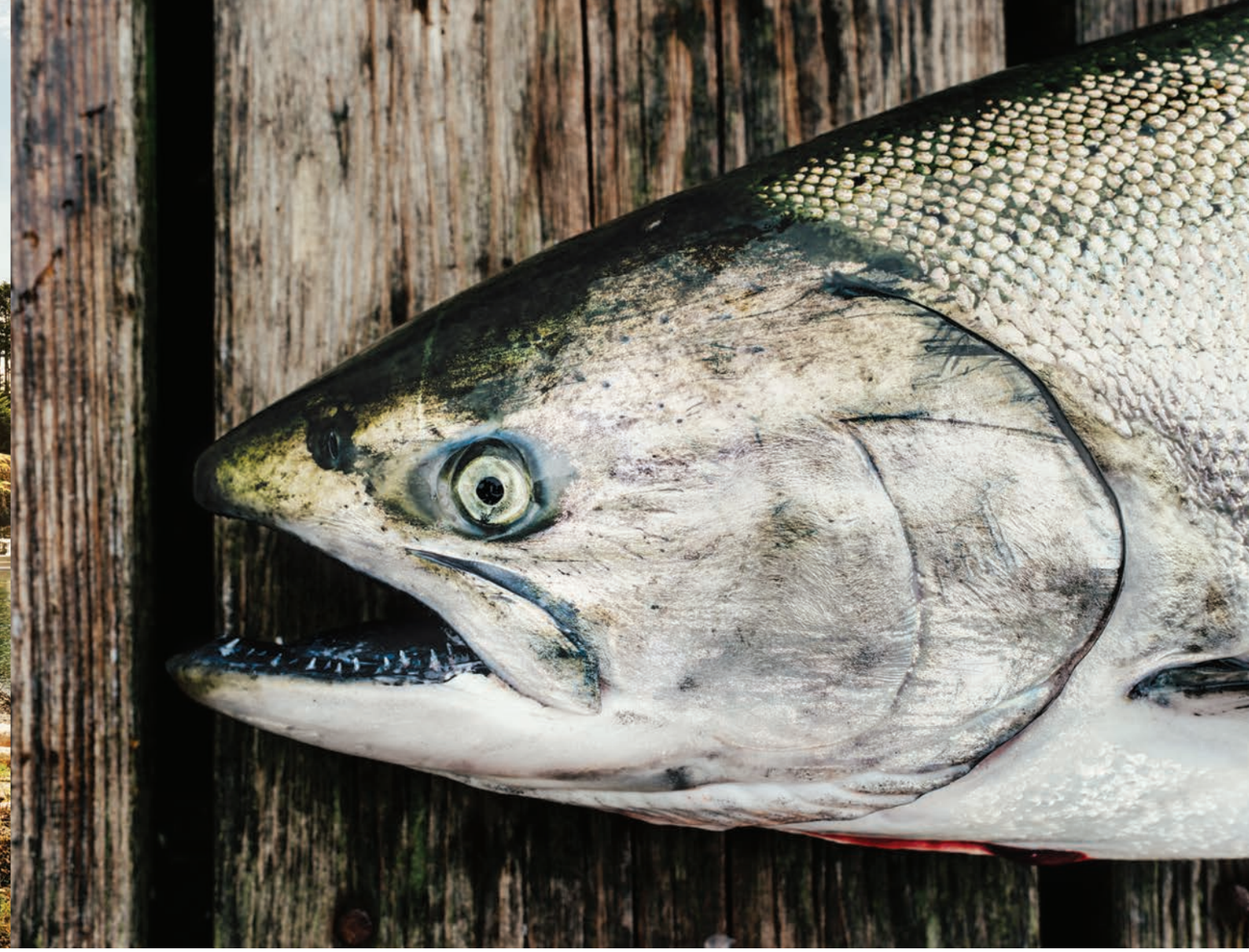
By Jim Sutherland Photography Kamil Bialous

The Unhotel in Paradise

They wanted to invest in a fishing lodge. What they built was a dream cabin for 16 that, for 25 years, has brought their families together



Visitors to this Kyuquot Sound retreat can choose between the lodge's two boats, the *Mary B* and the *Phoebe Gaye*, whether they're keen on sport fishing for chinook or they prefer to hit one of the nearby beaches (opposite), only a 20-minute boat ride from the lodge.

It's not quite dinner time on Sonny's Island,

and with wineglasses in hand, several members of the extended Osburn and Johnson families consider tomorrow's options. Weather forecasts are notoriously sketchy up near Vancouver Island's stormy northwestern tip, but the official guess is for something half-decent, suggesting the possibility of a day-long expedition to the Brooks Peninsula, with its never-glaciated refugia, faux-tropical white sand beaches, and surfable breaks. "Of course," says Brian Johnson, laughing at the probable futility of it all, "this conversation is purely theoretical."

Sure enough, by morning the half-decency has been supplanted by a thick bank of fog, and plans must be adjusted accordingly. A few early risers jump into one of two identical 26-foot aluminum-hulled Lifetimer boats and, within an hour or so, limit out on 12 to 15 lb chinook. Later, as the soup begins to thin, the entire multi-generational assembly of 14 trundles down the steep ramp—it's low tide—to fill both boats. The amended excursion will be to a wave-battered barrier island, where rugged cliffs conceal a seabird rookery on one shore while on another there's a sheltered lagoon.

Along the way there's an entirely welcome interruption, caused by some humpback whales who appear to be auditioning for an episode of *The Nature of Things*. "It's a mom teaching the young ones to slap their tails and fins," speculates Kristin Dobbin, the girlfriend of Mark Osburn's son, Max.

On the island, there's a hike through the dense salal and underbrush, up a steep cliff, and by a long-abandoned scientific outpost to an overlook above the rookery. Meanwhile, Max has brought along his wetsuit and speargun, and he snags a rockfish to augment the sausages grilling over the flames and embers of a bonfire tucked in among the driftwood. The fire is topped with a nifty portable grill that Mark made after being inspired by the ones he spotted on a trip to Argentina and that is now making its island debut.

Just another typically atypical day in Kyuquot Sound, complete with a cabin-cum-lodge base station that puts the "treat" in retreat. Want somewhere that sleeps 16? With ensuites for all? In high style? On its own private island? In an incredibly beautiful and astonishingly remote location? And even more incredible and astonishing—for a respectably affordable cost? Tall orders indeed. Fortunately, the place enabling fun of this quantity and quality is also something of a laboratory, where, for 25 years, Mark Osburn, Brian Johnson, and their partners, in both life and business, have been quietly perfecting the art and science of cottaging as a group. ››

How they share

The planning
In January and February, a booking calendar goes out, and everyone picks their preferred dates. Then, every March, Mark, Brian, and the lodge's two other managing partners convene an annual meeting. They spend the next couple of months working through operational issues. In late May or early June, they gather for a partners' weekend to check over the place and help open it up, working alongside the hired caretaker.

The sharing
The property is occupied virtually every day from the beginning of June till the end of September, by up to 25 different groups on stays ranging from four to six days. Within minutes of a group's departure, a battalion of hired helpers who live nearby arrives to clean, change linens, and restock the pantry, while also dealing with any maintenance issues. When the next set of guests arrives (sometimes only three or four hours later), the work will have been completed, with only the caretaker there to greet them. A similar system ensures that the boats are fuelled up and maintained.

The funding
Everybody pays an annual fee of about $2,100, to cover maintenance and improvements. Stays cost about $900 a day, plus roughly $600 for use of the boats. "It's a pretty sweet deal," says Mark. "You have to do your own cooking. But per person it's about a quarter of what a commercial fishing lodge would charge."

Beachcombers can find a bounty almost anywhere they search, then catch a few zzzs on the beach, like Mark Osburn (in foreground, opposite, bottom right). Back on Sonny's Island (named for the former owner), the dining table seats 16 or more for big meals.

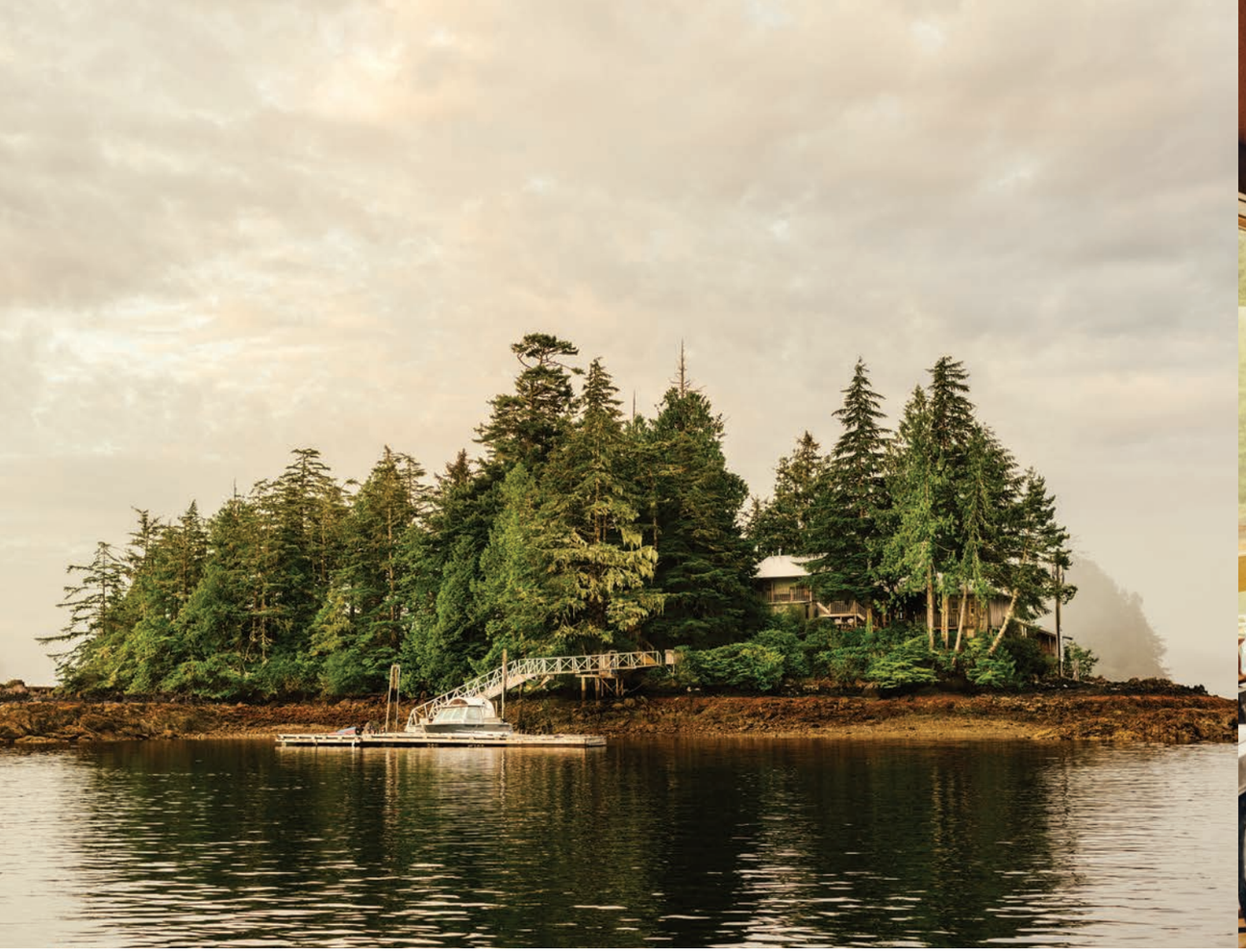
In truth, the story begins not 25 years ago, but more like 40, way back in the 1970s, when Mark, having just finished architecture school, was deckhanding on fishing boats and ultimately skippering one. More often than not, he was based in Ucluelet, then a rough and ready forestry town and fishing port, from which he trolled up and down Vancouver Island's wild west coast. "It was in the pub in Ukee that I first heard about this place," says Mark. "The guy who lived here was looking to sell it."

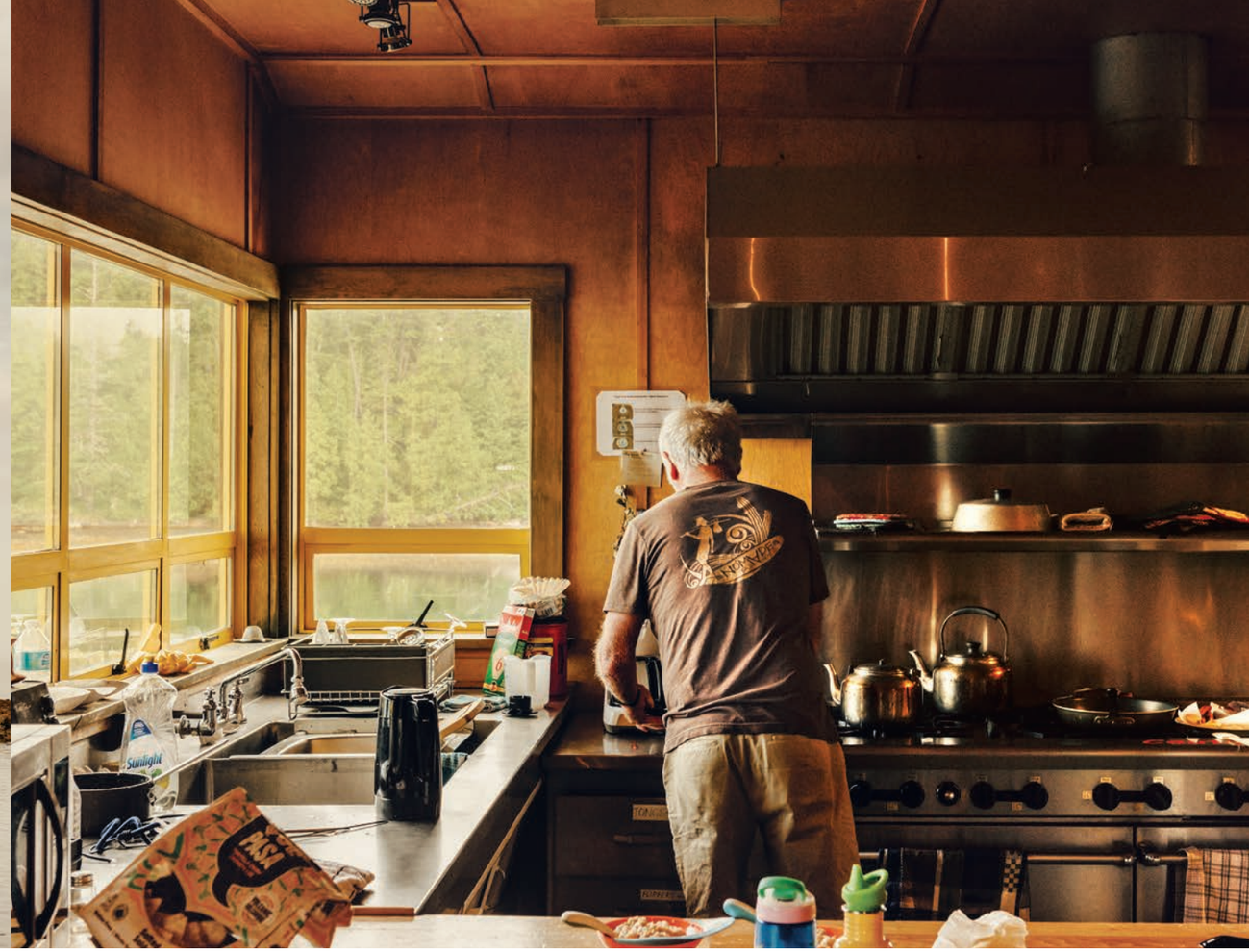
Along the hundreds of kilometres of coastline stretching northwestward from Ucluelet and Tofino, there are fewer than a dozen settlements of any size. Many are First Nations communities, and most others are logging towns, with the requisite clearcuts, gravel roads, and sheltered locations far up fjord-like inlets. Kyuquot Village is home to the Kyuquot/Checleseht First Nation, but lacks both roads and logging operations. Isolated about 40 minutes by boat from road's end at Fair Harbour, and more than 200 km by boat from Ucluelet, habitations there are divided roughly equally between the mainland and a jumble of islands that speckle the open sea. Jokingly, the 300 or so people who call the area home have been known to refer to it as the Venice of the North. "In the early 1970s, it was home to a commercial fishery," says Mark. "You'd see a hundred boats tied up there at night."

By the end of the decade, however, the commercial fishery was dying. "After we sold our troller, I was looking for a place you couldn't drive to," Mark explains. He bought the island he'd first heard about in the bar and for the next decade or so tried to make proper use of it, which wasn't easy. He was living back in Vancouver by then, starting a family and building an architectural practice. It was bad enough that the truck, ferry, and boat trip from Vancouver took most of a day and required the schlepping along

The waves are taller here than any most of us will ever see

Max, Mark Osburn's son, is a spearfisherman. "I'm still an amateur, as you can tell by the size of the catch," he says. Meanwhile, Mark's daughter, Chessa Osburn, and her husband, Steve Sims, prefer to tackle the scramble up the outer barrier islands (opposite).





The kitchen is designed for big groups, with a commercial oven and range (above, with Brian Johnson at the helm), labelled cabinets, and a large industrial sink. "I believe it was sourced from an old morgue," says Max. "Maybe that's too much information."

of all provisions. Worse, the old cabin was slowly, and then quickly, becoming downright uninhabitable.

By the turn of the 1990s, it was clear that the tumbledown cabin had to be replaced, but it hardly seemed practical to build a new one when Mark and his family could only visit for a few days a year. Instead, how about a deluxe commercial fishing lodge? That was the original plan—build a place that would operate like a hotel—and certainly there was no one better to design such a thing. By then his practice had developed a specialization in remote retreats.

Moreover, Mark had a group of willing investors, including pal Brian Johnson, another one-time captain who had abandoned the floundering fishing industry in favour of greener pastures, in his case, construction. Ultimately Brian would help turn the company that he co-founded, called Weatherhaven, into one of the world's leading providers of temporary shelters for remote locations and harsh climates, but back then his main business was building exactly the kind of woodsy retreats that Mark himself liked to design.

Mark pushed forward with plans for the lodge, keeping in mind both the shining attributes and the harsh demands of the site. Although the island is more than a hectare in size, there was really only one place to build—exactly where the old shack stood. "The most damaging winds here are from the southeast," Mark explains, and the original place had wisely been set on the island's northwestern tip, with the bulk of the island and its tall forest as a wind buffer. By placing the bedroom wing of the new lodge upwind and letting the rest of the building cascade down a slope, he could add more wind protection to the timber-frame living and eating area and its two decks, one facing the harbour, the other the open sea. Inside this social area, he used a strategically located dropped ceiling and different types of lighting to create several distinct zones. Befitting the luxury fishing lodge the place was originally intended to be, every bedroom got an ensuite, and the kitchen was spec'd to commercial standards.

Mark, Brian, and their original small group of investors didn't have the kind of money it would take to complete and then staff such a place, so they began to take potential additional investors up to Kyuquot to have a look. This led to some bad news. "No one had sport fished that area, so it seemed risky," explains Brian. "They kept saying 'I don't want to invest in this,'" Mark adds. But there was also some good news. "What they said instead was, 'I want to stay here myself.'" {*Continued on page 101*}

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Sharing is not without challenges. A few years in, Mark learned the lodge's number one lesson: "never mix two different groups." Given the large number of people—Mark, Brian, two other managing partners, plus at any one time 20 or so "limited" partners—the high demand for prime dates, and with two boats and sufficient beds for 16 people, double-booking was an obvious temptation, but too often disaster ensued. "A party group together with a young family," Mark suggests as one example among many. On the other hand, well-organized collaborations such as the Osburns and the Johnsons can be magical. For Mark's wife, Bronwyn, some of the fondest memories revolve around stays with the Johnsons and other partners. "They didn't know the secret places we go, and vice versa," she says.

The families typically arrive on a Friday, some after catching an early ferry out of Vancouver, but most driving up from southern Vancouver Island (where Brian and his wife, Sheila Patterson, now live), and leaving on the subsequent Wednesday. Evenings revolve around dinners assigned to a rotation of families and generations. These have to be planned in advance, given that the nearest supermarket is about four hours away. Pretty much every day involves a boat expedition of some sort, often to one of the dozens of small islands, or up and down a coastline that is by 21st-century standards, impossibly pristine. They also fish, especially the guys, generally reaching their limit of salmon, and often augmenting those with rockfish of various sorts, as well as halibut, which require a more venturesome trip farther out into the wild Pacific.

A lot of the other groups make fish even more of a focus. "They have fish fever," as Sheila says—a condition that the Kyuquot area is especially well-suited to. For all of its present-day isolation, the area served as a secure and well-provisioned home for a Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation population that once numbered in the thousands. It reigned as something of a marine capital for three centuries, hosting a succession of lucrative industries, including whaling. The

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industries were long gone, though, when Mark bought this place, and the salmon and halibut were in serious trouble too.

Call it luck, or call it effect, but around that time, things began to turn for the fish population. The reduced commercial fishery and better enhancement programs were important, but another factor was the return of the sea otters. The last known Canadian sea otter was killed near Kyuquot in 1929, and it was Kyuquot again that became the site of the species' reintroduction to Canada, from an isolated stock in the Aleutian Islands, beginning in 1969. Since then, the otters have gradually expanded their range along the west coast of Vancouver Island, but Kyuquot remains ground zero, and the area is now home to vast kelp forests, beloved by fish, but destroyed by shellfish, which proliferated in the absence of sea otters. On a quick tour, Mark points out one of the shockingly adorable creatures, lying on its back in the water while using its forepaws and the rock it carries in a pouch to crack open a sea urchin. Cute as the otters are, the locals have mixed opinions of them, he says. "We miss all the shellfish."

Unlike the fish and the sea otters, humans have not returned in any number, a reality that no one knows better than Brian and Sheila. Brian is a pilot, and on a day back in August 1996, the couple decided to take a brief flight in their Seabee over the Brooks Peninsula. There, they decided to land on a small lake—and promptly dunked the plane.

Shaken, but unbruised, they determined the quickest route to rescue would be to hike out to the seashore in hopes of hailing a passing kayaker or fishing boat. Meanwhile, authorities called in after the couple failed to return carried out what might still reign as the most cursory search in Canadian history before spotting the wreckage on the lake and declaring the couple dead. Three days—and no boats or kayakers—passed before Brian and Sheila were finally rescued, by a coroner who decided he couldn't comment on their deaths without checking out the scene. "Yeah," says Brian. "It was an adventure."

That was almost 22 years ago. Tonight, dinner duty has fallen to the second generation, comprised of a daughter of Brian and Sheila's; Mark's son and daughter and their partners; and the son of Mark's wife. Outside, on the rear, oceanview deck, there's a mere breeze by local standards, and the oldsters are enjoying their Okanagan reds and whites. "This is almost exactly the same group that was up here back then," says Brian, looking around and sounding a bit startled.

Life at the lodge has been a lot less eventful since the downed Seabee incident, although on a wall inside there's a plaque heralding the Golden Prop Award, a prize given annually to the original partner who has damaged the boats most thoroughly. Some years the Golden Prop has been "Thankfully not awarded," but Mark knows his name is much in evidence. "I think we're winning it again this year," he says, accompanied by a laugh that sounds like a sigh, or perhaps vice versa.

Then again, it hasn't always been Mark himself who has won the dubious distinction, but rather one of his children, and that's something no one is sighing over. Mark and Brian may be old salts, but their children certainly aren't, yet many are completely comfortable piloting the 26-footers on some of the stormiest seas in creation, where—it would seem, at least—waves are taller and shorelines more treacherous than 99 per cent of boaters will ever see. "I was scared at first," says Bronwyn. "We were raised on boats, but this place is nothing like Howe Sound."

There are few cabins on the planet as hard to get to and as pricey to maintain as the place on Sonny's Island. Mark thinks his experience on the island has influenced his architecture: by being able to observe the way the property has been used and sometimes abused, whether by wind, sea, or people. More important, though, has been the privilege of having such a place in the family. "Watching my kids experience this kind of environment," he says. "That's been transformational."

Vancouver-based Jim Sutherland wrote "Point of Entry," about Point Roberts, Wash., in our Spring '18 issue.