

By Rosemary Neering

Cottager Ken Poskitt fell under the spell of this forested isle not far from Victoria, where a national park attracts eagles, herons, and whales

SEDUCED BY SIDNEY



“THERE.”

National parkland on north Sidney Island encompasses a ferry dock (previous pages), a public anchorage, and a long spit of sand (left). A factory here made this namesake brick (right) a century ago. Ken Poskitt’s elegantly curved cottage (below) faces the sea.

Ken Poskitt points to a brilliant blue bay in front of his beach house. Yesterday, he says, he was noodling around this private cove in his kayak when a pod of orcas appeared offshore, shadowed by two whale-watching boats. The killer whales soon slid beneath the sea, and the boats sped off to some other rendezvous. But when the sleek black creatures resurfaced a few minutes later, swimming much closer in, Poskitt was able to spend a magical half hour alone on the ocean with them.

The story is one of many he can tell about the singular nature of life at the cottage on tiny Sidney Island, which lies off the eastern shore of Vancouver Island’s Saanich Peninsula, just north of Victoria, BC. He bought his south end property overlooking Haro Strait about eight years ago. Since then, the island has become his retreat and his passion. At the distinctive, semi-circular cottage he designed, Poskitt reconnects with the beach experiences he enjoyed as a child on Vancouver Island. He catches rock cod and crab, gathers oysters and mussels, and walks the meadows and forests whose natural ecology he and others are helping to restore.



PREVIOUS PAGES: JOSH MCCULLOCH; BEACH PHOTO: CHRIS CHEADLE/ALL CANADA PHOTOS; BRICK PHOTO: ROSEMARY NEERING; ALL ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOS: DOM KORIC;

A PARKLAND PARADISE FOR ISLAND COTTAGERS

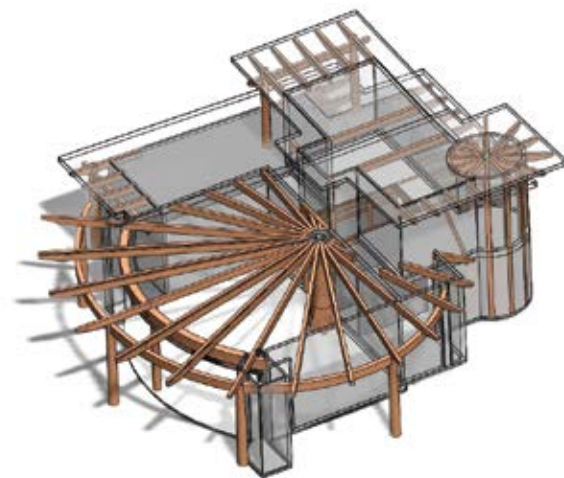
In summer, beachgoers crowd aboard the seasonal passenger ferry that shuttles between the southern Vancouver Island town of Sidney and nearby Sidney Spit, a mile-long loop of sandy beach at Sidney Island's north end. Cottagers on the island's private south end enjoy easy access to this 425-acre backyard paradise. It's one small piece of the 8,895-acre Gulf Islands National Park Reserve, which includes land on 15 different Gulf Islands and islets, as well as some surrounding waters and reefs.

Long a favourite day trip for Victoria residents and visitors, the eminently strollable sand spit and a parallel hook spit enclose a lagoon, tidal flats, and salt marshes that provide habitat for many birds. Brant geese flock here in March and April. Throughout the summer, purple martins perform their aerobatics around nesting boxes found near the ferry dock.

Trails lead around the lagoon, along the shore, and into the forest, which is largely second-growth Douglas fir together with arbutus, Garry oak, and other native and imported species. Bald eagles nest overhead. Native black-tailed deer and introduced fallow deer reside in the forest and browse in the open, grassy meadows.

Many boaters make the 2.5-mile crossing from the town of Sidney to the park, which offers sheltered anchorages, a government dock, and 27 walk-in campsites. Others arrive aboard the *Alpine II*, a 50-foot, 46-passenger, catamaran that runs weekends and holidays from mid-May to the end of June and daily through July and August.

For ferry details, visit the Alpine Group website at alpinegroup.ca and, under Our Companies, choose Alpine Sidney Spit Ferry. For more information on the Gulf Islands National Parks Reserve, visit the Parks Canada website at pc.gc.ca.



The Gulf Islands National Park Reserve area at the island's north end (above) encompasses the fine beaches of Sidney Spit. The cottage's design (left) repeats radiating roof beams of Douglas fir in the stairwell and main living area.

AERIAL PHOTO: JOSH MCCULLOCH; OVEN PHOTO: KEN POSKITT

This isn't where he was headed. Searching for waterfront as he approached retirement, the Vancouver pediatric neuroradiologist favoured Quadra or Cortes, two more northerly Gulf Islands. When he saw property advertised on Sidney Island, he visited just to cross it off his list—and was captivated.

"This has such a variety of geography and flora and fauna, it's almost like a microcosm of all the Gulf Islands," Poskitt explains. "And you have the wild ocean as well." He relishes watching winter storms roar up Haro Strait and the freighters transiting to and from the open Pacific.

The location is practical too. Cortes Island is eight or more hours from his city home. Sidney is 90 minutes via BC Ferries plus a half hour to the cottage in his 140 hp, 22-foot runabout.

Sidney Island is both microcosm and anomaly. On its north end, roughly 20 per cent of the 2,200-acre island is protected within a 425-acre piece of the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. The private 80 per cent of the island, which has no public access, is owned by the Sallas Forest Strata Corporation. About 300 acres are divided into 111 oceanfront strata lots, with 80 owners and 40 dwellings to date. All but five are cottagers.

The island's bare-land strata works much as a condominium corporation does. Each owner has an individual lot and is responsible for building and maintaining a home or cottage. Common assets include 1,460 acres of interior forest, a 300-foot dock, a small air strip, and emergency and construction equipment. Owners pay monthly strata fees and have voting rights regarding new bylaws and large shared expenditures.



A stonemason works on Ken Poskitt's new brick-and-stone outdoor oven (above). The 32-foot glass NanaWall (below) fully opens up the living and dining areas to fresh sea air off Haro Strait.



A REPEATING MOTIF OF RADIATING BEAMS





Exacting craftsmanship is evident in details of the joinery in the cottage's main living area (left bottom) and stairwell to the mezzanine level (left top, left centre, and opposite page, bottom left). Kettle River Timberworks sourced and cut the Douglas fir and cedar timbers. Small European fallow deer (below) introduced to Sidney Island wreaked havoc on the ecology with no predators to keep their population in check.

The site Poskitt chose for his beach house is a 3.5-acre lot with nearly 150 feet of waterfront, easy access to a long, cobble beach, and sweeping views of Vancouver Island's Mount Douglas and Mount Baker in neighbouring Washington State. When Poskitt was growing up on central Vancouver Island's east coast, his family "would live in a shack just to be on the beach." However, this cottage would be more than a shack.

"I wanted a place where inside and outside were the same thing, and you really didn't know where one ended and the other began." His wife, Val, a city person all her life, would have to be comfortable here, and his extended family, including two adult sons and a daughter, should enjoy visiting.

The cottage he designed has two bedrooms and two bathrooms on the 1,800-square-foot main floor, with a 300-foot mezzanine for extra sleeping room. From the rear entrance, the space opens into a wide semi-circle where kitchen, dining, and living areas look seaward. A dramatic, 32-foot, curved glass NanaWall slides open to a sheltered patio area and the grounds beyond, inviting the outdoors in and the indoors out.

The room's centrepiece is a 13-foot-high, multi-faceted, peeled cedar log. At its top, exposed Douglas fir rafters radiate out like the spokes on a wheel. Outside, the cedar columns will weather to a natural silver-grey, highlighting a shift from the cottage's more refined interior space to the rougher outdoors.

Poskitt worked with Jamie A. Martin Designs of Squamish, BC, to create his plans. He chose Victoria builder Rob Parsons for his previous construction experience on Sidney Island, and

he brought in Dave Petrina of Kettle River Timberworks in Burnaby, BC, to produce the cottage's signature timbers.

It was some of the most challenging work he's done, Petrina says—sourcing giant cedar logs specially harvested to retain the flare of their roots, preparing and cutting the Douglas fir rafters, and transporting everything by truck, ferry, and barge to the island site. "The challenge with these island jobs is that as soon as you make a mistake, the cost skyrockets."

There were anxious moments, Petrina says, "getting those 35-foot beams that radiate to fit so that they all come together perfectly." Add to that the engineering challenge of creating the curved beam that tops the NanaWall, with tolerances of a fraction of an inch, and you can understand Petrina's relief and feeling of accomplishment when he saw the finished product.

Poskitt strives for self-sufficiency at his cottage, with solar power backed up by a propane generator, water from a well, vegetables from a fenced garden, and fish and shellfish from the ocean. This summer, he built an outdoor oven so he can bake bread and rely less on his propane stove for cooking.

He incorporated a touch of history into the oven by using bricks he'd collected around the south island. Between 1909 and 1915, the Sidney Island Brick and Tile Company used the island's fine clay in their factory. What remains of the main kiln site on the island's north end lies within the national park.

The brickworks is just part of Sidney Island's storied past. Centuries ago, First Nations tended a meadow near today's government dock to cultivate the {Continued on page 106}



Reintroduced native plants like ocean spray (above) must be protected from the local deer. A staircase (below left) rises to the cottage's mezzanine level. Kayakers (below) paddle the shore of Sidney Spit.



DEER PHOTO: BRUCE OBEE/ALL CANADA PHOTOS; KAYAK PHOTO: CHRIS CHEADLE/ALL CANADA PHOTOS; TREE PHOTO: ROSEMARY NEERING



SEDUCED BY SIDNEY

{Continued from page 71}

edible bulbs of wild blue camas. Fruit trees that grow on the edges of the clearing are remnant orchards from the island's farming history.

Colonized by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1850s, Sidney Island had a number of owners. One group of Victoria businessmen created a gentlemen's hunting preserve stocked with partridges, pheasants, and other game birds.

A limited partnership acquired the island in 1980. This has evolved into the present-day strata corporation.

As we trek along the beach and over golden, grass-covered bluffs to visit a neighbour, Poskitt stops to toe a deposit of fallow deer scat. These small deer—which were imported by the gentlemen hunters or else swam here from a similar preserve on nearby James Island—have no predators on Sidney Island. Their numbers were kept in check for many years by a lack of fresh water, but in

the 1970s, owners dug a number of ponds to supply their own needs, and the deer said thank you. By 2002, an estimated 2,500 had overwhelmed the island, cropping meadows to bare earth, stripping bushes of foliage, and eradicating Garry oak and arbutus seedlings.

A cluster of ocean spray bushes, an indicator species for native plant regeneration, shows the impact of this introduced species. Outside a deer-proof fenced area, the bushes are bare to shoulder height; inside, they are green from ground to tip.

Culling began as a joint effort among the owners, park managers, and other interested parties. When Poskitt arrived on the island, he got deeply involved in the issue. The techniques for estimating the local deer population involved theoretical, mathematical models and some very practical research.

"I got to shovel a lot of deer shit along the way," he notes wryly.

Today, the deer number about 550, reduced through a carefully managed hunting and capture program. All parts of the animals are used, down to hooves given to local First Nations for ceremonial purposes and hides donated to schools where students can learn the techniques of tanning. Later, Poskitt leads me through an area of the common forest that has been thinned to encourage native Garry oak, arbutus, and Douglas fir to thrive. It's another example of his dedication to restoring the island's ecology.

Both the deer culls and forest thinning created some controversy. It took much discussion and persuasion, Poskitt says, to secure approval from the necessary majority of strata owners. "We have been lucky," he says of the islanders' support for the natural habitat. "Most people buy here because they love it here," not for later resale and profit.

It's clear that Poskitt, too, has a deep attachment to the landscapes and seascapes of Sidney Island. "You go away for a couple of weeks and start to think, 'It can't be that nice.' Then you come back, and it is—every single time." 🐾

*Victoria writer Rosemary Neering has published more than 30 non-fiction books. Her latest is *The Spanish on the Northwest Coast: For Glory, God, and Gain* (2014).*