

Romantic island getaways

The Gulf Islands offer a wealth of opportunities for Valentine's Day

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In 1985, promising good things for one another, we vowed to mark each wedding anniversary with a memorable escape to one of B.C.'s Gulf Islands, a different one each year. But other, more exotic travel destinations caught our attention and we have yet to complete the "Gulf Islands Cycle."

Deciding to pick it up again, we ask friends to tell us about their special places. Their stories prompted us to concoct an interesting list from which to choose, deliberately seeking those out-of-the-way and little-known spots perfect for a romantic getaway.

■ One couple has spent their wedding anniversary every year since 1981 at Vancouver Island's Point-no-Point Resort near Sooke.

They tell us that the ocean can often be heard, even with doors and windows closed. Log fire. Hot tub. Walks in the woods and to the beach. The resort boasts a fine restaurant, but each cottage has its own kitchen if you want to simply stay inside and snuggle.

Here, the feeling of escaping the busy-ness of everyday life is complete — no telephone, no television or wi-fi. In fact, the resort does not even have an e-mail address or offer a toll-free number in order to preserve that "back to nature" feeling.

Point-No-Point Resort: 250-646-2020 www.pointnointresort.com

■ Up a winding wooded lane, behind a deer-detering gate over-

looking a small cove on Navy Channel, Mayne Island's Oceanwood Country Inn has matured from humble cottage beginnings into a charmingly sophisticated home.

Innkeeper Jonathan Chilvers greets us while jazz wafts through the rooms. Established in 1990, this is the first year the inn is open as a B&B through the winter. Looking around, we decide it's a perfect romantic getaway.

Oceanwood Country Inn: 250-539-5074 www.oceanwood.com

■ Tucked away on a quiet cul-de-sac in one of Victoria's most exclusive areas, the Italianate Villa Marco Polo Inn is rated "simply sublime" by the *Best Places to Kiss*, Pacific Northwest edition.

Proprietor Eliza Livingstone comments, "Here we offer an experience that's out of time and place. Most visitors to our city expect a Victorian theme, but we transport guests to another world with heirloom furniture, rugs, mirrors and art work from exotic destinations."

Built in 1923 as a parents' gift to a bride, this boutique inn's four spacious suites, each themed after a stop on Marco Polo's travels to faraway Cathay, are steeped in romance. The walls and ceiling in the Silk Road suite, the home's former library, are painted with misty clouds, inspiring dreamers to float off to sleep. A former sunroom looking out to the garden and the Olympic Mountains holds a jetted double soaker tub.

Eliza adds, "We offer full services but we are discreet. Some couples like a private breakfast while others choose conversation over the breakfast table because we attract guests from all over the world — including countries visited by Marco Polo."

Villa Marco Polo Inn: Toll free 1-877-601-1524 www.villamarco polo.com

■ Saltspring Island offers many bed-and-breakfasts but we're advised to seek a little-known hideaway gem — Seido-en. Friends tell us, "This Japanese-style forest house is very relaxing and there's a lovely outdoor hot tub. Ruckle Park is nearby and Fulford Harbour not far away. The only inconvenience is clambering up a ladder to the bedroom. But you can sleep downstairs instead."

Seido-en: 250-653-2311 www.seido-en.com

Also on Saltspring, the Salt Spring Inn has a reputation for old-style comfort and dining. It has just seven guest rooms, all with queen beds. The three deluxe rooms sport fireplaces, sea views and private bathrooms.

Salt Spring Inn: Toll free 1-877-537-9339 www.saltspringinn.com

■ Saturna is the most southerly and easterly of the Gulf Islands. A friend comments "This has to be a perfect romantic getaway, since it's the farthest from the cities, hardest to get to and has the lowest population."

Saturna is also the least developed and most pristine of the southern Gulf Islands. About half the island's 33 sq. km, is Gulf Islands National Park Reserve.

To balance all that nature are two general stores, a liquor store, artists' galleries and studios, a local pub and quality restaurants. And on the south-facing side of the island lies Saturna Island Family Estate Winery with vineyards, bistro and cellar.

Saturna Island: www.saturna tourism.com



■ Coach House on the Cove is a rose-covered cottage nestled in a charming inlet on South Pender's rocky shores. Jane and Dennis Perch host guests by the week in high season and welcome couples seeking two-night getaways during winter and spring.

More than 25 per cent of the Pender Islands is parkland, and country roads and walking trails beckon explorers. Seals, otters, mink, kingfishers, osprey and eagles entertain guests in the cove, while from rocky bluffs one can watch for porpoises and whales.

> See GETAWAYS, Page C2



VANCOUVER SUN, HANDOUT

Wildlife can often be seen from the balconies at Coach House on the Cove.



VANCOUVER SUN, HANDOUT

Coach House on the Cove is nestled in a charming inlet on South Pender Island's rocky shores, from which guests can view seals, otters and mink.

> From Page C1

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The house boasts a full kitchen and country garden full of flowers, herbs and seasonal vegetables.

Coach House on the Cove: 250-629-2009 www.coachhouse.info

Back to our Mayne Island getaway... We lunch at the Springwater Lodge, founded as a pub in 1892 and still offering pub-style accommodation and food. Boaters moor at the adjoining dock and drop in for a pint and hearty clam chowder.

Mayne is surprisingly large, offering a serpentine coastline for exploring and 255-metre Mount Parke Park peak for hiking. We visit the old lighthouse at Georgina Point, waving at the passing B.C.



Times-Colonist (Victoria, BC)				Order/Commande
				131622
Date 09.02.2008	Circ. 73119	Page C1	4 / 4	

Ferries as they manoeuvre through Active Pass, horns tooting.

After poking down dead-end roads to secret coves, we return to a cheery fire in the Oceanwood's cosy library and enjoy tea and conversation with our host. After a nap, we set out for the highly-recommended Wild Fennel restaurant in Fernhill Road Plaza.

This is a little restaurant with a big heart.

Host Peter Weis's cheerful disposition and amusing "off the wall" three-dimensional portraits of people, pigs and the like keep us in

good spirits.

The bottle of Saturna Family's 2006 Pinot Noir (the Fennel's cellar holds only B.C. vintages) that accompanies strip loin steak, plump crab cakes and tangy caesar salad doesn't hurt either.

The fire has been stoked when we get "home" so we settle into the library, drowsing over the extensive collection of books and magazines. Next morning, after a hot breakfast overlooking the water, we head for the ferry, picking up a fresh croissant-wich from the Mayne Bakery Cafe for the ride.

Springwater Lodge: 250-539-5521 www.springwaterlodge.com
Wild Fennel Restaurant: 250-539-5987.