

Who says you have to go far from home to find sunny paradise?

gulf islands: Genial people, natural beauty and memories to last a lifetime

By Joseph Kula, Special to The Province July 5, 2009

It's summertime and the living's easy -- especially in B.C.'s southern Gulf Islands.

On a recent press tour, a group of travel writers got to savour the beauty and the bounty of four of these islands in the sun: Salt Spring, Pender, Saturna and Galiano.

Getting around the Strait of Georgia is easy: You can do it the slower and relaxing way by ferry, while you're on the lookout for orcas, or you can pretend you're a bush pilot and hop a floatplane, as we did from the south terminal at Vancouver International Airport to Salt Spring.

The largest of the Gulf Islands, Salt Spring is home to Michael Ableman, a transplanted Californian who, with his partner Jean-Marie Herman, runs Foxglove Farm, a 50-hectare organic farm and retreat nestled in a picturesque valley.

Some of the same delectable produce the affable Ableman so caringly grows -- berries, a veritable cornucopia of vegetables and fruit -- magically appeared on a picnic table to tempt our palates.

The scene fades away and the Farmers Market in the village of Ganges comes into focus. And guess who's front and centre. Yup, it's Ableman, lovingly displaying his produce, which is snapped up by locals and tourists alike.

The bustling Saturday market, which runs from mid-March through October, offers an array of culinary and cultural delights, from colourful yoga outfits to "dye" for to goat cheese and exotic mushrooms. The rules are simple: "Vendors must make it, bake it or grow it."

What makes this market so special is its cast of colourful characters, from the Jesus-like figure in a long, flowing robe and hair to match, to a veteran RAF pilot selling copies of his wartime exploits.

Ganges (named after a historic British naval vessel that was built in Bombay and sailed these waters) is a busy little harbour and our jumping-off spot for crab fishing.

Taking us out in his seven-metre crabbing boat, Welbury Bay, was Gary Le Marchant, who looked like he stepped off the set of the long-running CBC TV series *The Beachcombers*.

Le Marchant made it easy for us. He set the traps ahead of time. All we had to do was snag them and haul them up to the boat.

Then he showed us how to safely pick them up so we wouldn't go through life being called Four-Fingered Fred or Fran, how to tell male from female, and showed us a handy tool to measure them.

The little ones were returned to the bottom to perfect "the crawl," the dance craze of the deep, popular with *Finding Nemo* fans.

The next afternoon at Hastings House, our fab home away from home for two nights, executive chef Marcel Kauer, who hails from Switzerland, showed us how to make crab cakes, using our catch of the previous day.

Right there in his kitchen we savoured his culinary seafood creations, paired wonderfully with a locally produced rosé that left a similar pink hue on our cheeks.

There were no crabby people in that group, I tell you.

Hastings House is a bit of jolly olde England transplanted to the colonies, but with a distinctive West Coast feel.

The beautifully maintained Sussex-style English manor with its fairy-tale-like cottages sits on nine hectares of meticulously manicured lawns and gardens sloping toward Ganges harbour and the sea.

Hastings House -- voted the top Canadian resort for 2006 and 2004 by a Zagat survey -- is a proud supporter of the arts on Salt Spring and features a Sculpture Trail on a portion of its grounds.

There is nothing more satisfying and serene than, with a morning cup of tea or coffee in hand, sitting on a bench beside a larger-than-life work of art, and drinking in the incomparable views of Ganges and the harbour.

Then it was time to board a ferry at Fulford Harbour to Swartz Bay on Vancouver Island and then another ferry to Pender Island and some serious R&R at Poets Cove, a coastal combo of wilderness (where deer come to munch on the landscaping) and luxury (where amenities range from swimming pool to spa and bistro to fine dining).

The catch of the day at the Aurora Restaurant was Eduardo, our Brazilian-born waiter, who had us howling over his tale of using a hand line to haul in a "hali-boot."

"I brought it into the boat and decided to shoot it. But the bullet hit the bottom of the boat and I had to call Mr. Bob (his boss) to rescue me."

A tall tale, to be sure.

At the Poets Cove marina we boarded an Emerald Sea Adventures Zodiac and, looking like so many red penguins in our survival suits, we set out to explore the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve, some 35 square kilometres of land and intertidal area on 15 islands.

Apparently, the orcas decided to cavort elsewhere that day.

However, we did see several pregnant seals on the tiny Java islets just off Saturna Island, as well as feral goats, oyster-catchers, pigeon guillemots, eagles and, a rarity, peregrine falcons.

"This is the second time I've seen them this year!" said an excited Jeff Wonnenberg, our über guide and owner/operator of Emerald Sea.

Wonnenberg had an even nicer surprise. After tying up at a dock on Saturna, he led us up a country road, over a hill and . . . straight to a winery.

What a treat. After a taste-test at the Saturna Island Family Estate Winery, we broke bread in the great outdoors, sipping wine and enjoying sweeping views of the vineyards and the waters of Plumper Sound, named after (what else) another ship in the Royal Navy that surveyed B.C.'s coastal waters in the mid-1800s.

Taking the Queen of Nanaimo in these same waters on our way to Galiano Island, we came to an abrupt stop to allow another ferry to cross our bow.

"Rush hour in Active Pass?" I asked deckhand Bob Laycock.

"That's how it got its name," he said, smiling.

Galiano is well known in the Canadian paddling world. The reason: Trincomali Channel with its calm, protected waters and minimal tides.

Being a better canoer than a kayaker, I dipped my paddle, and with the guidance of Ben Miltner, owner of Gulf Island Kayaking, I hugged the shoreline, enjoying the tranquillity you only get on these eco-friendly craft, and opened my eyes wide in wonderment at the sandstone galleries so

beautifully sculpted by nature.

The pièce de résistance of my Gulf Islands getaway was the early Father's Day present I got at the Madrona Del Mar Spa at the Galiano Inn, a wellness resort with that certain West-Coast wow factor.

One of the spa's specialties is the blueberry bliss experience that begins with a steam bath, followed by a scrub and brings you to a state of nirvana with a blueberry smoothie wrap. But I opted for the massage, instead.

The tight spots in my neck and shoulders that I developed during my canoe trip evaporated like magic under the nimble, citrus-oiled fingers of my talented massage therapist.

My hour-long session seemed like only minutes. The memories of my all-too-brief Gulf Islands sojourn will last a lifetime.

If You Go

- Seair Seaplanes (South Terminal at YVR), www.seairplanes.com.
- Foxglove Farm Retreat, www.foxglovefarmretreat.com.
- Hastings House Country House Hotel, www.hastingshouse.com.
- Salt Spring Island Farmers' Market, www.saltspringmarket.com.
- B.C. Ferries, www.bcferries.com.
- Poets Cove Resort and Spa, www.poetscove.com.
- Emerald Sea Adventures, www.emeraldsea.ca.
- Saturna Island Family Estate Winery, www.saturnavineyards.com.
- Galiano Inn & Spa, www.galianoinn.com.
- Gulf Island Kayaking (also offering a kayaking experience in Costa Rica from December to April), www.seakayak.ca.
- Tourism Vancouver Island, www.vancouverisland.com/travel.
- Tourism B.C., www.hellobc.com.