

WESTCOAST HOMES

Search for the perfect wilderness getaway



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REAL ESTATE MATTERS

There is a certain natural order to the way humans settle on the land. When that order is disturbed it begins to disturb me.

Take, for example, the way humans are urbanizing the wilderness.

The experience of periodically escaping to the wilderness was traditionally an escape from urbanism.

We went to the get-away cottage or wilderness camp to “get away from it all” and to experience that which we can only experience in the wilderness.

No phones. No power. The FSOH — free standing outhouse. Those were our conveniences.

This month, I started a search for the perfect wilderness getaway.

I was looking for a place close enough to Vancouver that the escape could be experienced with a certain amount of efficiency, at least enough to ensure that I would actually take the time to escape occasionally.

The ideal location would be near the moderating influences of the ocean, with the added bonus of perhaps a private beach. If a ferry commute is required, it needed to be a short one.

The perfect abode would be rustic yet durable and modern enough that my weekends would not be spent contending with major repairs or renovations.

A bonus would be a home that is self-sufficient — with enough thought given to its design to make it ecologically responsible — perhaps “off-the-grid”.

I might be willing to sacrifice

electricity, settling for solar power and perhaps supplementary propane, but potable water was still a priority.

It didn't have to necessarily come from a municipal service or even a well. I was open to creative “sustainable” solutions.

Where does one look for a wilderness escape when every lot advertised for sale is located in one form or another of a “recreational property estate” or “ocean-side subdivision”?

Those are code words for the same kind of subdivisions you find in suburban areas, the only difference being that most of the residents are not permanent residents, but rather part-time urban refugees.

Escaping to a cottage for me doesn't mean pulling up next to the neighbours whose car shares your driveway.

Combing the real estate listings for the entire cast, I came up with one promising prospect.

A five-acre waterfront parcel on a bay near Powell River.

I walked into a local real estate office to inquire about the property.

The first agent I met looked at me with a shocked look on his face when I expressed an interest in this particular wilderness retreat.

It was as though he thought I would be retreating to the dark ages.

Solar power. No road access. A two bedroom cottage of only 900 square feet.

He went to a map on the wall, trying to point to exactly where the property is located. His map didn't extend that far north along the coast.

He then issued a dire warning — “You need pretty good navigation skills if you plan on getting there by boat.”

I reminded him the property was offered for sale along with a boat—the ideal package.

Then I met with a second realtor who had once visited the particular area. She confirmed it was on a beautiful south-facing bay.

She pointed to the relatively inexpensive annual property tax

bill, adding with caution in her voice “You're not getting much, though.”

“Likely have to collect your own water from the roof.”

Potable water was one of my initial prerequisites for a recreational property—no matter how remote and how rustic. Now I was softening on that demand.

After all, escaping urbanism should mean reverting to the wilderness. Somehow, though, as modern-day humans we have re-ordered the way we settle. We are no longer willing to settle for the true wilderness experience when we are pretending to escape urbanism.

Retreating to the land, escaping to the wilderness cottage, making the annual trek to the camp is one of the traditional rites of urban living.

The sacrifices we make when we set up a temporary home in such a rustic setting help us appreciate the order that exists in human settlements.

There is urbanism at one end of the spectrum, where the human condition is the first concern. Then there is wilderness at the other end of the spectrum, where nature should be our first concern.

Noted urban planner Andres Duany pondered our confusion with this natural order when he visited Vancouver a couple of years ago.

He characterized our urban obsession with preserving or attempting to recreate the natural environment in an obvious urban setting as our struggle to find the “New Jerusalem and the Garden of Eden” in the same place.

We are making the same mistake at the other end of the spectrum with this recent obsession with escaping to a wilderness location, taking with us all of the familiar comforts of urbanism.

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