

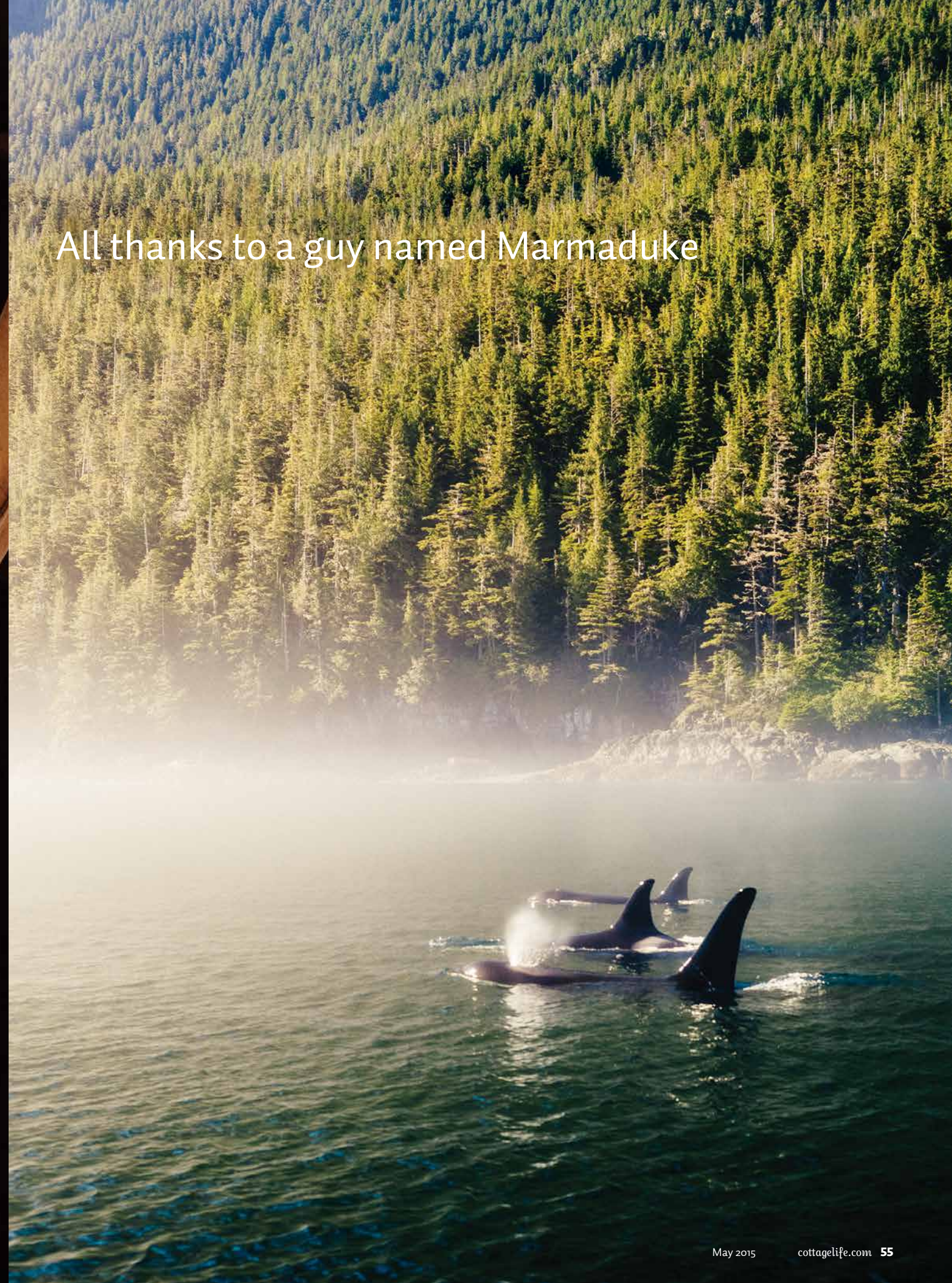
# A WHALE

Telegraph Cove is paradise for nature-loving cottagers.

All thanks to a guy named Marmaduke

By Jake MacDonald Photography Kamil Bialous

# OF A STORY



# WE HAD ONLY

been fishing for a few minutes when the rod on Conrad Porth's side of the boat jumped: a salmon had struck the lure. Conrad is well past retirement age, but he's as quick as a teenager. Snatching the rod from its holder, he cranked up the slack, set the hook, and handed me the rod. "You have to reel it in," he said with a laugh. "We make our guests work around here!"

Conrad's wife, Mary, was at the steering wheel of the boat, and she seemed equally amused that we'd already hooked a fish. I thanked Conrad, settled the rod into my gut, and felt the fish pumping at the end of the line. The movements were quick and erratic, indicating that it was probably a coho, one of the millions of salmon that were migrating at that very moment into the strait, heading for their spawning rivers.

It's a precious experience, being connected to one of the most beautiful fish in the ocean, and I kept a persuasive pressure on the rod, coaxing the fish towards the boat. We were in a sheltered pass of Johnstone Strait, a few kilometres east of the Porths' cottage in Telegraph Cove, on Vancouver Island, and our plan was to catch ourselves some lunch. It was still early in the morning, and rags of fog were snagged to the ancient cedars along the shore. In every direction were placid waters and evergreen-clad islands.

When the salmon broke the surface, it revealed itself to be a silvery 10-pound coho. Conrad scooped avidly with his landing net as the fish came alongside the boat. His reflexes were sharp, but the salmon's were quicker. The fish flipped off the hook and darted away just as the net plunged into the water.

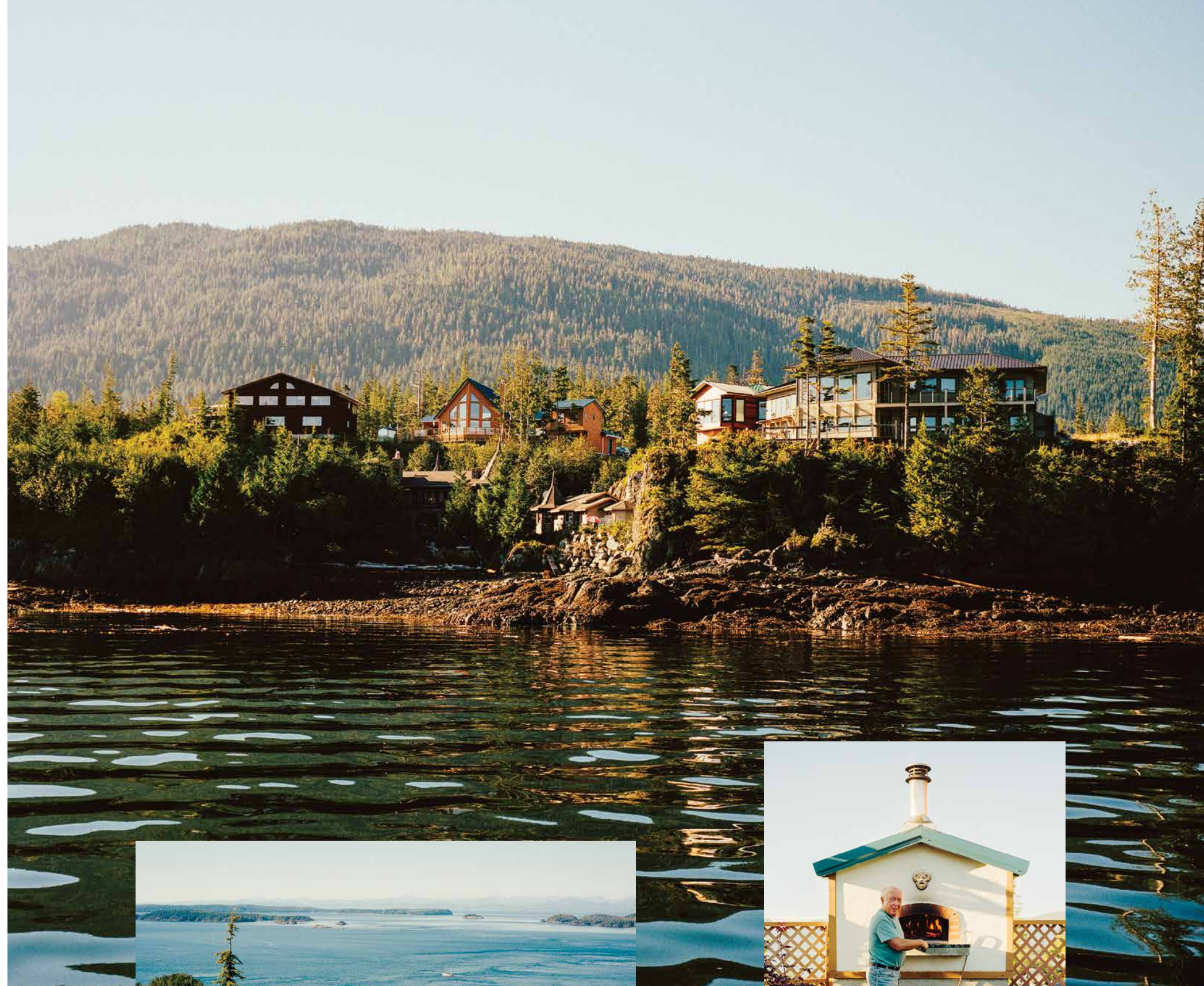
Conrad and Mary are chipper retirees who are amused by just about everything, and they cheered in good-natured defeat as the fish escaped. "That's okay," Conrad announced. "We'll catch another one."

Eventually we did and headed back to their cottage. The fog was dissipating, the sun glaring on a sea as flat as aluminum. Eagles wheeled overhead, and as we cruised down the strait, the ridged backs of humpback whales periodically surfaced. The whales exhaled with snorting blasts and submerged again, one parent-offspring aquatic team executing a perfect synchronous tail-up dive as we passed.

We putted into the cove, past a waterfront of brightly painted cabins. The docks were busy with people rigging sailboats, launching kayaks, and cleaning salmon at dockside filleting stations. Seagulls mobbed the fishing boats (*Mine! Mine!*), and a grey-bearded sailor applied a morning rubdown to his antique wooden tugboat. Mixed with the scents of kelp and salt air came the welcoming aromas of bacon and coffee.

It was getting warm, and we took off our jackets as Conrad tied up the boat. It was the start of another idyllic summer morning in Telegraph Cove. >>

At Telegraph Cove, the Porth cottage (in the middle) overlooks Johnstone Strait (bottom), the route that orcas take to their feeding grounds. Conrad Porth (far right) is a devoted pizzamaker. Visitors at the nearby Whale Interpretive Centre (on p. 54) can see the jawbones and skull of the 18-metre fin whale skeleton on exhibit there.





The chinook salmon hanging in the Telegraph Cove resort office (opposite) weighed in at 68 lbs., just short of the town record. Conrad and Mary Porth's catch (on p.60) was only about a quarter of that. Anglers who stay in the campgrounds are warned that they aren't allowed to clean fish there (one of several rules designed to keep away the bears).

The village of Telegraph Cove came to be thanks to one Alfred Marmaduke Wastell. Born in Haliburton, Ont., young “Duke” moved to Vancouver in 1897 and fell in love with B.C.

The equivalent of email, in those years, was sending Morse code messages by telegraph. Samuel Morse had actually already put pony express delivery out of business in 1844 when he sent his famous message (“What hath God wrought?”). But it took many years for telegraph companies to run lines into backwoods communities. When Duke Wastell moved up to Alert Bay, B.C., with his family in 1909, important messages were still being conveyed to villages along the north coast by boat. In 1912, crews began stringing a telegraph line up the island—often just stapling the wire to trees along the shore—and when they arrived at the north end, Wastell persuaded them to install the telegraph station at a snug, deserted natural harbour he dubbed “Telegraph Cove.”

Wastell then purchased the local timber rights, built a sawmill and a fish saltery, and commenced building a village for his employees. In those days, most freight was shipped across the country in wooden crates, and during the ensuing decades, Telegraph Cove did well building wooden boxes for companies all over British Columbia. But the advent of cardboard boxes and consolidation in the lumber industry eventually put a serious damper on the community's economy, and the tiny village went into a slow decline until 1978, when an angel investor arrived. Gordie Graham was a logger, and he was very good at it, but it was one of the most dangerous jobs in Canada, and his wife, Marilyn, argued that after years of pushing his luck, it was time for him to try something else.

The Grahams bought the entire village of Telegraph Cove with the idea of turning it into a vacation spot and cottage community. With the buildings in serious decay, however, they had to spend their life savings and many years putting the village back together again—jacking and levelling cottages, fixing rotting roofs, modernizing the many kitchens and bathrooms, replacing ancient plumbing, restoring the boardwalk. The village consists of several dozen cottages, and the Grahams were committed to preserving each structure's unique character and history. They added a campground and a marina, and a rustic restaurant and pub in the old salmon saltery, with antique machinery in the corners and flowery balconies overlooking the water. They wanted to preserve and pay tribute to a decades-old way of life and, thanks to their efforts, the village became an attractive stop for summer tourists and campers. It's along the route for killer whales to Robson Bight, a famous gathering place for them, and with the quaint cottages for rent, Telegraph Cove began drawing visitors from around the world. >>

**THEY WERE  
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Conrad and Mary Porth sold their Calgary-based oil business in 1995 and retired, intending to travel the world in the winter-time and spend their summers in a nice hideaway somewhere in Canada. They had heard stories about Telegraph Cove, and in 1998 they decided to pay it a visit. When they arrived, they were impressed by its beauty, the quiet atmosphere, and the apparently excellent fishing. "A few boats were coming into the pier, and I couldn't believe the fish they had on board," says Conrad. "I grew up a doctor's son in little prairie communities like Fort Qu'Appelle in rural Saskatchewan, where I hunted ducks and fished every day with my native buddies. So those two pastimes have always been a big part of my life."

Mary likes to fish with her husband and drive the boat, but she leaves the waterfowl hunting to Conrad and their younger daughter, Margaux. Mary grew up in Hungary and escaped to Canada with her family in 1956 after the Soviet invasion. While working as a secretary in Calgary, she met Conrad; they've been married for 43 years.

After giving Telegraph Cove a thorough examination and showing it to their two girls, the Porths decided they'd never find a nicer place to build a cottage. At that time, however, there was no property for sale, so the family spent several summers living in a trailer. In 2006, a piece of land became available on a high promontory overlooking the cove. They grabbed it. "It's the highest site in the community," says Conrad. "There's a great view of the ocean, and it's good exercise walking up and down the hill."

Conrad drove out from Calgary in October 2006 and prepared the building site with a blasting crew. "There was a driller and a blaster and me. We drilled down six feet at a time, blew the rock, and poured it into a low spot across the road that needed levelling. We built the house in 2007 and moved in right away. After another few years, we built a comfortable little guest cottage, and now we have guests coming every week from late June until August." They shut down in the fall, sometimes returning for a few days during the winter. "We love to come for the solitude and the wild weather in January," Conrad says. "The wind howls down Johnstone Strait at 120 kilometres an hour until early January, and then it's a good time to harvest clams at low tide. We'll sometimes dig 150 clams and invite half a dozen people for a clam chowder dinner. There's almost no one around, and it's a real adventure."

Their place is part of a tenants-in-common subdivision consisting of 18 lots, and their summer neighbours come from scattered places like Red Deer, Whitehorse, Calgary, Germany, and Hawaii. "It's a very friendly little community," says Mary. "We're always knocking on each other's doors to borrow a lemon or whatever."

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This whale-tail flag reminds boaters that they have to share the waterways. Orcas and humpback whales pass by the cove on their way to feed or to rub their bodies in the shallow near-shore of Robson Bight, which is off limits to people. Conrad Porth (below) enjoys taking visitors out in the strait to try their chances with rod and reel.



## A WHALE OF A STORY

{Continued from page 62}

Their immediate neighbours are Mary and Jim Borrowman, who operate a bed and breakfast, a rental cottage, and a wildlife excursion business. The Borrowmans—“young seniors” in their early sixties—are energetic hosts and naturalists, and one of their related projects is the village’s Whale Interpretive Centre. Jim spent his youth as a professional diver, doing underwater maintenance on drilling rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, but his real love was the ecology of marine mammals, and in the 1970s he moved to Telegraph Cove, fixed up a classic tugboat, and launched the first whale-watching business in B.C. His future partner, Mary, moved to Telegraph Cove in 1998 to help develop the cottage subdivision where they and the Porths now live. She and Jim recognized each other as kindred spirits and settled down together.

Gordie Graham was sympathetic to the Borrowmans’ dream of opening a whale education centre, and he not only donated the cavernous sawmill building that now houses the centre, but also built a wing to accommodate the enormous whale skeletons on display. (Among the exhibits is an 18-metre fin whale that was killed by a cruise ship.) Jim also captains the vintage tugboat *Gikumi*—once owned by Fred Wastell, Duke’s son—on extended marine mammal tours for people who want to learn more. “It wasn’t very long ago that Canadians were actively hunting whales,” he says. “The whaling station just north of here at Coal Harbour processed thousands of sperm whales, humpbacks, and even blue whales, and it only closed in 1967. So we’ve come a long way in our attitude towards whales, and it’s gratifying to see people gain an appreciation of these wonderful animals.”

Some populations of baleen whales like humpbacks and greys are recovering nicely, and from the deck of Conrad and Mary’s cottage, pods of killer whales are a common sight. (One day we saw a pod of about 20 swim past.) There’s a kelp bed at the foot of the cliff beneath their cottage, and schools of salmon gather in the lee of the kelp to take respite from the powerful tidal currents pulsing through Johnstone Strait every six hours. Conrad

says the killer whales come regularly to attack the salmon. “It’s quite a show. They cruise very calmly when they’re travelling from one spot to another, but when they’re hunting salmon, their body language changes dramatically. They get excited, turning fast circles and bursting out of the water chasing the fish. We can sit on our deck watching them.”

There’s always something happening around their cottage, and while Mary prepares a lunch of cedar-planked coho salmon in the kitchen, inquisitive birds peer in the window, screeching for a handout. The indigo-blue Steller’s jays know that Mary is a soft touch, and inevitably she steps out onto the deck to offer them scraps of toast. “Having a place in nature has really been a wonderful thing for our daughters,” she says. “It’s changed their lives. Our daughter Margaux is a symphony oboist, but she’s very much an outdoorsy girl. She’s been fishing since she was a little girl and spends a week every autumn hunting geese with Conrad. Our older daughter, Robin, is a schoolteacher and a wildlife photographer.”

There’s something about catching, filleting, and cooking your own wild food that makes it taste better, and Mary has dozens of recipes for the various species of seafood they harvest from the ocean. Over lunch, Conrad offers a mini-lesson on the wine he’s selected to accompany the barbecued salmon. “We’re serious enthusiasts of wine,” he says. “We travel a lot during the winter, to study indigenous and prehistoric cultures, and we learn about the wine-making traditions of whatever country we’re visiting.”

They’ve also studied Italian cuisine and built an outdoor oven, modelled on the communal oven central to many Italian villages. “We drove down to southern California to attend pizza school, bought the oven kit, loaded all the bricks into the back of my truck, and headed back up to Canada,” Conrad says. “When we got to the port of entry, this Canadian customs officer asked where we were going. When we told her ‘Telegraph Cove,’ she started asking us about the whales. She was fascinated. ‘You mean you actually see whales every day?’ We talked for about 10 minutes, with 50 cars waiting behind us, and then she just waved us through. Everybody loves whales.”

That evening, as daylight fades, Conrad and Mary demonstrate their pizza expertise: he builds a fire in the oven and, in the kitchen, she rolls out dough she’s made from scratch. On her menu tonight are several types of pizza, with toppings that include shiitake mushrooms, toasted almonds, and cinnamon raisin apples. Mary assigns me the task of ferrying each pizza outside on its wooden paddle for Conrad to slide into the glowing furnace. The jays are flitting around the deck, excited by the spread. As Conrad explains his techniques for temperature control, delicious smells waft from the oven, so compelling that a neighbour’s Newfoundland dog comes to visit. I’m standing next to the oven, talking to Conrad, and as the big dog appears in the corner of my eye, I’m simultaneously musing about our caveman reflexes: isn’t it interesting that when we walk across a lawn and see a water hose, our paleolithic brain says, *Watch out, it’s a snake*. And when a large, black dog walks into our peripheral vision, we think, *Careful, here comes a bear*.

Only in this case, it actually *is* a bear.

I nudge Conrad’s elbow and nod towards the animal. “Conrad, we have company.”

Like an irate chef expelling a visitor from his kitchen, Conrad waves a spatula and shouts, “Hey you—beat it!”

The bear cringes apologetically and ambles off, in the direction of the Borrowmans’ yard. Maybe it had the wrong address.

“That same bear was around last week,” Conrad remarks. “You have to be firm with them.”

Sitting down at the table, enjoying the wonderful pizza, we watch for whales as dusk settles on Johnstone Strait. Tonight is an important meal for Conrad and Mary, and they’re toasting it with a special glass of red. Tomorrow morning they are pulling their boat out of the water and shutting down the cottage.

“We’ve planned some nice trips over the winter,” says Conrad. “But come spring, we’ll be right back here in Telegraph Cove.” 🐻

*Jake MacDonald wrote “Sweat Devotion” in the Fall ’14 issue of Cottage Life. He recently edited Casting Quiet Waters, a collection of essays about fishing.*