

A scenic landscape photograph of a lake with a cabin and forested mountains. The image shows a calm body of water in the foreground, with a small wooden cabin on a rocky shore in the middle ground. The background is dominated by steep, forested mountains under a clear sky. The text 'THE GOOD TIME DRIFTERS' is overlaid on the right side of the image in a large, white, serif font.

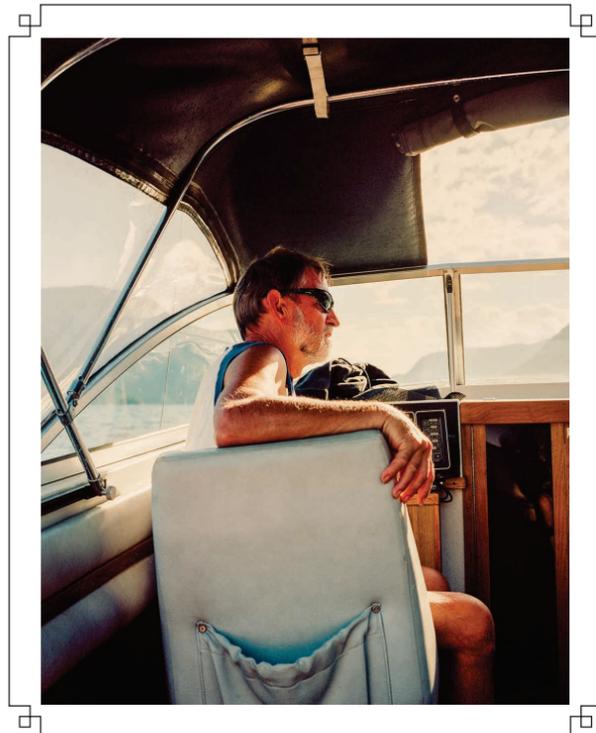
# THE GOOD TIME *DRIFTERS*

Nominations are now open for Canada's most fun-loving, wildly scenic, yet enviably undiscovered float-cabin community. Sorry, nominations just closed. We have our winner

By Jim Sutherland Photography Kamil Bialous



The Lutz cabin (above) floats in front of its dramatic backdrop. Powell Lakers love their boats: Richie Bird (right) sits shotgun in the Malibu, and Harry Zroback cruises with his six-year-old grandson Daniel (opposite). Harry says his homemade barge is a work vessel most of the time, but “once in a while, we use it for fishing or treasure hunts with the grandkids.”



# T

The view as you fly up the coast from Vancouver is of peak after peak and fjord after fjord. This stretch of the Coast Mountains, though tectonic in origin, was thoroughly remodelled during the last glaciation. Great sheets of ice scraped away at the mountainsides, followed by torrents of meltwater, which steepened the valleys even more.

Amid this angular convergence of rock, forest, and sea, there is one fjord-like tongue of water that deserves a closer look on the flyby: Powell Lake. In the summertime, there's just a smattering of humans on this huge body of water. It's about 50 km long and 15 km across, with a depth that rivals that of Lake Superior. In the middle, Goat Island—so named for the mountain goats—occupies an area as large as the city of Vancouver, its vertical terrain rising more than 1,300 metres above the lake's surface.

Powell would seem a strong competitor for Canada's top cottaging lake. The mountain scenery is stunning, and the water is drinkable straight out of the lake, surprisingly warm, and a happy place for trout. The climate is pleasant, with sunny summer highs in the mid-20s and habitable winter temperatures that almost never dip below freezing. As the crow flies, it's little more than 100 km from Vancouver, and yet, incredibly, Powell Lake remains blissfully uncrowded, so obscure that even many West Coasters have never heard of it.

Skeptical much? Then let's touch down at the cabin owned by Harry and Marsha Zroback. It's a warm August weekend, and they've been joined by their oldest son, Jason, and his 13-year-old daughter. Another son, Jamie, will





Richie and Linda Bird's raft, ready for visitors. At the Lutz cabin (opposite) Margy Lutz grows almost a dozen kinds of veggies in her floating garden.

# AT POWELL LAKE, YOU REALLY CAN HAVE IT ALL



Jamie Zroback works on his swing in the shadow of 1,484-metre Beartooth Mountain (above) and other dramatic Powell Lake scenery. The whole family, including the grandkids, plays regularly at Powell River's Myrtle Point Golf Club. Logging trucks (opposite) are common on the lake, says Harry, "but unless you go looking for them—at the main log dump or out in the forest—you won't see them."

drop in later with his wife and six-year-old son, as will several neighbours on the lake. "We know pretty much everybody," Harry explains. "Maybe that's not a good thing—but, actually, that is a good thing."

The Zrobacks' cabin, like some 300 others on Powell Lake, floats on the water. It's off-grid and barely in range of cell service—also typical—and the view is almost exclusively of lake, peaks, and forest. On shore, there are another 60 or so conventional cabins, most near the lake's southern tip. On a lake the size of Ontario's Simcoe and twice that of B.C.'s Okanagan, 360 cabins is hardly chockablock. So why would such an attractive place be so underpopulated?

Well, there are reasons. To begin, the lake is well north of the lower Sunshine Coast cottaging areas favoured by Vancouverites. It's adjacent to the town of Powell River, population 16,689, which is two ferry rides from pretty much everywhere. To drive from Vancouver takes about five hours. Moreover, the area owes much of its economic rationale to a paper mill that was once the world's largest but today chugs along with a fraction of its former workforce.

Adding further complication, virtually the entire shoreline of the lake is boat access only. All public roads end on the outskirts of town at The Shinglemill marina, on the southernmost tip. The shoreline is, in many places, too steep to build on. And even if it weren't, almost all land along the lake is owned by the Crown, save those 60 or so freehold lots.

Those obstacles didn't stop one name-forgotten Powell River resident, who had an inspired idea after the local mill constructed a hydro dam in 1912, which raised and stabilized the lake's water level: "I'll build a cabin on a float, tow it out to a really nice spot, and anchor it there." As time passed, the community of float cabins grew. Two decades ago, the nearly 300 water squatters received legal protection, and today Powell Lake is a veritable Lake Titicaca, Happy Hour and Call of the Loon Division.

Harry and Marsha's place, roughly 1,000 sq. ft., with two bedrooms and a roomy loft, is one of the larger cabins. Its capacity for hosting suits Harry, who's a gregarious *King of Kensington*-type figure on the lake. (Forgive the reference to a TV show last produced 36 years ago and set in Toronto, but Harry even looks a little like the late Al Waxman.)

Their cabin is anchored on Goat Island's western shore, about 20 km north of the marina. With so much water to traverse, boats are at the centre of everyone's lives, and the Zrobacks own at least a dozen, says Harry, who lists them off like cousins. These range from an electric pedal boat for the kids through canoes, basic aluminum numbers, and conventional outboards, all the way up to Jamie's 26-foot Campion Toba and Jason's 25-foot Wellcraft.

Harry will most often be found at the wheel of a 20-foot Malibu. Marsha, who works part-time at a Powell River supermarket deli, sometimes zips down the lake to her job on the family's fwc.

Harry worked in logging as well as fishing before gravitating to local real estate. Powell River residents own 95 per cent of the cabins on Powell Lake, he estimates. Many are passed along to friends or family without ever coming onto the market. He and Marsha got their first place cheap in 1989 because the humble cabin had come loose from its mooring and been tossed onto shore. The owners hadn't been using it much for a while, Harry recalls, and let it go for about five or six thousand dollars. Jamie remembers his parents presenting a photograph of the place at Christmas that year as the big family gift, the

structure tilting on a 45-degree angle. "We were jumping and cheering," he says. "We got a cabin!"

After righting and re-anchoring the old place, the Zrobacks made do until 1993, when they constructed their current cabin. Like many on Powell Lake, their cabin floats on a platform underlaid with logs harvested from dead cedar trees, a.k.a. grey ghosts, which have an extraordinary ability to resist rotting. The relative scarcity of this wood in recent years has raised prices. "You might have to spend \$30,000 for one cabin," says Harry—a big spike from the previous cost. Powell Lakers have tried

empty steel drums as floats, but cedar logs remain the preferred choice.

Some floating platforms are only a little larger than the cabins that sit on them. The Zrobacks', however, is 55 feet by 100 feet, comparable to the size of a city lot. That ensures plenty of room for outdoor activities, including golf practice. There's no issue with balls polluting the lake. Harry, a scuba diver, rounds them up whenever his ball bucket gets low. Other cabin owners sometimes ask him to suit up to investigate the condition of a float or to repair a mooring—even to retrieve a pair of glasses or a set of keys. "At one place I got two fishing rods, some shoes, and a snorkel mask," he says. "You go down there, and you come up with a little garage sale."

A log boom surrounds each cabin platform, protecting it from damage



during winter storms and big wakes. Some cabin owners also have a smaller barge anchored nearby. These homemade rafts, propelled by small outboards, are used to perform repairs to the log boom and may double as recreational vehicles.

As on any lake, there are people here who use their places as quiet retreats from the maelstrom of life, solitary hide-aways for relaxation and reflection. The Zrobacks, not as such. “We do relax,” Harry points out. “But we come here to have fun. It’s a social gathering place.”

Is it ever. This weekend they’ll see a lot of Richie Bird, an old high-school buddy who has a cabin a kilometre north on Goat Island’s shore. Richie’s wife, Linda, who’s hosting a retirement party, will be hanging out on their barge with five friends and playing a little water volleyball in the nifty court that Richie put up. For their part, Richie and Harry will eat some of Marsha’s delicious cooking, putter a bit with their boats, eat some more of Marsha’s delicious cooking, run Harry’s quad up some of Goat Island’s logging roads, eat yet some more of Marsha’s delicious cooking, and, as the gas generator rumbles into the night, play horseshoes among the huge old cedar trees on the shore adjacent to Harry’s cabin. The beer fridge, crammed full at morning’s light, will be empty by bedtime. “You better have a constitution if you’re a laker,” Harry says.

Frequently present as well will be Steve and Jill Waghorn and Steve’s sister and brother-in-law, Nancy and Gary Dietrich. The two couples are also on Goat Island, a few kilometres south at Elvis Point, where their twin cabins face each other across a platform only slightly smaller than the Zrobacks’.

There’s a story behind Elvis Point. Back in the 1990s, the Waghorn family owned two less elaborate cabins there. They mounted a hand-carved statue of Elvis Presley atop a cliff, where it reigned until a few years later, when members of a partying hockey team hauled it down.

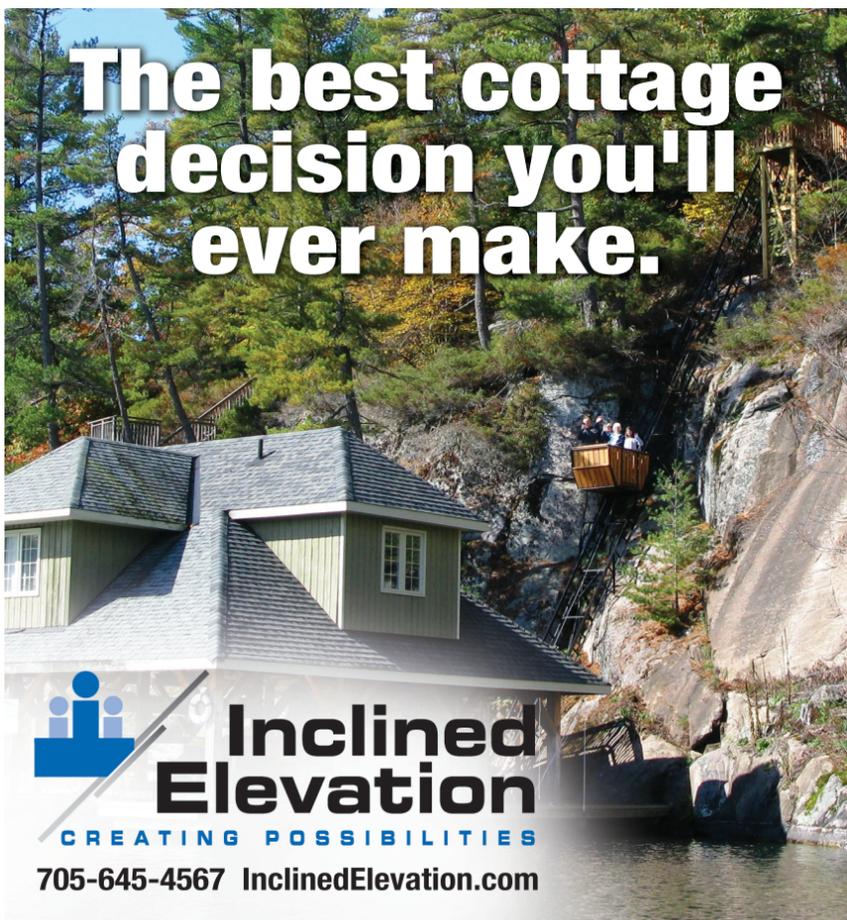
Powell River isn’t a big place. “You pretty much know everything,” says Steve. When the culprits failed to come forward about the statue’s disappearance, the family started running mes-

sages in the {Continued on page 108}



Jill Waghorn (opposite) and her husband, Steve, store logs left over from a raft rebuild behind their floating cabin, Graceland (above). The Waghorn retreat was given this moniker because it sits at Elvis Point. Richie and Linda’s cabin (at left) also has a nickname: The Dollhouse. “It’s cute and compact,” says Powell River realtor Harry Zroback, who helped the pair buy it three years ago.

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### THE GOOD-TIME DRIFTERS

{Continued from page 79}

Powell River paper—"Elvis has left the point," "Don't be cruel," and "Return to sender"—prompting the team to fess up and replace the original Elvis with a facsimile from the same shop. For a few years, New Elvis spent his winters in an old outhouse, and, on one occasion, shocked an unwitting local logger. "It kind of freaked the guy out," Steve says.

Old-school outhouses are still fairly common on Powell Lake. Some cottagers install a flush toilet in an outbuilding on shore, with an adjacent septic field. Others have a tank inside their cabin that's pumped out to a septic field. Most cabins have running water, and most people use it right out of the lake, which doesn't seem to bother anyone. "It's better than bottled water," says Harry. "Why wouldn't you drink it?"

The septic fields are permitted under regulations that came into force in 1997—rules that Steve Waghorn had a hand in formulating. At the time he was working for B.C.'s forest ministry, which manages the entire area around the lake, except for a few patches, under an active tree farm licence. The forest behind the Zrobacks' place, for example, was harvested a few years ago. Harry reflects the majority view in a town that would barely exist but for its mills when he shrugs off the clear-cutting as just the way things are. "It's a working forest," he says.

Back when Steve got involved, a building boom on the lake was creating conflicts. All of the float cabin owners were squatters, and there was nothing to stop one from crowding up against another. After due consideration, the ministry halted the building of any more float cabins—a decree which stands to this day—while grandfathering the existing ones. It instituted water leases and introduced various regulations about the use of adjacent shore property, such as the size and location of outbuildings.

There was some grumbling, Steve says, though the conflicts largely abated, and compared to a lot on shore, the added costs were fairly nominal. Today, Harry estimates, annual fees and taxes run \$2,000 or a little more. That includes membership in a cabin owners' association, which provides some basic

insurance in the event of fire or other environmental damage. "Yeah, there are some complaints," he says of the regulations. "But look at what you get."

Well, no kidding. And yet, hardly anyone knows about the place. Powell Lake would almost escape the prying eyes of Google but for the blogs of one cottaging couple, Wayne and Margy Lutz. They have a place on the lake's west side—south of the Zrobacks' cabin on Goat Island's western shore—near a spot called Hole in the Wall. Popular as a float cabin location since the earliest days, the steep-walled bay is now so semi-civilized it rates as a "cul-de-lac."

The Lutzes are the exception to the rule that everyone here is a local. In 2000, they came upon Powell Lake after flying up in their plane from California, where Wayne was as an aeronautics professor and Margy was an educational administrator. The next year, they came back to explore some more and ended up buying.

That first fall, when Wayne couldn't get vacation time, Margy decided to come up for U.S. Thanksgiving anyway. She was alone at the float cabin when one of coastal B.C.'s legendary storms struck. Two of the four cables anchoring the cabin snapped, the gangplank fell into the water, and she was afraid that the roof would blow off. "It was terrible," she says. "But the cabin survived."

So did the Lutzes as cabin owners. Within a few years, both retired from their jobs, and they moved ever closer to Powell Lake. Eventually, they bought a condo in Powell River, which Margy calls their "support place"—a spot for occasional overnights, where they can do laundry and get their mail. Maybe because they're on the lake for months at a time, maybe because they see themselves more as homesteading ex-citizens than as weekenders, their approach to float cabin dwelling is a little different. They have a composting toilet rather than a septic field; solar panels, a wind generator, and a 1,000-watt generator, rather than a diesel generator; and, to augment the solar power, an experimental energy-recovery system that uses heat from the woodstove. Their cabin's most distinctive feature may be Margy's vegetable garden, which floats inside their boom on a raft accessible via gangplank—

contrived to stop critters from mowing down every tender green shoot.

Wayne has written several books about the couple's explorations of the area, while Margy concentrates more on their blog, *Powell River Books*. Much of the humour in both media comes at the expense of the recent city dwellers—their insistence, for example, on a boat with an anchor on a lake that is almost universally hundreds of metres deep.

Early on, they heard that Powell Lake had once been an arm of the sea, before deposits from retreating glaciers and the rebounding land created a natural dam at the fjord's mouth. In 2006 they followed up on research that a University of British Columbia team had done to confirm that the lake's deeper reaches were still filled with salt water. The Lutzes got hold of a Kemmerer bottle—designed for the collection of underwater samples—lowered it 335 metres, and hoisted the elixir back to the surface. Sure enough, their sample was yellow, salty, and very, very smelly.

Rich Pawlowicz, an oceanography professor at UBC, continues to study Powell Lake, in part because its conditions—cooler fresh water near the surface, warmer sea water below—mimic parts of the Arctic Ocean. In addition to the salt, he confirms, "there is a lot of gas in the water." A one-litre sample from Powell Lake contains 600 ml of gas, including methane and CO<sub>2</sub>—enough to be downright explosive. Mind you, that's 300 metres beneath the surface. Pawlowicz qualifies that it would take an event along the lines of a major earthquake or a landslide to cause the lake to explode. Which, it has to be said, is something that would truly set Powell Lake apart.

Until that unlikely day, these float cabin owners can count their blessings: clear water, an amazing mountain setting, perfect summer weather, camaraderie when they're looking for it, and tranquility when they're not. All that with the bonus of knowing that there's virtually no way the rest of us could ever crowd in there to spoil their nirvana. The contest was rigged from the start. 🐾

Vancouver-based contributor Jim Sutherland is working with Random House on an upcoming cookbook, out this fall.



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