

Haida Gwaii Scavengers & the Neoprene Handshake



This secret surf haven has hobbit homes instead of palm trees. And that's how these cottagers like it

By Masa Takei Photography Kamil Bialous



Frances Riley waits for waves. If they don't come, there's always the comfort of the cabins she and her partner, Richard Haley, built.

One sunny afternoon

in January 2006, Pete, Richard, and the Mapper were bobbing in the break at the mouth of B.C.'s Sangan River. It was just the three of them. Waves, spun off by ocean storms 5,000 km away in Kamchatka, Russia, marched in orderly lines through Dixon Entrance. As the northwest swell hit the river outflow, it divided neatly into lefts and rights. A light southeaster was propping them up nicely. "Shoulder-high and glassy. A perfect longboard day," recalls the Mapper now, more than a decade later, perhaps through the rose-tinted glasses of recollection.

The land on the beachfront behind them had come up for sale, and Richard was thinking of selling his inland cabin and moving to the beach. Pete and the Mapper had already been asking Richard if he wanted to sell his backlot property to them. "On a scale of one to 10, how interested are you guys?" Richard asked. "Quite interested," said the Mapper. "Ten," said Pete.

Boards bumping, they shared a round of handshakes through thick neoprene gloves. The deal was sealed, North Beach style.

It's February, a decade later, on Haida Gwaii, B.C., and sunny—remarkable for this northern archipelago, known for its rain, vibrant green mosses, and muted grey mists. We sit in Richard Haley and Frances Riley's surf cabin at the mouth of the Sangan. "This is what I'd always wanted, a place where I could surf right out front," says Richard, a 45-year-old Vancouver native now living in Prince Rupert. Having first learned to surf during summers spent in Hawaii as a teenager, he couldn't have guessed that his dream cabin would one day be on some lonely islands more than 30 degrees latitude farther north. Spruce trees instead of palms. Rubber, wool, and Gore-Tex rather than bare, tanned skin. Though he's from a place that has no real surf, it seemed inevitable that he would eventually have a surf cabin somewhere. "From when I caught that first wave, felt that first overwhelming surge of speed," he says now, "I was hooked."

Richard performs yet another surf check; he leans slightly forward in his chair and peers to his right. While he's there,

he reaches into a bowl of cashews on the table. We're in one of their two cabins, snugged together like the flesh around an apple core. The eyebrow-curved roofs of the two hobbit homes blend together as a natural cap to the sand dune. "I like that idea," Richard says, "of not being on top of a hill, but being part of it."

Perched high as we are, we have a fine vantage from which to assess the surf. The waves are Right There—or would be if there were any to speak of. Today, as in the past week, the slate-coloured water just mirrors a broad sky with a skein of cloud.

"Doesn't matter. I'll go out whatever it is," Richard says, his lean frame kicked back in repose, but still giving the impression that he might spring into action at any moment. Sitting across from him, Frances whines. "I don't wanna goooo..." She's not complaining about the cold water, although even when an Arctic outflow isn't freezing things onshore, the water temperature goes down into single digits. Frances will be out there as well, suited up just before the high tide push. Rather, she's bemoaning the return to their home on the mainland. Their two-week stint of island life is just about done. But they're here now, and they intend to squeeze every last bit out of their remaining time. >>

Even for Richard and Frances, who live directly across Hecate Strait, it's a long trip: a seven-hour ferry journey to get from Prince Rupert to Skidegate on Graham Island (the largest in the Haida Gwaii archipelago), then a 100 km drive up-island. For surfers who live in southern B.C., it's even more of a trek—two to three days of driving and ferries. The two-hour flight from Vancouver to Masset, the nearest town, costs about the same as it would to fly halfway across the Pacific to warmer, more reliable waves in Hawaii.

That the archipelago is remote is part of its character, even its allure. It's about as high north up the B.C. coast as you can get without bonking into Alaska. Indeed, looking out from North Beach, the open water is interrupted only by the gentle mounds of the Alaska panhandle. They look close because they are—only 70 km away. And in either direction, the beach curves off into the distance, lined by dark spruce. Besides a few drifts of smoke coming from the odd cabin, there is sparse evidence of human habitation.

Although there can be surf in any month of the year, the season generally runs from September to March. Richard and Frances usually time their trips for October or November, when there's the highest likelihood of getting good surf. "But really," says Richard, peeking out the window again at the flatness, "how do you plan a surf trip here? It can't be just surf. You've also got to be building, collecting driftwood, foraging for berries, whatever." Hanging with locals around beach fires or in the bakery bus are other good options. "I brought a dozen books," says Frances, "and I got through most of them." Frances and Richard consciously decided to eschew electricity in their cabins, and all the modern distractions that go with it.

Cold, remote, fickle. But North Beach is dependably free of the serious crowds in more popular and accessible breaks, such as Tofino. "I was searching out new, less-crowded spots," says Richard. Others had the same idea. His friend Pete Reynolds, now a teacher in Masset, first came to the islands in 2002. Based at the time in Sooke, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, he was an avid surfer, having already travelled to surf spots throughout Australia, Indonesia, Central America, Mexico, Chile, Spain, and Hawaii. He first came here to pick mushrooms, but, tipped off by pictures of promising waves, he'd also brought a board. Speaking now from his home overlooking Masset Harbour, this is, he says, his ideal experience, "surfing with a small group of friends instead of fighting a large pack of people aggressively pursuing waves and their egos." >>

Richard used slabs of concrete from a nearby abandoned tennis court to make steps and terraced platforms for the cabin (below and p. 52).



“All the cool dudes: Surfer Jeff,

Hump Hadden, and the Mapper”



On no-wave days, Richard and Frances go stand-up paddleboarding on the Sangon River. Opposite: Chris “the Mapper” Ashurst.

Pete Reynolds built his cabin (below) partly using boards that he and the Mapper milled from cedars found lying around, logged decades earlier. Bottom, left: Layla, Pete's daughter, in a room any kid would love; centre: Frances Riley.



From a local population of about 5,000 on the islands, there are, says Chris “the Mapper” Ashurst, only maybe 25 people who surf regularly. Whereas crowds can number in the hundreds in Tofino, “here, a crowded day is a dozen or 15,” he says. “The most in history was something like 18 people at one time on one break.” Even as tantalizing shots of pro surfers like Pete Devries, captioned “somewhere on Haida Gwaii,” appear in glossy magazines, crowds have yet to emerge.

Cold, remote, fickle. “Only half a dozen times a year are the waves truly awesome; the rest of the time it’s just great fun,” says the Mapper, who moved to the island a dozen years ago for work and now lives full-time here with his partner, Elin Price, and their dog, Banti.

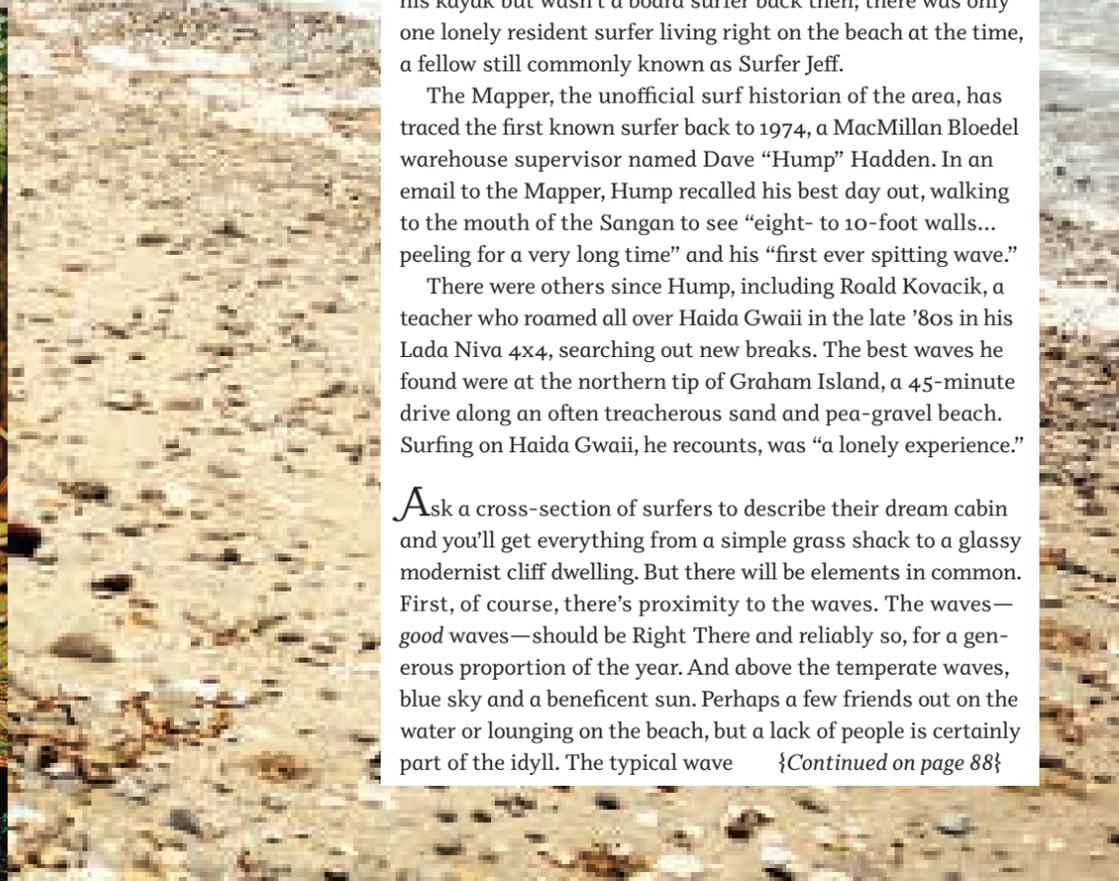
Richard first visited the islands with a friend in 2001. “We went exploring for new surf,” he says. “I just figured that there must be something out there. And I’d always been intrigued by those islands sitting off the west coast.” He was taking a few biology and chemistry courses at the time, after a seven-year career as a stockbroker in Vancouver. It was late September, and they dip-netted for crab and camped out in their van. “It just had that feeling of the stories of Florencia Bay in Tofino back in the ‘60s and early ‘70s,” he says, “when it was a free-for-all, and there were people just camping and living on the beach, and it had more of that vibe.”

When they got sick of the van, they stayed with Randy Martin, a young carpenter who lived in a beach cabin. Randy surfed his kayak but wasn’t a board surfer back then; there was only one lonely resident surfer living right on the beach at the time, a fellow still commonly known as Surfer Jeff.

The Mapper, the unofficial surf historian of the area, has traced the first known surfer back to 1974, a MacMillan Bloedel warehouse supervisor named Dave “Hump” Hadden. In an email to the Mapper, Hump recalled his best day out, walking to the mouth of the Sangan to see “eight- to 10-foot walls... peeling for a very long time” and his “first ever spitting wave.”

There were others since Hump, including Roald Kovacik, a teacher who roamed all over Haida Gwaii in the late ‘80s in his Lada Niva 4x4, searching out new breaks. The best waves he found were at the northern tip of Graham Island, a 45-minute drive along an often treacherous sand and pea-gravel beach. Surfing on Haida Gwaii, he recounts, was “a lonely experience.”

Ask a cross-section of surfers to describe their dream cabin and you’ll get everything from a simple grass shack to a glassy modernist cliff dwelling. But there will be elements in common. First, of course, there’s proximity to the waves. The waves—good waves—should be Right There and reliably so, for a generous proportion of the year. And above the temperate waves, blue sky and a beneficent sun. Perhaps a few friends out on the water or lounging on the beach, but a lack of people is certainly part of the idyll. The typical wave {Continued on page 88}



HAIDA GWAI SCAVENGERS

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trifecta of the surf cabin dream: warm, reliable, and empty. As North Beach will prove, one out of three still isn't bad.

Not long after that first visit, Richard received a call from Randy about land for sale. Richard bought that five-acre lot, next to the dark tannin waters of the Sangan River, a couple of hundred metres inland from the beach. He built a small cabin, then realized that there wasn't any point in coming all this way if he couldn't see the water. "You would hear what sounded like good surf and have to ride your bike to go check it out," says Richard. "With a spot this fickle, you want to be able to see the waves."

The move to the beachfront gave him what he wanted, and Pete and the Mapper, taking over the inland property, got into a market that had already shot up in price. For his part, Pete was happy to live inland. "You do surf a lot more if you're looking at the beach," he allows, "but there's sandflies in the summer and freezing cold northeasts in the winter to deal with. When it's blowing on the beach, it's pleasant in the forest." Though, "it's nice," he says, "to have friends on the beach you can call for a surf report."

With "almost no building experience," Pete built a 20-by-20-foot one-room cabin. It was bush building at its finest. "All I had was a hammer, a chainsaw, and a combination square. Pretty sure I had a level, but a really small one." The clearing, which is backed by a skyline of old-growth forest in Naikoon Provincial Park next door, is tucked into a corridor of hemlock. A decade later, Pete's spread now includes a stackwall bathhouse and a vegetable garden and serves as a weekend cottage during the school year for him, his wife, Laura, also a teacher, and their eight-year-old daughter, Layla. During the summers, they live out at the cottage and drive the 15 minutes back to their house in town to do laundry and (literally) recharge batteries.

For their part, the Mapper and Elin inherited the rough 12-by-12-foot shack that Richard had first built, half-perched on a large cedar stump. They'd spent their first three years in that tiny dwelling getting by without electricity or running water. Since then, a bigger cabin has

sprouted out of the side of that original pod, like a tree out of a nurse log and with all the complications that come from tying in to a stump. But the Mapper doesn't begrudge Richard his make-do building style. "His are what cabins are supposed to be: what you can make with the money you have, the things you can scavenge, and the best view in the world."

Scavenging or freecycling is a big part of fabricating a classic North Beach cabin, where building materials on-island come at a hefty premium. Everything from woodstoves and sinks to windows and patio doors are sourced from knock-downs and neighbours. With raw materials from nature there for the gathering, Richard "freestyles" (his term), just as he might do on the water. "The biggest thing for me is the freedom that comes with surfing, freedom both around the beach culture and lifestyle and the freedom on the waves."

The first cabin on his new beachfront land went up, out of necessity, in just three weeks. He had Frances and a friend coming to visit and no structure at all. He scavenged wood off the beach and would "just go for it," using his Husqvarna 365 Special. "Building with a chainsaw," he says, "is just so fast."

Richard only draws general floor plans, knowing that once the posts are in place it's "just a matter of tying up the corners." He likes to use curves in his designs, giving a distinctly organic feel to his cabins and some slightly unorthodox arrangements, such as a triangular bed platform that left futon corners drooping over the sides and the person sleeping on the outside in a compensatory curl. "I love lying in bed at night," he says, "planning the work that I'm going to do the next day."

That original beach cabin was a collage of raw alder and hemlock poles, rough-cut and dimensional lumber, plastic, tarpaper, sheet metal, nails, staples, cement, agates, and driftwood, filled in with liberal jumbles of mac-and-cheese-like insulation foam. "It was hard to live in," says Frances. "You couldn't sit around comfortably and were always kind of chilly." A yang to her yin, Richard counters with, "Drafts aren't necessarily a bad thing. They promote airflow." And while he might be "big picture," she is detail-oriented. "Richard will be out there

standing a hundred yards away, checking out the roofline," she says, "and I'll be inside sealing up drafts with spray foam."

The second beach shack, where we sit now, had started out as a bathhouse but evolved into a whole other cabin. It was built in a luxurious four months. It's much more polished, tighter, and better insulated. "Though it's definitely not impermeable," says Frances, pointing to where blades of dune grass grow out of nooks in the walls, furthering the impression of inhabiting a living, breathing building.

The multi-levelled layout may seem haphazard, but Richard has a logic. "The lower level catches the sand and keeps the cold air down there. The stove goes low, the seating goes high. Sightlines need to be preserved to see the surf."

With the lack of waves during the past week, Richard is bored. Down the hill and up the other embankment we can see the result of his boredom: what looks like an archaeological dig. It's the footprint of his next cabin. The third on this land, his fourth on the island, and just a little closer to the break. About 30 sq. ft. and five feet deep, the excavated sand bears his characteristic curves and layers. His idea is to have the cabin completely covered in sand, an underground structure in the style of the buildings of the architect Malcolm Wells. "What's the point in having beachfront," he says, "if you can't build sandcastles?"

It's a few hours before high tide arrives, and Richard and Frances are suited up. Out in the mouth of the Sangan, there's a peak with a nice shape. It would be double-overhead—for Barbie and Ken dolls—but Richard and Frances don't mind. Richard catches a ride and scoots down on his butt, milking the most out of the little peeler. Frances paddles heartily, chasing down another wee bump. It's just the two of them out today, with all the fun to themselves. Pete is in town working. The Mapper and Elin are drywalling another new addition. Somewhere out in the Pacific a storm is brewing up a future epic session, but, in the meantime, cold, remote, and fickle as it is, the best swell right now is the one Right Here. 🐾

Masa Takei lives in Vancouver and has written for explore, The Globe and Mail, and Western Living.