

# The Gulf Islands

## BC's "Closest Remotest" Islands Inspire Visitors to Slow Down

by Carolyn B. Heller

"Nothing is the New Something" on British Columbia's Gulf Islands.

"We launched a regenerative tourism campaign encouraging people to slow down and do nothing," explains Jamie Sterling, marketing coordinator for the non-profit Southern Gulf Islands Tourism Partnership, established three years ago with representatives from Salt Spring, Mayne, Galiano, Pender, and Saturna Islands. Their goal is to create a more sustainable tourism industry in the region.

But what does sustainable tourism look like across this island chain? And how are hoteliers adapting?

### Building a Year-Round Destination

"We're overwhelmed with visitors in the summer," Sterling says. The "Nothing" campaign "is regenerative in the sense that we're trying to encourage people to come during our quieter months," reducing their environmental impact while supporting year-round jobs.

Encouraging visitors to do nothing, Sterling admits, is "turning our truths into our strengths." The Gulf Islands don't have a lot of sights, but hiking, kayaking, and other outdoor pursuits are readily accessible, and the region has a thriving arts culture.

The islands also excel in what Sterling calls a "non-commercial style of wellness. Taking the time to sit at a bakery and talk to people and smell the cinnamon buns."

### Connecting and Disconnecting on Salt Spring

"People have a different perspective now," agrees Kelly Armstrong, general manager of Harbour House Hotel on Salt Spring Island. "They're looking to be more connected and disconnected at the same time."

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A short walk from downtown Ganges, Salt Spring's largest town, and central to the ferry terminals, the 53-room Harbour House opened as a guesthouse in 1916. Recent renovations mean that "we have a rustic feel, but we're actually really modern," Armstrong says.

They've installed rooftop solar panels and replaced bathtubs with low-flow showers. They also operate a conference centre, keeping them busy with corporate events during the off-season.

"We try to be really inclusive," Armstrong notes. Her staff has received training to support a more diverse clientele, and the hotel was recently accredited as a "Rainbow Registered Business," granted to LGBT+ friendly properties.

"Hospitality's always been about the people. You treat your people well, and your business will do well. You never know where people are in their journey in life."

### Family-friendly Mayne Island

For Lise Magee, her life's journey brought her to Blue Vista Resort.

Magee had worked for Vancouver's Listel Hotel for more than 25 years, eventually moving into the general manager's role. "It was a great setup," she says, "but my husband and I were always looking for a property that we could take on. Always wondering what having your own gig would feel like."

In 2019, the Magee-Miller family found that property, a nine-cabin resort on Mayne Island.

Opened more than 50 years ago, Blue Vista is "an institution on the island," Magee explains, reminding them of places they'd stayed years earlier, traveling with their children across BC. The resort is "well equipped, not fancy, well-priced, and friendly."

Families are a main market for Blue Vista. "We have a playground. It's a quiet road. We're close to the beach. Parents can let their kids run wild here."

"We have tons of people that come for weekends. We have women's groups, cycling groups, and kayaking groups. And there's always the 'do nothing' crew." In winter, they provide

accommodations for construction staff from off-island.

The property's small size and limited number of employees relieve them of challenges like finding staff housing, says Magee. "The biggest issue on the island bar none is housing."

### The Closest Remote Place

While the islands' population skews older, "all of our accommodators are seeing a trend toward younger visitors—millennials and younger," notes Sterling.

Younger families are settling on the islands, too. Mayne's population "increased from under a thousand to nearly 1,400," says Magee. "We've got more restaurants opening, and more shops opening. It's becoming more dynamic."

This growing population is triggering demand for infrastructure improvements, including better high-speed Internet and more stable electrical power. And more people mean more cars, adding sustainability challenges.

"It's easy to get to the islands without a car. Getting around does take some creativity," Sterling acknowledges. Salt Spring has regular bus service, and you can rent bikes or e-bikes on several islands.

On Mayne, only eight kilometres long and six kilometres wide, Magee says ride sharing is part of the island's culture. People can wait at 25 designated "car stops," and driving past someone who needs a lift "is bad manners. You can't not pick people up."

The rural Gulf Islands "have a long reputation of being a refuge, and that attracts alternative and artistic types," Sterling says. "We don't have any chains, save for the grocery stores. We're all small, independent businesses and entrepreneurs."

Yet the Gulf Islands are an easy escape from the city. "We often call ourselves 'the closest remote place.'" ■

Courtesy of @southerngulfislands

Courtesy of Harbour House Hotel

