

Home Sweet Sakinaw

The Gabriel family dove into lakeside life and discovered the art of living well

WHAT IF you could leave your city job, pull up all your roots at once and completely change nearly every aspect of your lifestyle. Would you? Could you move to a remote, off-the-grid Sunshine Coast property, just for the sense of adventure, camaraderie and opportunity?

Donna, Garrett and Liza did. How'd they manage it? Through serendipity, hard work and three huge leaps of faith.

"We first came to the lake on a gorgeous August afternoon and as soon as I saw the property, I thought, how can we make this work?" says Liza, a former Lower Mainland real estate agent, who was immediately smitten by the tranquility, crystal clear waters, forested slopes and charming lakefront lodge and cabin.

If you're a local Sunshine Coaster, chances are you either know Sakinaw Lake (between Garden Bay and Ruby Lake) like the back of your hand, or you've never been there before. It's just that kind of place. But regardless, once on the lake, it transports you to a different frame of mind.

"On the North Shore, Sakinaw is this mythical place," says Garrett, a former physiotherapist. "I had only visited once before, in my twenties."

It's just a four minute boat trip from the end of Sakinaw Lake Road to the revamped Sakinaw Lake Lodge, today offering luxury in the truest sense of the word – a place of casual wonder, harmony and soul – where visitors kick back and reconnect, with nature and themselves.

It's also the home of Donna Gabriel, son Garrett and daughter-in-law Liza, the trio who did find a way to purchase the property after that fateful visit in August 2007, moving there full time in January 2008.

Although they weren't actually looking to live on recreational property, the Gabriels had previously traveled through Sweden together where they fell in love with the concept of a lakeside cottage.

STORY BY
CHRISTINA SYMONS



Opening spread: Main photo: The upper living space of the main unit at Sakinaw Lake Lodge. From left to right: A cozy lodge bedroom with fireplace; The well-equipped gourmet lodge kitchen; A romantic tent suite for two; Swimming, paddleboard, skiing and hiking are just some of the activities; At night the lodge glows invitingly.

Right: Lodge owners and hosts Donna, Liza and Garrett, with faithful companion, Max, enjoy sharing the terraced deck with guests.



On a bit of a whim, Donna, having recently been widowed by the loss of Garrett's father, had visited Sakinaw Lake and saw a B&B sign and number.

She called the lodge to see if the owner might know of any lakefront properties for sale. Turns out, the owner's property was available, although she didn't have time to view it that day.

When Donna came home to downtown Vancouver, she floated the lodge idea past Garrett and Liza. They decided to all go up and look at the property, just for fun, but they all fell in love with it and the rest is history – with a healthy dash of nerves and comedy.

"There was, and still is, a sense that this is exactly what we were meant to be doing," says Garrett with a steady grin. "We drove back to the city, decided to give our notices, sell our homes and begin to really live."

"The serenity of the lake is very spiritual," adds Donna. "I just thought it would be a really nice place to spend my retirement years."

And so, the trio had six months to leave two careers, sell two homes, down-size possessions dramatically and prep for a rather dramatic change of lifestyle and scenery.

"We moved here January 15th and it was raining and cold," says Garrett. So nervous and exhausted regarding the move, they hadn't been sleeping back in the city. The couple had gone to bed the previous nights literally weeping, Liza remembers, chuckling.

Not surprisingly the former lodge looked a little different and deserted in the winter.

"We were a bit stunned," says Liza, recounting their new home. To add to the angst, the previous owner had barely left an ounce of propane or drop of diesel fuel. The pipes froze and Garrett had the flu, so Liza and Donna had to flip a coin to see which one of them would drive the boat across the lake – neither one had ever done it before – loading up the float, propane tanks and Jerry cans to fetch fuel.

Once they got over the shock and settled in, the real work began. They've been revamping and expanding the lodgings to a resort quality property ever since.

The bulk of the buildings, including a two-storey dual suite self-contained lodge and cool safari tent suite, is strictly reserved for visitors, friends and family.

Being off the grid means using solar power with a back-up generator for electricity. The

Gabriels are trying to be as eco-friendly as possible and strive to be a zero-waste enterprise. They use bio-diesel fuel, phosphate free soaps, compost all organic waste and recycle everything possible. They're passionate about protecting the lake's ecology and the lodge's footprint and also try to gently educate guests on these topics too.

In the city, Liza and Garrett had a three bedroom condo. For now, they share a tiny one bedroom loft cabin with Donna and three pets: dogs Max and Munchy plus kitty Meow Meow, leaving the bulk of the lodgings available for guests.

"Now we realize how much we had before, and how little we have to have, to live well," says Garrett, who today shares a closet with his mom while Liza uses an IKEA bookcase for her personal belongings.

Breakfasts however, are decadent, delicious and healthy too. Liza is head cook with Donna lending her considerable expertise, deftly handling any number of breakfast treats such as berry smoothies, lemon ricotta pancakes, zucchini fritters with lox, and French toast.

In addition to sumptuous lodgings, Sakinaw Lake Lodge (sakinawlakelodge.com) also

offers lake cruises and has teamed up with Rockwater Resort for special excursions and luxury stays. Tours offer a peek into the history of Sakinaw Lake including the natural ecology and First Nations pictographs. Tour guests may also hike to the bay where Sakinaw Lake meets the ocean.

For the lodge owners, it's a sweet lakeside life.

"We feel blessed all the time, like we are finally really living" says Liza. "When Garrett and I are out in the canoe on the lake at night looking at the stars I think, 'Who gets to live like this?'"

"There was a brief moment when we questioned our sanity before embarking," says Garrett. "But looking back we never really doubted ourselves."

Now we just feel really fortunate," he notes, excited also to be contributing to the burgeoning local tourism market, Garrett will be president of the Sunshine Coast B&B and Cottages Association starting in October of this year.

"There's just so much to be thankful for," adds Donna. "All our guests say the same thing and it's true – we are really lucky to live here." CL