

Yurts and Yoga in the Kootenay Rockies

Former Calgary couple builds Mongolian inspired retreat

When 49-year-old Bev Jackson first asked her husband to build yurts instead of cabins on their newly acquired property in B.C.'s Kootenay Rockies, Bob bucked the idea.

"I wasn't sure what a yurt was," says the former Calgary production accountant. "I was pushing for cabins."

Bev, a career accountant in Calgary's frenetic oil and gas sector, did her research, and eventually persuaded her 51-year-old partner to consider these round canvas-covered structures with an inverted cone roof.

"I got the idea from one of my yoga instructors in Calgary," says Bev. "She said before you put up cabins, why don't you take a look at yurts."



Swapping spreadsheets for saws, Bob became the builder of Blue Ridge Mountain Retreat, erecting four yurts on their 20 acres of wilderness five minutes north of Kaslo.

The biggest yurt is where you can find Bev nearly every morning at 6:30 leading yoga classes for guests and friends. Three slightly smaller "guest" yurts are a short walk away.



The floor in the "studio" yurt is a perfect circle, nearly 10 metres in diameter, topped with laminate wood. Look up and see dozens of lodge pole pines jutting toward the huge circular skylight. Vinyl-backed canvas replaces the more traditional animal hides that stretch around the Mongolian inspired frame. Sitting cross-legged in this sun-filled space, Bev says, "It's a quiet healing sort of space. It's perfect for yoga classes for sure. I feel a sense of calm when I come in here."

It's certainly calmer than when Bev worked at a large publicly traded oil and gas company in Calgary, where she ran the accounting department. She says she was consumed by reporting deadlines, shareholders needs, and raising three teen-aged daughters. "I really felt like I was getting burnt out. Bob too. He was probably one of the main instigators to leave the city. It didn't feel like home anymore. Especially when the girls left home."

Bob is blunt when it comes to former career choices. Does he miss his life as a production accountant? “No. But I miss the money,” he laughs. Overlooking the Selkirk and Purcell mountain ranges, Bob recalls a few of his many jobs. “Tin smith, auto mechanic, truck driver, and Red Seal chef, to name a few.”

“I’ve just been trying to find myself. I think I finally have.”

Blue Ridge Retreat offers guests a chance to rest in a part of B.C. that is not overrun with tourists. The facilities overlook Kootenay Lake, where, according to Bob, seeing seven motor boats, in a 12-hour span, constitutes a, “busy day on the lake.”

Guests find it easy to relax here. It’s 7 a.m. on a bright Thursday morning. Montreal visitor Beatrice Genest, her husband and two children pack up their van having stayed here the past five nights. The family says the round concept was a hit with the kids. “It’s something like camping, except with all the amenities,” says Beatrice. Husband Dave Pronovich adds, “The light streaming in, no TV’s, yes, that’s a good vacation.”



The family rate is \$145 per night for what could be considered an upscale teepee. But this is also a place where you can take a long high pressure hot shower in an oversized circular stall, dry off with a 5-star hotel quality towel, watch and hear the hummingbirds race by one of several large screened openings, get dressed and then (if you’re the type) cook a full course meal in the well designed kitchenette. The key difference: When an afternoon thunderstorm pounds these canvas-covered abodes, nobody gets wet. At days end, comfortable duvets top a queen size bed and a sofa bed. If you’re cool, turn up the thermostat.



Bev Jackson says whether guests are interested in yoga or not, most guests appreciate the quiet and the view. There are exceptions. She warmly recalls one guest’s difficulties. “He really struggled. He complained about the moonlight coming in through the dome. He didn’t come prepared. But I gave them books and a crib board, and they ended up having a good time.”

The yurts do not have TV’s, telephones or jacks, making this a poor destination for people needing electronic connections. (You can still get your fix five minutes away at an internet café in Kaslo.)

Instead, the Jacksons, born and raised in fruit-challenged Calgary, routinely invite guests to pick blueberries and raspberries, or crunch into an apple or pear from the orchard. If fruit isn’t your thing, Bev invites guests to take a

swim in the indoor lap pool, or a cold plunge in the nearby lake. Another option, sit by the “serenity pond” and breathe in the lavender.

“It just gives people a chance to reflect,” says Bev acknowledging this place has also given her a chance to reflect. Her parents were country people who had a connection to the land in their early days. They have both died, Bev’s mother most recently. “I feel my mom and dad here. There’s really nice karma here.”



The couple has spent more than their life savings on this venture. Bev continues to supplement their income by doing the accounting for a smaller oil and gas firm in Calgary. It requires a monthly visit to the city but also allows her the chance to reconnect with family and friends. Bob does some bookkeeping on the side, but is focusing on the yurts. He says the nearby townspeople used to chide him. “There’s still a guy in town that whenever he see me, snickers, How’s the yurt? They think it’s a cave you crawl into and sleep in at night.” Bob laughs it off. He has the infrastructure in place to build three more.



Bev says she’ll continue offering yoga to anyone interested. While she’s not yet ready to call herself a yoga teacher, she urges yoga teachers and students to come for week long retreats, especially in the quieter spring and fall months. Calgary yoga instructor Helen Mikuska taught classes here in 2006. “The place is beautiful. Just the idea of being outside. You’re not on a beach. You have a straight floor. But the outdoors - you’re right there. The cool breeze. It creates the connection with nature which we miss in many of the spaces in Calgary, such as community spaces or leisure centres.”

Bev acknowledges her days are in many cases, longer than they used to be. (up at 5:30 every day, cleaning yurts, taking care of guests - but she says she feels at home here in a way she never felt in Calgary, a city she still likes. “Even though I’m very busy, it’s a different busy. I feel a real connection to nature here.” And she credits her daily yoga practice with giving her the energy to see her dream through.

Links:

www.blueridgeretreat.ca

www.yurtco.com