



## Friendliness a hallmark of B.C.'s Gabriola Island, or 'Isle of the Arts'

THE CANADIAN PRESS  By Elianna Lev, The Canadian Press | The Canadian Press – Fri, 19 Aug, 2011

GABRIOLA ISLAND, B.C. - There is immeasurable character and wonder to be discovered in the mystic landscape of Gabriola Island, in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia.

Within minutes of arriving, there's a good chance you'll spot an eagle soaring, watch deer scampering along the road or pass by the alpaca farm. Ancient petroglyphs are carved into sandstone throughout the island, which is a 20-minute ferry ride from Nanaimo. There are more than a dozen beaches and ocean-side spots to visit, including the Malaspina Galleries, a stunning 3.5-metre natural sandstone formation created by years of wave erosion.

But the wondrousness isn't limited to the terrain.

The 4,200 residents who live here (the number doubles in the summer time) emit a laid-back, welcoming vibe, ready to chat with a stranger or help out in any way.

Resident Kathy Ramsey calls it a "rural community populated by people from somewhere else," and warns not to be surprised if the person behind the check-out at the grocery store is a former rocket scientist.

The extreme openness and eccentricity of the island could be traced back to its history as a hippie colony in the 1960s, when many Earth-loving wanderers made their way over to live off the land, exploding the population.

"We didn't get hydro until 1950 and the islanders thought the people who wanted to go back to nature were nuts," said Dale Ferguson, an employee at the Gabriola Museum and sixth-generation resident. "Here they were, wanting to go backwards."

Before Tammy Hudgeon moved to Gabriola Island 12 years ago, she had spent most of her life working odd jobs, in places like meat departments and pharmacies. Now, the white-haired middle-aged woman spends her days making colourful blown glass art, adorned with bees and inspirational sayings. Hudgeon said she never imagined her path in life would have resulted in her making art full-time.

"I didn't come from an artsy background at all," she said. "But this island has something."

That something manages to keep the community constantly inspired. According to the Gabriola Arts Council, the island has the fifth highest concentration of artists in all of Canada. The island is often referred to as the "Isle of the Arts."

"There's a real work ethic amongst the artists here," said Ramsey, who is president of the council. "They go out to their studio on Monday and come out on Friday with a whole body of work done."

One intriguing characteristic about Gabriola is the high number of vintage cars that are seen during the summer months. Until recently, the local newspaper would publish a feature on a different vehicle every month.

Sue DeCarteret, with the Chamber of Commerce, said a couple who owns a Messerschmitt KR200 attract so much attention that they have a hard time running errands.

"If they want to run to the store for 20 minutes, they might as well count on three hours because they get stopped everywhere, by everybody," she said.

While having a rare and exclusive car would only create a divide in many communities, on Gabriola it's just the opposite. This only adds to the theory that the island is one of the friendliest around.

"The locals drive (the vintage cars) with the purpose of being stopped and asked about them," she said.

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If You Go...

<http://www.gabriolaisland.org/>

<http://www.gabriolaartscouncil.org/>

<http://www.hellobc.com/>

CP, 2011

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