time and the tide

How an artsy B.C. getaway designed for two empty nesters ebbed and flowed into a bustling family cabin

BY
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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CHESSA OSBURN WAS walking up a dirt path leading up from the dock and turned back to call out to me: "This might be my favourite view of the cabin!"

I could see only a tangle of boulders and Douglas fir trees, with the edge of a slanted roof poking out behind. Her son, Barnaby, 8, still wearing his lifejacket, ran ahead of me, while her husband, Stephen Sims, and their daughter, Ophelia, 10, trailed behind. Stilton, a yellow Labrador retriever, was everywhere, in the manner of a dog looking after his people.

A couple more steps and a building suddenly came into view: a split-level cabin, nested in a bowl of large rocks and cloaked in grey paneling. A walkway of grey-brown planks wound through large boulders and led to the front door. Inside, I felt like I'd walked on to a boat; the cabin has sharp white walls, a wood ceiling, and matching cabinets. Through the line of windows along one wall, water lapped up almost to the building's edge.

Fifty-two years ago, Chessa's father, well-known Vancouver architect Mark Osburn, designed this unusual cabin. He envisioned a building that would sit on the stony shore of this private island near Howe Sound, B.C.—an effect similar to a limpet, the aquatic snail with a conical shell that likes to suction itself onto rocks up and down the islands off the West Coast. A limpet is almost invisible until you are right upon it. The cabin is the same. You don't see it until, suddenly, you're there. Even from the dock, which sits just outside of the cove that bears the cabin, the building is mostly hidden. But if you were to drop a plumb line down from the windows in the cabin's entryway, it would land in the Salish Sea, points out Chessa's brother, Max Osburn, a water resources engineer based in Toronto.

"It feels like you're in a boat at high tide," he says. "It's just phenomenal at sunset when you have the light coming in off the water through the windows."

At high tide, the family spends their time on the lower deck (opposite). It's always been a popular spot. "My grandparents used to have a little grill down there," says Chessa. "So people would be going off the rope swing while others were making dinner."

Chessa's grandparents, Pat and Julie, commissioned the one-bedroom, one-bathroom residence as a stylish island getaway to escape Vancouver. Their children had already grown up and moved away, and the couple wanted a place that would not become an extended family home. They didn't want it to become a crash pad for kids and other relatives. The space was too small and too pristine, filled with delicate ceramics from Africa and pots from Central America collected by Julie on their travels; it was situated too precariously at the water's edge to be suitable for families with young kids. It was designed for adults who want to drink cocktails out of fine glassware at sunset; not for children in dripping bathing suits.

Limpets survive by hoovering up algae from rock. In doing so, they clear room for other forms of life, like barnacles, to settle in and colonize. And that's what happened to this cabin. The space built for a couple of empty nesters ended up becoming a home to four generations of a family—one that grew unexpectedly when the daughter of the owners married the architect who built them the cabin of their dreams. Chessa and Max grew up coming to the cabin every summer. For both, this place intended for adults has been the stage for some of their strongest childhood memories. They perfected the art of jumping from the cocktail deck onto a rope swing that hangs from a nearby Douglas fir and then plopping into the sea. They now bring their own kids, ranging from two months to 10 years old, every summer and are watching a next generation learn the art of timing their rope swings with the tide. ››

The cabin faces west, so it's exposed to summer storms that roll in. "When the wind is howling, the back deck is kind of a refuge," says Chessa (above, with Ophelia). "You can be outside but still protected from the weather."

The "West side"—as the Osburn family refers to the cabin—is located on one of a handful of privately owned islands in Howe Sound, so close to Vancouver that you can visit in a 30-minute-ish boat ride from the city.

In 1909, Henry Ogle Bell-Irving, a wealthy Vancouver businessman, politician, and civil engineer, bought the island to build a recreation home for his family. The setting became a part of the summer social calendar for well-heeled Vancouverites in the mid-century. *The Vancouver Sun* used to report on the Bell-Irvings' trips with guests to the home. In 1950, the family set up a small company, made up of 30 shareholders, most of whom were family members or close friends of the family; each took possession of a portion of the land. Ever since, the company of shareholders sets the rules around development, including restrictions on the size and number of buildings. This has prevented construction of the kind of large mansions that dot other islands off the West Coast of Canada.

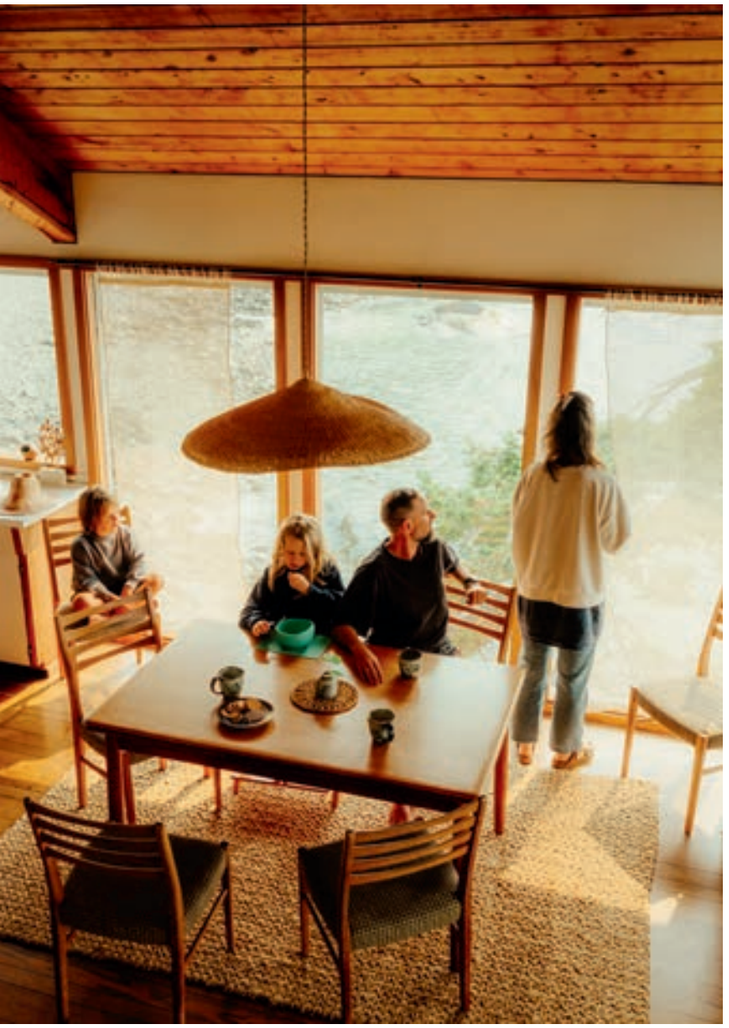
Mark Osburn's parents knew the Bell-Irving family, and they bought one of the first shares on the island. The family's plot included an original cottage built in 1927 on the north side. When he was a kid, Mark and his family would travel from Vancouver by water taxi on the day after the school year ended. Their summers on the island dragged into the first few weeks of school. "We would basically not leave the island for two months, sometimes longer if the weather kept nice," says Mark. "My mother was a great believer in the outdoors as opposed to education."

He spent his childhood roaming the island, fishing and checking out what was happening in the "pasture"—a large field in the island's centre where horses were once kept, and is now home to tennis courts and a playground. Here, he developed a strong love for the outdoors. "If you grow up in those environments, you become aware of them through your body, not through your education," says Mark. "You get to know where the light is, where you can protect yourself from the wind, and where you want to be, the areas of foreshore you can land on and where you can't." Over Mark's five-decade-long career, he specialized in designing homes for the coastline or islands, including a fishing lodge previously featured in *Cottage Life*. This island "influenced my life in many ways—the sense of understanding place and understanding the nature of these kinds of places has been in my blood since I was a young child," he says.

The four decks on each side of the cabin range in size and shape, but much like the design of the buildings, they work with and incorporate the natural features of the land. Below, Stilton takes a drink on the largest of the four decks just off the main cabin.

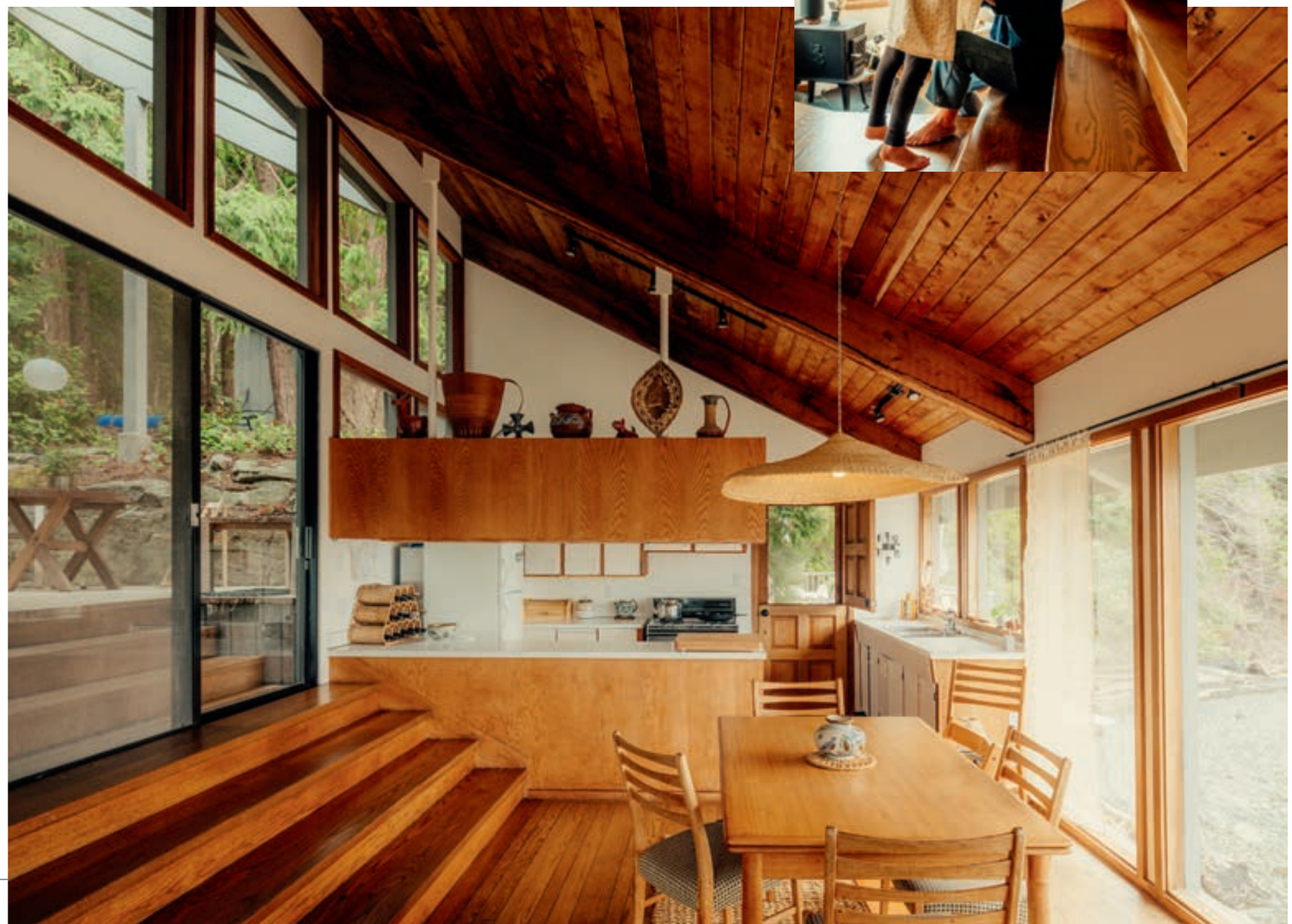
In 1962, Mark started his studies at UBC and focused on architecture. It was a period of "a lot of ferment" in the field, he says. His education consisted of "open-ended discussions around the nature of the universe and the planet." There was "not a lot of teaching of craft, shall we say?" he recalls. When he graduated in 1970, he admits to having limited knowledge about how to build buildings.

By then, his parents, Babs and Tony, had purchased a second share on the island—this one, on the west coast where there were no other cabins. His mother dreamt of building a new residence there, something away from the buzz around the original Bell-Irving cottages. She eventually gave up on the idea, satisfied to stay on the established plot with its reliable water well and the parade of family and friends coming through. She sold the undeveloped share to family friends, Pat and Julie, who were her frequent guests at the island. Pat ran a successful business importing wood from around the world; Julie, who'd been born in El Salvador, collected textiles and art from their travels. The pair asked Mark to design their cabin as one of his first projects out of architecture school—"in a very brave move" on their part, says Mark, and likely as a kind of thank you to his parents. ››



From left to right: Barnaby, Ophelia, Steve, and Chessa. The sheer curtain panels are from Chessa's company, Twenty One Tonnes. They're made by an organization in Oaxaca, Mexico, out of discarded agave leaves from the mescal industry. The light fixture is also from Twenty One Tonnes, produced in conjunction with a women's group that supports traditional art in northern Ghana.

The family has made small updates over the years, including adding a solar power system, but the place remains largely unchanged from its original state. "I don't think anyone feels the need to overhaul the place," says Chessa.



It was a daunting job. He was tasked with building a house on an untouched plot of land, wild with rocks and Douglas firs that grew in odd lines, bent from the wind that whipped through this spot. "It was pretty challenging," says Mark. "But naïveté is a great blessing." Pat and Julie wanted a small place that could be a stylish haven for weekend getaways. Mark and the couple agreed on a design that placed the cabin almost over the water; it was the only place on the rocky property that made any sense. Pat had served in the Navy, and he liked the idea of a home that felt like being on the water. He could source unusual woods from around the world, and found oak planks for the flooring, which Mark installed "ship-deck style." Mark wanted no obstructions between the cabin and the sea front; no docks or decks in the way. Just windows, then water. He set decks to the side of the cabin to leave the view untarnished. In order to protect the structure from the wind, he placed the building close to a large, granite wall. *Cont'd on p. 66*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"We were able to essentially place parts of the building right over the water, which is, of course, totally illegal now," says Mark. He worked with a builder, Oscar Hansen, who'd done work on the Osburn's cottage and knew the island well. "Without his knowledge of construction and his abilities, it would have been a disaster."

It was not a disaster. The opposite, in fact. "I've done a lot of buildings all over the coast, all over the world. When I go back and look at the cabin now, it still hangs in there as being just a beautiful solution," says Mark.

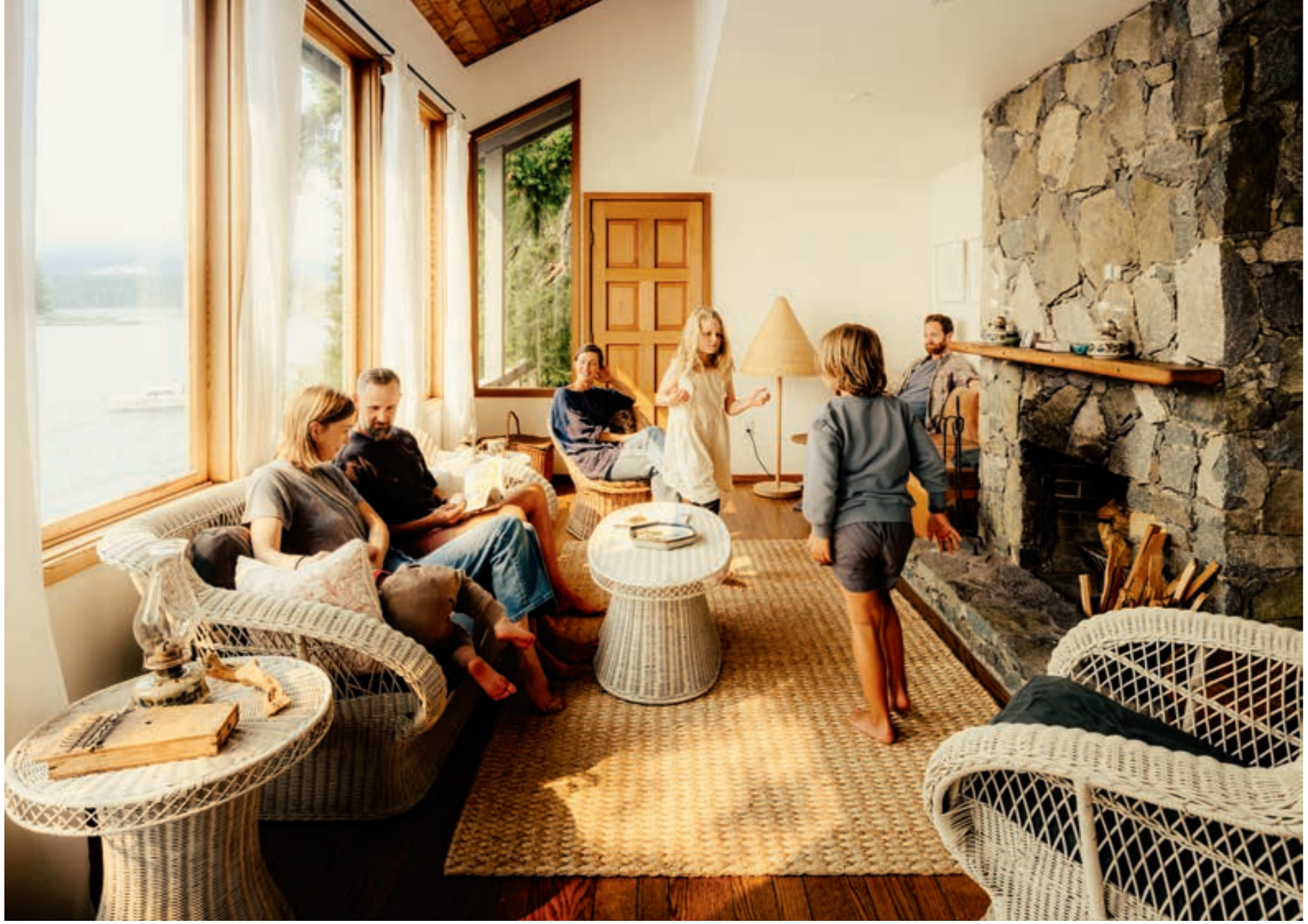
He remained friendly with the owners. A few years after the cabin was finished, he joined the couple for cocktails and met their youngest daughter, Elizabeth. The pair fell in love, married, and had two kids, Chessa and Max. In the summers, the young family would return to the island. They mostly stayed over in the old North side cottage, which they now call the Osburn cottage, where there were mismatched plates and mouse poop, cousins and chaos. In comparison, the West side cabin had a single, uber-stylish—for the 1970s—sage green bathroom. The kitchen's cabinets were filled with plates from Tonalá, Mexico. Outside, Pat and Julie docked the family boat, *The Lamu*, named for an island off the coast of Kenya that they loved.

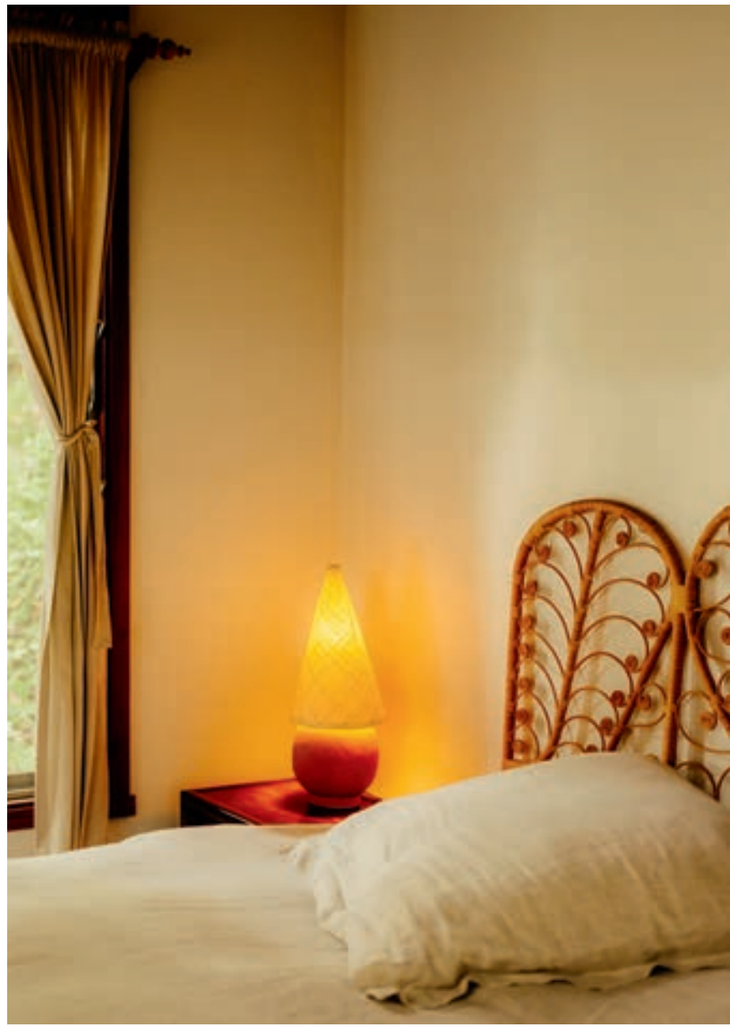
"I think granny's design choices were elegant, and given the place is largely the same as it was in the 70s, they have stood the test of time," says Chessa.

As kids, Chessa and Max had chores to do around the property, such as chopping and piling wood. After, they'd spend full days adventuring around the island. It was a kind of freedom that was rare even then, says Max. "We were probably six or seven years old learning how to run boats," he says. The pair and their cousins liked to follow a trail known as the "north path" along the coastline until they'd arrive at their granny's cabin. Chessa sometimes slept there with her grandmother, in the cabin her father designed. She loved to wake up and look out the small bedroom window that reached from the floor to the bottom of the slanted ceiling, about the height of a young kid.

Chessa describes swimming in the Salish Sea as "refreshing," but that doesn't stop her son from playing in it all day. In 2021, UNESCO moved to protect more than 2,000 sq. km. of the area as a biosphere region, the third such area in B.C.

In time, Elizabeth and Mark divorced and Julie died, bequeathing the cabin to her children. The small upper porch began to leak, so it was filled in and turned into a very tall closet. There is still no access to the electrical grid, but the family installed solar panels over the back deck. Inspired by her grandmother, Chessa co-founded Twenty One Tonnes, a company that imports light fixtures, baskets, and textiles from artisans around the world. She's added her own touches to the cabin: ceramic lamps with palm shades handmade by artisans in southern Mexico and a woven pendant light from a women's organization in northern Ghana. It hangs above the dining room table. On the wall, her mother hung a framed coffee sack from her grandmother's family's coffee farm (now a charitable organization in El Salvador). ››





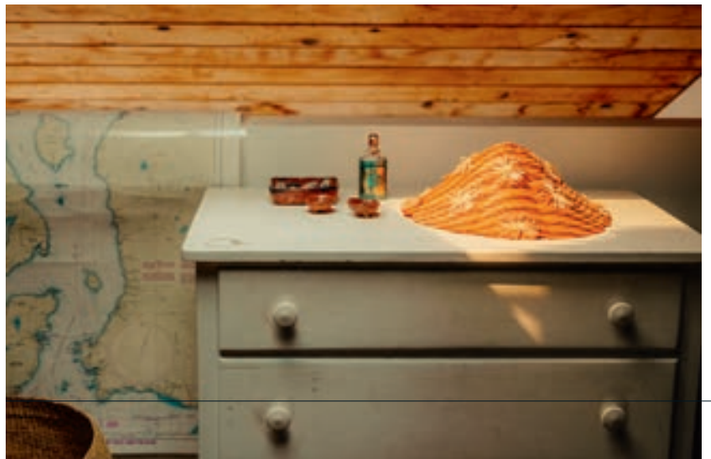
As the family expanded, the rhythm of the place has changed. Pat and Julie's children divide their time at the site, and several have built small studios on the property. There is a guest cabin that backs on to the main space that comfortably houses a family of four. Chessa's family and her brother's fit themselves into the cabin's calendar wherever they can. It's challenging for different branches of the family to try to make a tiny space work, she says. "But the payoff is just massive. When you're able to be up here, whether that's all together or just as our little family, if you can dance your way through the family politics, it's such a gift."

Both Chessa and Max continue to spend time on the North side, where the pace feels easier and safer with kids. But they still return to granny's cabin, hanging above the tide.

"I love that it's this beautiful blend of all these really important members of my family," she says. She sees her grandfather in the way the cabin feels like a ship and showcases woods, her grandmother in the crafts, her father in the design, and her mother, who now spends the most time at the cabin, in the little touches.

"There is a continuity here that stretches through generations," says Chessa. "Everyone has made their mark."

Christina Frangou is a writer based in Calgary. Her dream cottage is packed with good books, strong coffee, and is surrounded by miles of dreamy, gravel cycling.



◀▲ Clockwise from top middle: Chessa; Ophelia; Max; Barnaby; Max and Kristen's son, August; Max's partner, Kristen; and Chessa's husband, Steve. The wicker set in the living room and the headboard in one of the bedrooms are both original to the cabin. "We have the same headboard at the North side cabin," says Chessa. "It must have been in vogue at the time."

◀ Grandmother Julie's hat still occupies pride of place on the dresser in one of the bedrooms. The small clay pottery is from one of the family's trips back to El Salvador, where Julie was born and raised.