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Utopia by the Sea

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

IN the early mornings, when the ocean is enveloped in fog and the scent of wild iris hangs in the air, the possibility for solitude can be found on a wind-tossed path. Deer eyes stare from slender meadow grasses, and a curve in the trail along the headlands can unexpectedly yield a squadron of pelicans zooming skyward on ocean thermals.

At Sea Ranch — even the name has an aura — it is possible at once to lose and to find yourself on a path, following it past tumbledown picket fences to a driftwood throne on a secluded beach. When the architects Charles W. Moore, Joseph Esherick, William Turnbull, Donlyn Lyndon, and Richard Whitaker and the landscape architect Lawrence Halprin conceived this place along a mystical 10-mile stretch of California coast in the early 1960s, they courted the wind. They measured it, observed the way its salty gusts sculptured the cypress trees.

Eventually, they would tame the wind in architecture, its force poetically echoed in the angled plank roofs and slanted towers of the original building, Condominium One, an austere Shaker-like ode to nature's power and the first of many groundbreaking structures at Sea Ranch.

The wind still holds sway at this once-idealistic second-home community, where man and nature are engaged in an intricate dance. Sea Ranch has achieved a sort of a cult status among architecture mavens, who house-gawk rather than bird-watch, bearing a glossy tome by Mr. Lyndon, a spiritual dean of Sea Ranch, as a guide. They come to see a style forged by A-list architects (shed roofs to deflect the wind, windows punched through redwood boards) but perhaps more than that, to pay tribute to a big idea: the then-radical notion, influenced by Mr. Halprin's experience on a kibbutz, of open land held in common and houses designed in deference to nature.

Since moving to the Bay Area nine years ago, my family and I have rented numerous houses at Sea Ranch, a place that for me has become the psychic equivalent of a tubercular Victorian's healing in a sanitarium. Over the years, I have gotten to know Mr. Halprin's landscape intimately, savoring the way the trails lead to salty cliffs alive with nesting cormorants and into dark, enchanted forests straight out of the Brothers Grimm.

Like many, I fantasized about what it might be like to experience some of Sea Ranch's most iconic houses, the ones designed by the guys who dreamed up the place before the sad arrival of what might be called Sea Ranch sprawl. This past

summer, I finally got my wish, indulging in architectural promiscuity by renting Mr. Moore's fabled Unit 9 in Condominium One, a complex now on the National Register of Historic Places; an Obie Bowman-designed Walk-in Cabin; a Binker Barn designed by Mr. Turnbull; and, as the drum-rolling crescendo, or so I thought, one of the original Esherick houses tucked into a now-fetishized cypress hedgerow.

The timing was fortuitous: the Sea Ranch Lodge, the community's dated, killer-view hotel, is about to be Post Ranch-ified, as Passport Resorts, whose principals created the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur and other high-end lodges, proceeds with an expansion. The company envisions a luxurious watering hole with 15 or so house-size cottages serviced by motorized carts spilling down 52 acres of now-pristine meadow.

They will by necessity be marketing seclusion. Just getting to Sea Ranch, about two and a half hours from San Francisco, requires negotiating a stomach-churning, acrophobia-inducing sliver of Highway 1. The payoff is a relatively undiscovered, unspoiled swath of California coast — bordering Sonoma and Mendocino Counties and nicknamed Mendonoma — that mercifully has yet to be mythologized à la Mendocino village or Big Sur.

CHARLES MOORE called Sea Ranch his “Mother Earth.” All I could think of when I stepped into Unit 9 was that the little rat had kept the best place for himself.

I had this revelation while sipping coffee from a vintage Vignelli-designed mug in Mr. Moore's kitchen — a riot of painted checkerboards overseen by a textile of frisky Indian goddesses. A misty cauldron of waves was churning madly against the cliffs that Condominium One, widely considered to be one of the most influential buildings of the 1960s, seems precariously perched upon. My teenage son, Gabe, and his two pals were still asleep, white iPod wires in their ears, visions of a winged cow, a wooden dinosaur, a shadow puppet, toy blocks spelling out M-O-O-R-E and a fragment of a Corinthian column dancing on wooden beams over their heads.

A restless global wanderer and voluminous author who collected university appointments the way he did Oaxacan clay pigs (Yale, U.C.L.A., Berkeley, etc.), Mr. Moore, who died in 1993, possessed an infinite capacity for joy that was expressed in his architecture. “I think that fairy tales have a great deal to teach us architects,” he once wrote. The way that most magical adventures, he observed, “end in time for tea seems to me worth careful looking into.”

His twinkly view of the universe lives on in Unit 9, which has been delightfully frozen in amber by his family, who still own it, down to the papier-mâché ponies and abalone shells inserted into the 14th-century tile ceiling fragment on the wall. It thus has become a shrine for architects, whose rhapsodies fill the guest register.

Hovering gluttonously over the ocean, the condo was Mr. Moore's salon-by-the-sea, filled with students and a blizzard of manuscripts. Today, it is a powerful argument

for the afterlife, an indoor fairy tale with a four-poster bedroom loft held up by logs, creating a cozy shelter underneath. For Gabe and his friends, Pete and Gabe D., a cadre of teenage Coppolas equipped with a digital movie camera who had resoundingly rejected Mr. Moore's leftover jigsaw puzzles of Queen Elizabeth in Parliament and the Tokyo subway system, it was the perfect place to plot a literal cliffhanger.

My most vivid memory of Mr. Moore, whom I interviewed six years before his death, involved the spectacle of the architect as human periscope, swimming in the pool around midnight at his compound in Austin, Tex., and clutching a flashlight aimed at the water so that he'd be able to spot wayward tarantulas.

Puttering around the kitchen the morning of my visit, admiring Mr. Moore's global tchotchkes, I realized things were getting weird. "Where does Charles keep the vacuum cleaner?" I muttered to myself. "I wonder if Charles has a steamer."

I knew Mr. Moore had worked his magic when I found Gabe sprawled on the turquoise cushions of the saddlebag — a trademark Moore feature in which windows project out of the main space — gazing at the horizon. "Hey, Mom," he wondered. "If you went straight across the ocean, where would you be?"

Daydreaming is the emotional agenda at Sea Ranch. It's a place to watch a hummingbird with your coffee or to observe a deer grazing improbably on a sloping grass-covered green roof.

It is a place to drink too much wine while being transfixed by harbor seals with your college roommate and then being unable to find your way home in the foggy dark. The possibility for both discovery and community undergirds Sea Ranch, an early example of ecological planning that, for better and worse, spawned suburban wannabes across the country. The founding ideal, shaped by Mr. Halprin and his all-star cast, was that 10 stupendous miles of California coast were something to be shared rather than subdivided.

The early architecture was communal and modest, with houses clustered perpendicular to the ocean so that everyone would have a view, leaving the meadows open and held in common. Houses were sited to settle into the landscape, like quail nesting. "This wasn't a place to show off your architecture," said Mr. Whitaker, now a 79-year-old renegade. "Buildings were meant to be like geodes, ordinary rocks on the outside with the inside going gangbusters."

Too much of that philosophy has bitten the proverbial dust, a long, bloody tale of politics, real estate, public access to the coast and the sad disconnect between taste and money. Today there are essentially two Sea Ranches: The southern portion, planned by Mr. Halprin et al.; and the later more suburbanized north, with cul-de-sacs and palazzos along the bluffs.

But plenty of the genuine item survives, including the Moonraker Athletic Center, one of three recreation centers with pool, tennis court and family sauna (this is California after all). Along with miles of hiking, biking and horse trails and a Scottish-style golf course, the centers are major perks for renters, who must dangle passes from their rearview mirrors. Moonraker is a stark, weathered cathedral of chlorine, all but buried in an earthen berm.

AT the Obie Bowman Walk-in Cabin I rented, the first challenge was finding the door. Spatial organization has never been my forte. Anxiety mounting, I finally spied a padlock attached to a sliding barn wall. Eventually, I realized it was the door. Architects! I cursed.

The conceit of the Walk-in Cabins, a remote gathering of 15 troll-like dwellings in a kingdom of redwoods in the hills above Highway 1, is that no cars are allowed. They are left about a quarter-mile down a dirt road, which sounds romantic until you realize that your garbage has to walk out the same way.

Make no mistake. Sea Ranch is not pussyfooter terrain. I was reminded of this fact when, traveling solo this time and relieved at having found the front door, I perused the welcoming material: a form to fill out should I spot a mountain lion, with blank spaces for size, color, tail and attitude.

Mr. Bowman, who still works in Healdsburg, was a shopping center designer in Los Angeles when he took a trip up the coast and discovered Sea Ranch. After the Walk-ins were completed in 1972, he remarked that the spartan cabins, recipients of umpteen design awards, were about the size of the restrooms in his shopping centers.

In contrast to the Moore condo, with its drama-queen ocean views, the Walk-ins are about quietude, the light feathering through the redwoods. With its compact loft bed, wood stove and twee kitchen, it all felt a bit like inhabiting a lifestyle magazine edited by the redwood-dwelling activist Julia Butterfly Hill.

One of the pleasures of a rental, of course, is imagining the real owners (the tip-off here may have been the stuffed gnome in a basket). Exhausted, I hiked down to the ocean, where the harbor seals were sunning on the rocks like old couples by the pool in Miami Beach. They seemed to have the right idea. So I hiked back up to the cabin and promptly collapsed on the deck into savasana, the yoga corpse pose. I let the breeze, sun and scent of pines lull me before soaking in the hot tub (life is tough at Sea Ranch).

The only sign of fellow humans in the dense thicket were scattered lights at dusk — the home fires burning in our little warren of Prius-driving hobbits.

EVERY visit to Sea Ranch has a mood. I have watched migrating gray whales breach the surface from Walk-On Beach, experienced a near-tsunami with pelting rain

followed by brilliant sun at Christmas. During abalone season, when divers routinely lose their lives (three so far at Sea Ranch this year), bulbous wet-suited figures with inner tubes around their waists scramble down rocks to plunge into the churning kelp-ridden abyss.

Like the weather, houses set a tone. And it was an exhilarating one in Barn Dance, one of 17 Binker Barns designed by William Turnbull, who died in 1997 and designed the houses to be replicated around Sea Ranch. As soon as my husband, Roger, and I opened the wooden door — artfully carved in quilt-like patterns — we knew we'd hit pay dirt.

The house is poetry in wood, a beautifully fashioned breakfront in architecture. Built like a barn, with plank walls and crisscrossing beams with exposed bolts, it felt like a totally chic abstraction of Nebraska, with an airy central space soaring to the roof and a staircase winding up to an interior bridge leading to the bedrooms. The dining area and kitchen had me convinced I could cook like Thomas Keller. They were enfolded in lustrous Douglas fir, with light streaming ethereally through clerestory windows.

Roger promptly deposited himself on a lounge chair beside the fireplace, becoming positively ecstatic when he discovered the owner's voluminous CD collection, including the obscure "Veedon Fleece"*/ by Van Morrison, with whom he is obsessed. Shortly thereafter he proclaimed, "I want to live in a Turnbull house!"

Warmed by radiant-heat floors, I cracked open the guest register, in which the owners had charmingly chronicled their own escapades, including a week of nonstop rain in which they hunted for mushrooms and watched bygone episodes of "The West Wing."

Gualala, a village nearby, offers escape valves for the stir-crazy: a couple of excellent restaurants; a fine-foods store, a bookstore, a first-rate crafts gallery and even an au courant design store, Placewares (Mendocino and the Anderson Valley wineries are a curvy hour-and-a-half drive away).

The most popular hangout at Sea Ranch is the Twofish Baking Company, which has morphed into an ad hoc community center for the growing number of full-timers, many of them aerobic grandparents.

But there remains a psychic divide between people who are drawn to Sea Ranch for its history and those who regard it as a generic seaside resort. The impending transformation of the lodge is causing some fear and loathing. "A highly processed destination resort, with all sorts of pleasure amenities, will bring people with different expectations and a less deep commitment to the place," said Kenneth Wachter, a demography professor at Berkeley who was walking his poodle not far from the house he and his wife bought on their honeymoon 26 years ago.

Arguably, Sea Ranch's most hallowed ground are the Hedgerow Houses, a group of genteel rustic shacks that Joseph Esherick tucked inconspicuously into a row of wind-blown cypress trees not far from Black Point Beach.

Along with Condominium One, they define the Sea Ranch style. Mr. Esherick, a master craftsman of space who died in 1998, used to say that "the ideal kind of building is one you don't see."

For renters, the prime Hedgerow House is the one that Mr. Esherick designed for himself, a sophisticated cottage with ship-like woodwork that seems to all but disappear into the meadow grasses.

A mere 875 square feet, the house is made from inexpensive materials though its spatial arrangements are quite complex. Ironically perhaps, the current owner, Jim Friedman, builds \$10 million to \$20 million 20,000-square-foot houses for a living. "The Esherick house has taught me that really great architecture doesn't require gilding a lily," he said.

Sadly, the house was already spoken for, so the rental agency, Sea Ranch Escape, suggested an alternative Hedgerow House also designed by Mr. Esherick.

So it was a crushing blow to open the door and find pickled woodwork, wall-to-wall carpeting and Venetian blinds — a Motel Esherick. Trying to cheer me up, Roger gamely kept chanting "location, location, location."

Nevertheless, I began to suspect that our abode wasn't even an Esherick because the conventional arrangement of spaces was so un-Esherick-like. Several days later, a Deep Throat with access to the historic files confirmed that the house was designed in the manner of Esherick by Van Norten Logan, a little-known architect turned land investor.

It was then that I felt the palpable presence of the ghost of Joe Esherick returning to my beloved Sea Ranch.

IF YOU GO

In the Zen sense, it's hard to go wrong with any house at Sea Ranch (just don't forget to bring your own sheets and towels). The nicest agency to deal with is Ocean View Properties (707-884-3538; www.oceanviewprop.com; \$200 to \$250 a night for William Turnbull's Barn Dance). Rams Head Realty rents a number of homes at Sea Ranch, including the Redwood Cottage Walk-in Cabin (800-785-3455; www.ramshead.com; \$342 for two nights). Sea Ranch Escape (707-785-2426; www.searanchescape.com) has the largest collection of prime rentals by classic architects, including Unit 9 (\$468 to \$525 for two nights) and the real Esherick house (\$761 for two nights).

Sea Ranch 101: "The Sea Ranch" by Donlyn Lyndon and Jim Alinder (Princeton Architectural, 2004); "The Sea Ranch ... Diary of an Idea" by Lawrence Halprin (Spacemaker, 2002); "The Place of Houses" by Charles Moore, Gerald Allen and Donlyn Lyndon (University of California, 1974); "William Turnbull: Buildings in the Landscape" (William Stout, 2000); "Appropriate: The Houses of Joseph Esherick" by Marc Treib (William Stout, 2008). The Sea Ranch Association Web site (www.tsra.org) is also an excellent resource.

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