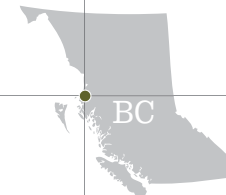




▶ Canada's rainiest region fosters the thick coat of moss on this cabin's roof, making it blend into the natural landscape so much as to almost be a part of it.



# PIONEER CABINS OF THE NORTH COAST

Hiding from the rain in Prince Rupert's forgotten mountain cabins, where the people that maintain them strive to keep the spirit of the backwoods lifestyle alive

BY MATT J. SIMMONS

**F**or once, it's not raining. The skies above Prince Rupert are remarkably clear of clouds for a city that bears the dubious distinction of being Canada's rainiest city. The few clouds that do punctuate the blue sky are of the vast, windswept variety and the sunny scene is idyllic. But the soggy ground under my feet reveals with every step the region's true character. Whether it's wanted or not, that accolade of precipitation is well deserved; Prince Rupert gets an annual average of more than 2,500 millimetres of precipitation.

Like its ability to erode a landscape over time, all that falling water has shaped the way in which the people who live here experience the outdoors. As I trudge over the wet ground, working my way up to the top of a local mountain, I glance skyward and glimpse a clearing: ▶





▣ The shingled siding and hand-hewn foundations are testament to why these cabins need to be respected.

there is no access but a steep, obscured trail, and it's only the wolves and deer that keep you company. In another climate, you might only find fire-pits, tent pads, and the simple utilitarian structures that follow the trails of fishers and hunters across the province. But on the north coast, where the skies open up on a regular basis and release the full burden of the clouds, the landscape is, quite literally, littered with cabins of every kind.

On alpine lakes, up on top of mountains and ridges, and on the lushly vegetated banks of rivers that cut through the rugged terrain, the cabins of the north coast are almost as ubiquitous to the landscape as its vast tracts of muskeg. Bob Blain, an avid outdoorsman in every respect, grew up in Prince Rupert exploring the terrain and maintaining these cabins, as did his parents and their parents before them.

Blain's grandfather, Leon Blain, is featured in archival photographs of pioneer life in Prince Rupert in a recent publication, *Prince Rupert: An Illustrated History*.

"Much of the outdoor activities back then were related more to survival, food gathering, and hunting and fishing for sustenance rather than for recreation," says Blain. Looking at a picture of his grinning grandfather crouched heroically under a towering wooden rack on which hung 11 deer, he laughs. "That's them going grocery shopping."

Prince Rupert was—and still is—the end of the road. And to this day, it's a hard climate to live in. In early days a deficit of food deliveries from outside the region—not to mention the obvious lack of refrigeration—made subsistence hunting and fishing a necessity.

"My grandparents first lived across the harbour here in Rupert in a 'cabin'...their house," says Blain. "[They] rowed in an open rowboat across the harbour to Rupert every day, to go to work and to take my dad to school. When they used to go inland before the highway was built, they would row a boat from the harbour through to Kloiya Bay [about 15 kilometres away] then walk/hike for miles along the old telegraph line to get to the various trails into lakes and up mountains in order to hunt and fish."

These hard-working pioneers of life in a wet landscape built the trails and later the cabins where they spent much of their time "grocery shopping" out in the wilderness. "When we were kids we hiked around all the time, helped mom, dad, [and] grandparents build and maintain trails and cabins, cut firewood, etc., and now it's all we can do to get our kids off the damn couch and away from the TV and computer long enough to go for a walk or short hike anywhere anymore!" He laughs. "I know I'm ranting but you asked."

a cabin. Here, impossibly located on the precipice of a slope that tumbles a thousand feet down into a remote lake that feeds into the Skeena River is a hand-built log cabin. Here, where there are no roads,

He has a point. The life of these oases in the wild depends on their continued use. The occasional hunter huddling down in a little log building for one week a year is hardly enough. But they do get used, especially the more accessible buildings. The visitor's journals that feature on every cabin's kitchen table are always full of signatures and stories. One cabin proudly displays three journals, all filled with the exuberant stories of locals and lucky tourists, each group spending a night under the shingled roof. Hikers and hunters alike share the same space. But the busyness that these Skeena River cabins once saw seems to have drifted away like the Pacific fog that rolls in from the sea every night.

"There were always people coming and going up there," recalls Peter Loy, another longtime local with a passion for the local landscape. "There was so much activity."

The particular cabin he refers to is a spectacularly located log building, perched on the steep shore of a cold mountain lake. Built by two families, the cabin saw a lot of visitors in its early years. Loy was just a teenager then, but as best friend to one of the sons, he

spent his fair share of time behind the cedar-shingled walls. "I didn't have a lot to do with the actual building of the cabin," he admits and laughs. "We were so busy."

But he looks wistful as he reminisces about all the memories made in and around the cabin: scrambling in the mountains, paddling on the lake in the summer and skating on it in the winter, celebrating the New Year by the woodstove. It's the collective moments spent within its walls that really bring a building to life.

But the moments are becoming just that: moments, a majority of them shared by only a few families and friends. Many of the cabins here are hidden, both from obvious access and from local knowledge, primarily because of a very real fear of vandalism. These cabins, some every bit as amazing as

**"The cabins of BC's north coast are almost as ubiquitous to the landscape as its vast tracts of muskeg."**



▣ Reflections of the stunning view from the cabin porch.

an elaborately constructed lakefront property on Vancouver Island, are effectively located in the middle of nowhere. And, really, like most

cottages, they're only part-time residences, weekend getaways shared by a community of outdoors enthusiasts. Sadly, when word gets out there's a cool cabin only a short hike up a mountain, some visitors don't adhere to that unwritten code of ethics regarding the use of a building in the wilderness: leave it as you found it, chop firewood for the next party, and so on. Worse still, sometimes that lack of respect leads to destruction. Several cabins in the Rupert area have met with a fiery demise, caused by carelessness or vandalism. It's no wonder then, that the locations of cabins here are fiercely protected.

"Furniture or walls and counters and cupboards, even wooden hand-built boats [are] burned up by people too thoughtless or lazy to actually cut firewood themselves," says Blain.

"Every spring—when we haven't been out for a few months—we just hold our breath," adds Loy, speaking of his guiding company's



▣ This massive stone fireplace keeps the cabin toasty when the inevitable rain pours down outside.



small site. This fear is a sad reality of building out in the woods.

Blain cites a combination of infrequent use with thoughtless use, as the factors that culminate in the destruction of a cabin. Not to mention, maintaining a property in this climate is no easy task. "These places eventually rot from the harsh climate of this beautiful coastal rainforest in which they were built," says Blain. "[They] fall down, crushed from the weight of the snow load in particularly harsh winters."

Trails are constantly threatened by the thick bush, boardwalks disintegrate after only a few years, and foundations for buildings have to be carefully cared for if they're going to last. Cottaging in a northern rainforest takes a lot of work.

"Today there is a greener, [more] environmentally friendly youth," Blain continues, hopeful. "[They're] aware of the need to preserve things, but the recreation pursuits have changed a bit with a shift away from fishing and hunting, and toward more extreme types of sporting things like whitewater kayaking.

"[It's] great seeing younger people getting back out into the wilderness, but many of them seem to have lost the sense of pioneering spirit that drove the earlier, previous generations. They don't have to work as hard to get places and do things, and because of this, their connection to these places is somewhat more temporary and brief in nature—they come and go again quickly, and don't stay anywhere long enough or frequently enough to want to establish trails and build cabins."

But while Prince Rupert's golden age of cabins might be somewhat muted these days, it's not over. "We start simply by trying to share these places with our own children and friends and family," says Blain. Loy agrees, and he's taking it one step further. As an instruc-

It's hard not to feel a connection with nature when presented with this kind of landscape.



tor with various outdoor after school programs, he's leading the way to getting a younger generation back out in the woods. And as kids make their way along muddy trails and spend nights playing games by the glow of a woodstove, little gumboots stashed by the door, hope is breathed back into the cabin culture.

Even the cabins that met their demise from a hard winter or from the relentless rain are treats to find on trails throughout the region. An old abandoned ski cabin sits tucked away in the snow on top of

Mount Hays; the foundations and odd relics of cottaging paraphernalia slowly rot on the wet shores of Tona Lake. These recent additions to the archaeological record are bursting with memories, and each carefully crafted structure teetering on oblivion in the bush is a testament to the pioneering spirit of the hardworking individuals who hacked their way into the thick coastal rainforest to play.

I cook up a hot lunch as black clouds start to spit big drops of water. A LEGO Eiffel Tower stands proudly on the wooden win-

dowsill. Even without a fire going, it's warmer inside than it is out in the elements. For a while I just quietly stare up at the mountains and soak up their ancient peacefulness as the steam rises from a gas stove. There's something revitalizing about this place—it resonates through the floorboards and in the walls. I know I have to go back out into the rain—and I love being out there, exposed and small—but for now, I feel safe and warm, enclosed within the walls of a Skeena River cabin. ☺



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