

The

**No space is no problem for
this family of off-gridders
on B.C.'s Anderson Lake**

BY EVA HOLLAND
PHOTOGRAPHY KAMIL BIALOUS

really

great

outdoors



THERE IS A SMALL cabin in a quiet corner of southern B.C., set against rocky cliffs above a deep, narrow slice of lake: Anderson Lake. A rack of elk antlers is fastened above the little cabin's front door, and from the end of the antlers, hanging from a piece of twine, is a wooden sign. In a cheerful font, it reads: "Be nice, go play outside."

The sign is a message to the three children of Catherine Aird and Sholto Shaw, who bought the property ten years ago. "I'm always telling them, 'play outside,'" says Catherine. Certainly it's a statement of the family's cottaging philosophy, but it's also practical. The off-grid cabin is small and its amenities are limited. The wilderness around it is boundless.

The building is largely unchanged since it was built by gold miners in the mid-1930s—though the details are sketchy. "Government records say that it was built in 1937," says Sholto. "But beyond that, there's kind of no history. There's no one to ask."

For decades it was a long-term leasehold property, as were most of the other lots on Anderson Lake. (Back then, the area was only reachable via a rough, one-lane logging road from Squamish, 140 km away—and the drive took a full day.) The previous owner held the lease before seizing an opportunity to buy it

The Anderson Lake property is 1.5 acres, with 250 feet of lake frontage, but much of the craggy land is too vertical for regular use.

2 parents
3 kids
1 dog
no electricity
350
sq. ft.



from the government in the mid-1990s, and in turn, Catherine and Sholto bought it from him in 2012.

These days, it's an hour's drive to Anderson Lake from their home in Whistler. You head north, hang a left off the highway just past Pemberton, and pass almost immediately out of cellular service range. The road follows a narrow valley, squeezed between peaks, until it dead-ends. There, the lake begins at the tiny, unincorporated town of D'Arcy and stretches away for about 20 kilometres, arcing north and east, sandwiched between the steep green slopes of the lesser Coast Mountains. The lake is long, cold, and deep (nearly 200 metres deep in places). Salmon surge up the length of the lake in summer, nearing the end of their long run from the ocean, while deer and cougar haunt its hills. There are 70 or so cabins scattered along the lake's steep edges, and apart from a handful of places, all of the properties there are reachable only by boat. They're also entirely off-grid.

So how exactly do two parents, two kids, one teenager, and an energetic Australian shepherd—not to mention regular crowds of visiting friends and neighbours—make a no-frills cottage life work in just 350 sq. ft.? They go play outside.

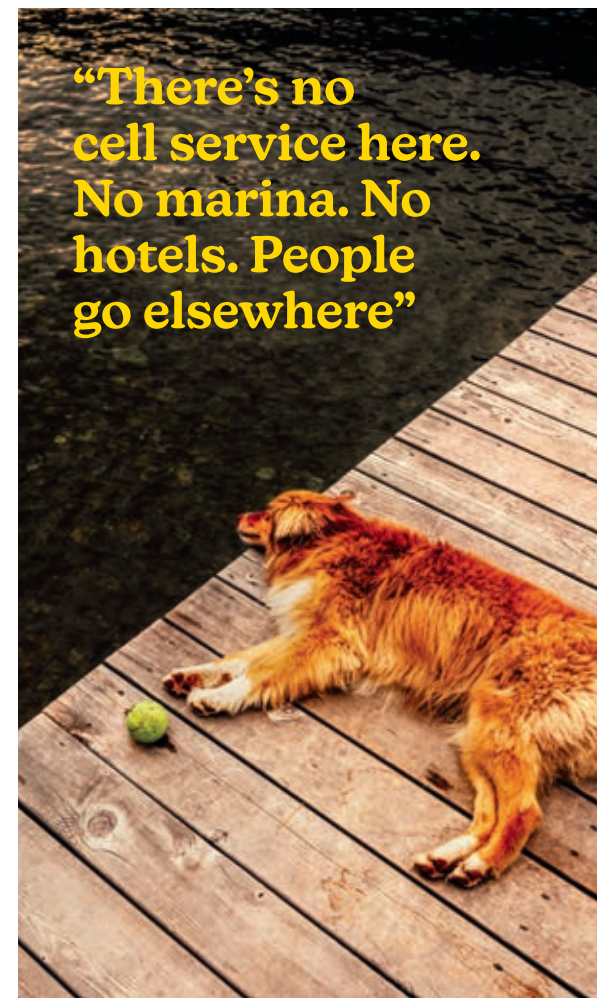
HENRY DAVID THOREAU famously wrote in *Walden* about his life in a small cottage on Massachusetts's Walden Pond. But at one point in the book, he also describes a large, metal box he'd seen in a railyard and speculated that it wouldn't make a bad home base either. "Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box," he wrote, "who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this."

For Catherine and Sholto, the property on Anderson Lake was an opportunity to buy up a small cabin. They'd heard about the lake, and the rare opportunity to buy a place there, from one of Sholto's fellow lawyers in Whistler. "Who would need a cottage when you live in Whistler?"

Though some of the neighbours lament the fact that there is now a smattering of solar lights around the lake, "it's still more pretty than it is a nuisance," says Catherine. "It shows that there's life here."



"There's no cell service here. No marina. No hotels. People go elsewhere"



Sholto asks. "It's not a big city. You can walk or ride your bike to any of the lakes there." But at the time, Whistler had just co-hosted the 2010 Olympic Games, and the town was a long way from being a quiet wilderness idyll. (It's only gotten busier since—these days, at least in non-pandemic times, Whistler receives three million visitors annually.) Anderson Lake, on the other hand, was and still is tucked away from it all. "There's no cell service. No marina. No hotels. No bars," says Sholto. "There are no rental properties, because nothing is turnkey. People go elsewhere." Its out-of-the-way location and lack of infrastructure had kept it affordable. And the stark granite of its cliff walls reminded Sholto of his childhood visits to camp on Georgian Bay. The family went for it.

After they'd bought, they had a choice. "Either we had to redo the whole cabin," says Catherine, "or we had to live outside." They decided on the latter, and instead of expanding the little cabin, they built extensive decking around the building, a large wooden tent pad on the cliffs above the lake, and a larger dock. Inside, a kitchen area occupies one corner, and a small table and a couple of chairs, another. Beyond them, there are

two couches that fold out into beds, and a woodstove. A ladder leads up to a sleeping loft that is almost entirely filled up by another two mattresses. Catherine and Sholto filter water from a nearby waterfall-fed creek and they get their power (just enough to run a wireless router, LED lights, and the coffee grinder) from a small solar panel array. There's a composting toilet out back, partially tucked beneath the eaves of the cabin, and an outhouse a short walk from the main building.

There were a "series of reasons" why they decided to leave the cabin as is, says Sholto. At the time, "we didn't have a choice financially. And with it being off-grid and water access, it's a chore to do anything, to get any tradespeople here," he says. At some point, the family might renovate or add on to the cabin, they admit, but right now? "It's complicated, and we don't care that much," says Catherine. "We don't need more."

They were a smaller family when they first arrived. Tristan, now 18, is just old enough to remember life before Anderson Lake. Colin, 11, was a baby when his parents bought the cabin, and Chloé, 9, came along soon after the purchase. (Snowy the dog is another latecomer.) Even so, in a pinch—on a rare rainy day, say—they can all eat and sleep inside.

The outer deck is their main dining room. It holds a much larger table and chairs, and a set of couches as well. Chloé and Colin like to pitch their own tents on the wide, roomy dock (no one has ever tossed and turned themselves into the lake in the night, they note) while Tristan more often puts his up on the tent pad at the south end of the property. Catherine likes to roll her sleeping bag out in the open, under the wide expanse of a clear night sky. There's nothing but the occasional solar-charged lantern at a distant neighbour's place to interrupt the darkness, and Anderson Lake lies in the transition zone between the high Lillooet desert and the heart of the Coast Range. So for the most part, in summer, the area is hot, dry, and free of bugs. >>

Along with a trampoline and tent pad, the property houses a wood-fired sauna, a storage shed, the outhouse, and terraced garden boxes on the hill above the plateau.

The property and its possibilities feel expansive, regardless of the cabin's size

Want to unplug at the lake? Get the benefits of Wi-Fi without being chained to Wi-Fi

1

Use it for work

(if it allows you more time at the cottage), but not for play. "Other than rainy evenings in the fall or spring, we don't really spend time on our devices," says Sholto. He and Catherine might sit on the deck and check in with the office—but only on weekdays.

2

Use it for logistics.

That's not cheating. And it'll give you more time with your guests, and therefore, more time unplugged: "When we have friends up, there is usually too much going on to think about devices," says Sholto. Before Wi-Fi, planning was difficult. "Guests would often be late, or early," he says. "Most cottages here don't have internet, so we regularly see people at the main docks waiting for guests, or guests waiting for a ride out to the cottage."

3

Keep your phone

somewhere where "you can't just pick it up and casually start scrolling, for example, locked in the glove box of the boat," says Sholto. If it's a real effort to go get it, you're more likely to do something else instead.

4

Alternatively,

put it somewhere where "everyone would see you on it," he says. Thinking that you'll be chastised ("It's the cottage! Why are you on your phone/laptop/iPad?") might keep you from picking it up in the first place.—*Jackie Davis*

“We’re forced to be unplugged,” says Catherine. And for the most part, the children get it



The Anderson Lake climate is significantly warmer and drier than it is in Whistler. “So we’re always in the water,” says Catherine. Even when it rains, the family prefers to dine outdoors. “We have a big umbrella that we can eat under.”

“It’s peaceful and quiet,” says Catherine. And although there’s lots of wildlife close by—*really* close by: a cougar recently walked “right up” to a cottager with a cabin on the north end of the lake, she says—no one is ever concerned about sleeping outside, exposed. “We know the animals are there,” says Catherine. “But I’m more worried about a branch falling down in a windstorm than I am about cougars.”

A narrow footpath runs up and over the hill to the nearest neighbour’s cabin a few minutes away—one of Catherine’s closest friends who bought the property next door. But in full summer, they’re more likely to swim or paddleboard over for a cocktail, rather than walk. They also sail, kayak, waterski, hydrofoil, and go tubing on “an inflatable hot dog,” says Sholto. Well, the kids do. “We thought a hot dog would be less deadly than an actual tube.”



Sometimes they all climb in the powerboat and explore the lake, finding secret picnic spots and hiking to waterfalls. Catherine is into long-distance swimming: she’ll pull on a wetsuit and slip into the lake for an hour or more at a time, towing an orange floatie behind her for safety as she strokes past the neighbours lounging on their docks and decks. “It’s a good workout,” says Catherine. But more importantly, it’s a beautiful workout. The water is cold (“It’s not for the faint of heart,” she says), but clear. “You can see 70 feet down. I see schools of fish when I’m swimming. It’s like being in the Caribbean.”

Their lives revolve around the water, and that’s what makes the property and its possibilities feel so expansive, regardless of the cabin’s size. “Go play outside” might just as well be “go play in the lake.”

The Wi-Fi lets them communicate with the outside world, but it’s usually off. The kids—and their parents—“are





It's an existence stripped down to bathing suits and sand and sweat and sunscreen

"There are no real signs of the modern world here," says Sholto (right, with Chloé). "So we usually feel like we've been away for a long time, even if it's only been a couple of days."

forced to be unplugged," says Catherine. And for the most part, the children get it. Colin, asked if he ever finds the cabin too small, responds—and not surprisingly—"There's lots of room outside." He spends his time sailing in the family's small boat and jumping off the property's rocky cliffs with his friends—both the children of other Anderson Lake families and Whistler friends who come down to their cabin to visit. The cliff-jumping sessions can be marathons: up to three hours of plunge and repeat. Chloé likes to chase lizards and snakes, and sleeping in her tent, in part because it's so quiet out there. "There's not a lot of noise when my dad makes coffee in the morning."

(Colin: "You wake up earlier than when he makes coffee anyway!" Chloé: "That is not true." Colin: "That is 100 per cent true!")

These days, Tristan doesn't always go to the lake with the rest of the family. He's old enough to stay home in Whistler alone. He works in restaurants in the summers, and he has sports and other commitments tying him to town. "It's just pretty far from everybody and everything that's going on," he says.

His rapid path to adulthood is part of the reason why Sholto and Catherine have never wanted to get bogged down in renovations and expansions. "We'll do all that and then we won't have time to enjoy it with our kids," Catherine says. "When you have one that's a teenager, you realize how quick it can happen."

Of course, even without renos, there's a lot of work behind a deceptively simple existence. "It takes so long to get everything done," says Catherine. But at Anderson Lake, "everyone helps each other." Each spring and fall, the couple and their immediate neighbours have to set out and then haul in the sprawling network of pipes and hoses that bring water to each family, carrying the hardware along steep forest trails on foot. Everything on the property has at some point been driven to the boat launch, unloaded and then reloaded into a small craft by hand, ferried to the property, and



then unloaded again and hauled up the hill: basics such as food, lumber, propane to keep the fridge running, but sometimes the loads are more memorable. When they first bought the cabin, they planted two young apple trees and a peach tree. (The apples are thriving; the peaches get ravaged by the deer.) But on the day they bought the trees and drove them down, they already had a full load for their little aluminum skiff. So Catherine and Tristan, then still a child, paddled the potted saplings across the lake in a canoe.

THERE'S SOMETHING TIMELESS about the cabin on Anderson Lake and the style of cottaging that it requires—or, perhaps, that it helps us to recover. It's an existence stripped down to bathing suits and sand and sweat and sunscreen; active days and dark-sky nights; cold water and warm sleeping bags.

In 1936, at around the same time that the building was first nailed together, the American philosopher Richard Gregg raised a concern that echoes loudly today. "It is time to call a halt on endless gadgeteering," he wrote. "We think that our machinery and technology will save us time and give us more leisure, but really they make life more crowded and hurried." It's hard to imagine which gadgets he may have been fretting over then. Certainly, we have a much wider selection today. But Anderson Lake is a reminder that actually, the solution to "endless gadgeteering" is simple. Be nice, go play outside. 🐾

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