



Photos: David Morrison

**DENISE GRATTON AND  
JULIE GEREMIA WITH  
CANINE COMPANIONS,  
HIBOU AND RICO**



# THE BLUE OWL ON DENMAN ISLAND: A Cottage Built of History and Love

By David Morrison

*Hospice—noun: a house of rest for pilgrims, strangers etc.*

Fixed over the entrance to The Blue Owl B&B on Denman Island is a piece of gently arched old wood. It would be perfectly feasible to stay in this intimate little cottage for days and not notice it, or else spot it but not give it a second thought. Yet when learning the significance of this seemingly ordinary object, its history and why it is there, I feel you will be as delighted as I was and, if you're like me, rather moved by the story.

Set in five acres of tranquil rural beauty, The Blue Owl is owned and run by Julie Geremia and Denise Gratton. Personality-wise this couple is truly chalk and cheese—Geremia is a bubbly chatterbox, Gratton a gentle introvert—yet on the evidence of what they have created with The Blue Owl it is obviously a dynamic combination.

*“...the inviting rustic aesthetic of its cosy interior grabs you immediately upon entry.”*

This is one of those rare accommodations where it is clear how much time was spent in chin-stroking deliberation over precisely where to position each item of furniture, how to place every functional or decorative item, and where to hang the wall art in order to maximize the overall visual impact. The result, as if this lovely, hand-crafted cottage is not attractive enough from the outside, is that the inviting rustic aesthetic of its cosy interior grabs you immediately upon entry. With every detail, the love that has gone into creating this space is obvious.

From the entrance the cottage presents an open-plan living room with a fully equipped kitchenette and recessed wood-burning stove to the right. To the left, a wooden staircase with a stunning, hand-built natural alder banister leads up to the loft bedroom, where a queen-sized bed awaits. (All felled on the property, alder features prominently in the cottage's construction.) Occupying the wall under the staircase is a  $\frac{3}{4}$  Murphy Bed—the shelves of the unit housing such as a CD player/radio and CDs, books and a functioning

Lego® telephone! A chaise longue occupies the left hand corner, while the right features a marble-topped dresser with an emerald tile backboard. The other main features of the living area are a tall antique dresser with stripped turquoise paint for that cool distressed look, and a folk art chair by local artist Velda from the neighbouring Windy Marsh Farm. (See sidebar.) Mercifully for such a peaceful location, there is no television. Each end of the cottage features two small stained glass windows picked up on Main St., Vancouver by Geremia years ago. The bathroom, accessed at the right hand corner, boasts a classy, retro-style claw-foot tub and, la piece de resistance, a two-person Radiant Health Sauna™.

## COMPLIMENTARY SIGNATURE WINE AND CHOCOLATES







**THE ARC OF OLD WOOD OVER THE BLUE OWL'S ENTRANCE CARRIES A LOT OF HISTORY**

Photos: David Morrison



**ALDER BANISTER**





The finishing touches come in the form of a gorgeous array of art. Denman Islanders Leslie Dunsmore, Lynda Dabbs and Bentley LeBaron are all represented, as well as Tessa Fenger from Hornby Island alongside beautiful pieces from around the world.

The Blue Owl officially opened for business on April 11, 2009—Geremia’s birthday, and over two years since construction began. It was the realization of a long held vision for the cheery, Vancouver-born and raised Geremia.

“I’ve always had something in my head, ever since I was young, that I wanted to create a space where the weary traveler could rest, somewhere they would feel some sense of healing, cradling or nurturing,” she says. It is no coincidence that she describes the resultant accommodation in this way, as both she and Gratton come from a caregiving professional background.

Gratton hails from a small French community in Manitoba. She fell in love with Vancouver and BC in general

during a vacation in 1978, moving to the city in 1980. The majority of her working life has been spent in the computer industry, but she entered the field of palliative care after visiting May’s Place in Vancouver, where Geremia had been volunteering each Friday.

“Julie said there was a patient who spoke only French, so it would be good if I could come so they could communicate with this man,” she recalls. “I went with Julie the next Friday, but he had already died. But it brought me through those doors and I started volunteering every Friday night. I then quit a 16 year-old job, took a nursing course and started work specializing in palliative care at the hospice at St. Michaels (Centre) and working with addicts at the Dr. Peter Aids Foundation. It’s such demanding work that I eventually said to Julie: ‘I want to simplify, work part-time and experience island living.’ Julie said: ‘Have I got an island for you!’”

Geremia first visited Denman Island 35 years ago,



LOVELY FURNITURE AND LOCAL ARTWORKS



returning to stay from 1979 to 1982. She has always harboured a deep love for the island, and so it was when the timing was right that the couple bought the main house and land in February 2003, then started hatching plans for the permanent move from Vancouver. Once on the island for good, the idea of building The Blue Owl on their property began over time to take shape.

Several skilled Denman Islanders and other friends were involved in the construction of the cottage. (Geremia and Gratton are keen to publicly give kudos to Stuart, Tony, Jeff, Mike, Jack, Nova, Bob and his daughter, Laura.) Of particular interest (supplied by Stuart) is the hip roof forming the top half of the cottage.

“It was found a block from Fisherman’s Wharf in Co-mox on a piece of property that was being sold,” Geremia explains. “(Denman farmer) Wes Piercy said to me: ‘I’ve seen that building before. That roof used to sit on the old Wright Farm (now the Lone Pine Farm) many years ago.’ There’s no evidence to this end, but I do believe it to be true and I’m sticking to it! I really think it’s found its way home.” Such a possibility delights Geremia: “I’ve always had a love for old things, things that speak to you, things with great stories attached to them; I’m big on that.”

The most important old thing of all in The Blue Owl is that piece of gently arched wood above the entrance. Just over a decade ago Geremia worked at what is now St. James’ Cottage Hospice in Burrard View Park, Vancouver. Formerly amongst other functions a Children’s Aid Society orphanage, the historic 86 year-old building was subject to a major restoration project, reopening in May 1999. Geremia, a keen photographer, composed a photo essay of the overhaul and received a section of the original entrance archway from a restorer as a souvenir. It is a treasured artifact with a history Geremia feels embodies the spirit she always had in mind for The Blue Owl—somewhere to feel safe, to rest, and to experience that “sense of healing, cradling or nurturing.” With this magical little retreat in its serene pastoral setting, that is *exactly* what these two dedicated caregivers have created. ●

*The Blue Owl is at 8850 Owl Crescent, Denman Island. For further information and booking details contact Julie Geremia and Denise Gratton on (250) 335 3440 or visit [www.blueowlondenman.ca](http://www.blueowlondenman.ca).*

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**THE BLUE OWL IS EMBELLISHED THROUGHOUT BY PIECES FROM LOCAL ARTISTS, LIKE VELDA'S FOLK ART CHAIR**

# Kids Expo

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Saturday, May 29th  
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## Things to do on Denman Island

### Boyle Point Provincial Park

An easy forest trail leads to two viewpoints offering great views of Eagle Rock, Chrome Island lighthouse and across Baynes Sound to Vancouver Island.

### Windy Marsh Farm

Purchase Velda's delightful folk art as well as organic produce, eggs and much more from Bob and Velda's farm stand.

### Lindsay Dickson Nature Reserve

Trails run through 134 acres of magnificent Douglas fir, red alder and Western red cedar forest, with the pristine Graham Lake at its heart.

### Fillongley Provincial Park

Stroll along the beach, hike the trails or simply relax with a picnic in this lovely small park on the north side of Denman Island.


### Denman Village

One of two Denman hubs—the other being the free store at Marcus Isbister Old School Centre—so somewhere to get a true feel of the island from the vendors and inhabitants.

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