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Utopia by the Sea

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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.

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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

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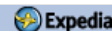
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staircase winding up to an interior bridge leading to the bedrooms. The dining area and kitchen had me convinced I could cook like Thomas Keller. They were enfolded in lustrous Douglas fir, with light streaming ethereally through clerestory windows.

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.

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"Never trust a real estate agent," he whispered.

## 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](http://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](http://www.ramshead.com); \$342 for two nights). Sea Ranch Escape (707-785-2426; [www.searanchescape.com](http://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](http://www.tsra.org)) is also an excellent resource.

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*PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN writes for The Times and Architectural Digest from San Francisco.*

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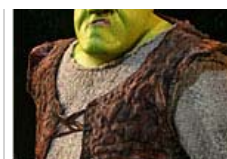


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