

October 5, 2007

Havens | Birch Bay, Wash.

In the Northwest, Hard by Canada, a Secret Is Out

By BARBARA E. HERNANDEZ

BIRCH BAY, Wash., was once another hidden gem of the Northwest. It sits 10 miles south of the Canadian border on a crescent-shaped inlet that is filled with some of the warmest water on the Pacific Coast. It was once known only by rural locals and savvy Canadians.

But it has now been discovered by newcomers from throughout the West, real estate agents say, and its mobile homes are being torn down to make way for 3,500-square-foot pleasure domes and luxury condominiums.

“It’s a laid-back resort area, and the world found out about us,” said Shannon Holtry-Benedict, an agent with Birch Bay Village Realty. About 51 percent of all homes in the region are second homes, according to the Birch Bay Steering Committee.

In spite of the recent growth, Birch Bay is still swathed in lush mixed-conifer forests and serves up sweeping marine vistas. The town was named by the botanist Archibald Menzies in 1792, after he noticed the many stands of black birch trees. Cedars, maples, alders and Douglas firs make up the rest of the forest in the rolling hills beyond the beach.

Kim Capeloto spends half the year in Birch Bay, working part-time at Tradewinds Cafe and Gifts, the other half in Indio, Calif., a resort town east of [Palm Springs](#). It was her husband, Bruce, who introduced her to Birch Bay. They bought a house with a bay view for \$18,000 in 1987, moving there when, she said, they were both “sick of [Seattle](#).”

“I love being able to go clam-digging,” she said. “I love the saltwater. I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.”

For many Canadians, like Erwin Phillips, another attraction was Birch Bay’s lower prices. Canadians watched their [British Columbia](#) coastline being devoured by development, and then watched real estate prices skyrocket. Many chose to cross the border and buy American.

Mr. Phillips started visiting Birch Bay in the late 1960s and built his first home there in 1975 on the water for just under \$100,000, spending \$18,000 for the lot. “We used to go crabbing all the time,” he said. “It was only six steps to the ocean to pick up the traps.”

He sold it in 1992 for \$400,000 when his wife was ill. He recently saw the house listed for more than \$1 million. Now a widower, he bought another lot in the gated community of Birch Bay Village 10 years ago for \$100,000, because the beachfront lots were out of his price range. “I think about a year ago people started waking up to the fact that there was no more,” he said, referring to coastal property.

Brenda Mills, an agent with Windermere Real Estate, said that for many newcomers, location is also a factor — just one hour to [Vancouver](#) and two hours to Seattle. Add nearness to winter sports in [Whistler](#), British Columbia, or [Mount Baker](#) in [Washington](#), along with [kayaking](#), sailing and no state income tax, and it becomes an easy sell. “You can go from [skiing](#) to sailing in the same day,” she said.

Like Ms. Capeloto, Dan Johnson, a retired structural testing manager for Boeing, moved from the Seattle area with his wife, Laurie. Mr. Johnson, who is originally from Issaquah, Wash., had been visiting Birch Bay since 1986, staying at his nephew’s condo.

“We ended up coming more and more until we bought the condo,” he said. “All the time we’ve been here, walking up and down the beach, you have such a feeling of safety. People walk by you and say, ‘Hi.’ ”

They now live in Jacob’s Landing, a beachfront condominium complex, where he bought a two-bedroom, two-bath unit in 2001 for \$81,000.

Mr. Johnson and his wife spend the winters in the high desert of Southern California and drive between their two homes. Summers belong to Birch Bay, he says, usually starting in June.

Charles Reilly, a native New Yorker and an agent with Birch Bay Realty, said that second-home buyers tend to be in their 40s and 50s, empty nesters or with a few children.

Jim Farmer, 50, a retired teacher from McCall, [Idaho](#), bought a \$500,000 fourplex, a four-apartment building, in Birch Bay in May 2006. Mr. Farmer said he and his wife spend about four months there, usually June through October. “We sit on our balcony with a hot cup of tea and coffee and revel in the beauty of this place,” said his wife, Mei Koh, also 50, who keeps a photo album of sunsets.

The Scene

Birch Bay’s culture is casual and determinedly not class-conscious. Swimsuits, shorts and drugstore sandals are common, and local residents proudly tell you that their friends range from millionaires to fast-food workers.

Birch Bay Drive is the main drag, with most of the town’s lodging, restaurants and shops. Most restaurants, like La Cantina de la Playa and the Shores, have an open-air patio so that diners can watch the sun set. Restaurants serve shrimp and shellfish by the pound, and one sign even boasts the summer staples, “Chowder, Chili Dogs, Wi-Fi and Ice Cream.”

Dusky [beaches](#) and warm seawater set the mood in Birch Bay. Many people stay on the beach until twilight, walking knee-deep in the ocean, flip-flops in hand. Although Birch Bay Drive can be filled with summer and weekend foot traffic, there's rarely any honking. That's way too Type-A for this crowd.

Pros

Birch Bay is all about the ocean, its small-town atmosphere and its easygoing lifestyle. There are also Birch Bay State Park for [hiking](#), a couple of nine-hole [golf](#) courses nearby, one public and one private, and a small water park for children.

Cons

There is little night life or [shopping](#) in Birch Bay. Residents must travel to nearby Blaine, Ferndale or Bellingham for groceries and malls. Winters are wet and cold.

The Real Estate Market

Genée Haws, executive director of the Birch Bay Chamber of Commerce, estimates that 2,100 new units are in various stages of development. Grand Bay Condominiums on the Beach is building 52 condominiums, now starting at \$334,950 for a one-bedroom, one-bath, 722-square-foot condo. A new community called Horizon at Semiahmoo is now reserving 74 quarter- to half-acre oceanview lots for \$288,500 each. When finished, the project will include 650 units of condos, houses and guest apartments, said Craig Anderson, a company spokesman.

Mr. Reilly said that most people want homes on the water, which average between \$700,000 and \$900,000. But he added that bargains can still be found. The farther from the beach, the lower the cost, so those wanting to pay around \$400,000 can be just a couple of blocks from the bay. Few houses near the water remain from before the 60s, and most were built in the 1980s and 1990s. There are a few dozen new McMansions.

Seventy-two properties were for sale recently in Birch Bay, at prices ranging from \$124,900 for a 374-square-foot, one-bedroom, one-bath home in Latitude 49 Resort Park to \$1.05 million for 2,107-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath waterfront house.

LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION About 7,500, according to the chamber of commerce.

SIZE 13.59 square miles.

LOCATION About 110 miles north of [Seattle](#) and 37 miles south of [Vancouver](#), [British Columbia](#).

WHO'S BUYING Empty nesters and families from Western Canada and the American West.

GETTING THERE Bellingham International Airport is about 20 miles southeast of Birch Bay; Birch Bay is 124 miles from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING The Semiahmoo Resort (9565 Semiahmoo Parkway, Blaine; 800-770-7992; www.semiahmoo.com), just north of Birch Bay, is a waterfront resort with a [spa](#) and two [golf](#) courses. Rooms start at \$224 a night on weekends during the peak summer season. In the off-season, starting Oct. 16, weekend rates begin at \$149.



Stuart Isett for The New York Times

OUTDOOR LIFE Birch Bay State Park has hiking, and there are nine-hole golf courses and a small water park nearby.