

# National Post

## Full frontal beach property

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Illustrations: Color Photo: Photo by Htu Htu / Crocodile Bill emerges from his home, ...

Black & White Photo: Photo by Htu Htu / ... a vendor sells his wares to a customer, ...

Color Photo: Photo by Htu Htu / ... another vendor has planted beautiful flowers, bottom, in hopes of attracting buyers to his sandwich shop.

Color Photo: Htu Htu / Photo of Vancouver's nude beach.

At the top of the steep staircase that descends from the highway to Vancouver's nude beach, the rules are clearly laid out: No fires, no dogs, no "unauthorized selling," beach closed from sunset to 8 a.m., clothing optional. A young French couple with dreadlocks and ratty clothes ignore the signs before bounding down.

It's a cloudy day. The sky is the colour of city seagulls and I wonder if there will be anyone on the beach at all. The French couple pause on the stairs to ask me if there's anywhere on the beach they can camp for free. I explain there isn't anywhere to do it legally. They look at me quizzically. They don't see the trails hidden amongst the ferns and the undergrowth that lead to shelter for a number of beach residents.

We are steps away from Wreck Beach. The waves begin to echo louder through the trees. Just a few more feet and this couple will discover that despite the signs, there are no rules down here. And camping for free is the least of it. As new nude beaches are introduced in other locations across Canada, such as Toronto's Hanlan's Point, which was opened in May, I set out to explore Canada's oldest nude beach. It's

world famous, well established and an interesting study in human behaviour.

The tide is out and in the greyness of the afternoon, the water actually looks clean. The beach is beautiful, a sweeping arc surrounded by forest. Sure enough, a large, naked man is sitting on a log. But the beach is quiet today, a welcome respite from the regular summer crowds. Quiet but warm. Warm enough, apparently, to be naked. In Vancouver, that means about 10C.

I am not naked. Not because I have a problem taking off my clothes, but because I don't want to distract people from the interview process. I like people to look me in the eye during a conversation.

I walk past a circle of young people in hippie clothes who are passing a pipe. An older man who's obviously had a few too many drinks is sitting with them. He wears blue sweatpants and has a beer bottle tied with string around his neck. There are crystals of sand stuck to the corners of his mouth and on the top of his balding head.

This is Crocodile Bill, one of the denizens of the beach, a long-serving member of the quasi-primitive community that inhabits

the beach, protecting one another with a fierce loyalty and pride.

The community is, in some ways, the inevitable by-product of an isolated urban area. There are the homeless who live on the beach, young partiers who take over at night, artists and welfare recipients who try to supplement their income as vendors, and, of course, the true nudists, who range from stockbrokers and academics to activists and musicians. It's a true melting pot and everyone is welcome.

At least that's what the regulars say. But they have their turf. The regulars sit in "the front row," on the logs closest to the water. There's the nude-only "casino," the gay hangout, and the fully-stocked bar called Ten-Forward. There are about 300 regulars, by their count. Which could mean anything from 12 to 2,000. Lucidity is not a common quality at the beach. The motto here is: peace, love and beer.

Crocodile Bill, or Croc as he is called, has obviously embraced the beer part. He tells me in slurred syllables that he built himself a house under one of the driftwood logs that line the beach. He claims he owns half a townhouse in "the high village," but says he lives down here "to keep the beach safe." He talks about working on highrises and two women who died. He leads me to the log where he has presumably made a home.

Croc has dug a hole in the sand at least five feet deep and eight feet wide under one of the logs. I climb down for a look around. There's a kitchen on the left; a propane camping stove and a container of water propped up on piece of plywood. There's another long piece of plywood for the bed, with a sleeping bag and blanket.

I can barely sit up on the bed, but it's not uncomfortable. There are shelves all around, and a mirror. There's a jar of peanut butter, two packages of instant noodles, candles and cigarettes. The ceiling is a row of small logs he somehow managed to slide under the bigger log. I wonder how cold it gets at night with the damp. The floor under the boards is full of water. But there's nothing to be done about that. Sand is porous and this cavern is only a few feet from the ocean. Like a sandcastle, the moat fills up with water.

Croc doesn't seem to mind. He has lived on the beach almost every summer for 20 years. He says he lived in a tent on the beach before the area became a park in 1989, and he lived in the bushes.

But Croc's house isn't the only ingenious design on the beach. Vendors, who sell everything from Jello shooters and beer to veggie burgers and empanadas, have created art galleries and flower gardens. There's a juice bar, with the letters carved in wood, and two big stumps used as serving tables. There's a mermaid carved into the side of a log, and a log sprouting roses and pansies.

A frail, old man in a wool toque, pants and a sweater, is watering the flowers. He says he carried the soil down himself. It's his way of marking his spot, beautifying it to attract customers. He's a vendor and sells "the best sandwiches on the beach." On busy days, he will have a lineup six people deep for most of the day.

The sandwich man is on welfare and doesn't want me to use his name. Selling sandwiches is the only way he can survive. He says he has tricks to get himself through

the winter. Some days, he says, he eats this much, showing me half a finger. From May to October, he can make a bit of extra money and hang out with friends.

As an immigrant, he says, the beach feels more like home than Canada. "It's too painful to be in Africa. Too painful to be in Canada. So I stay down here," he says. "The only people I like, the only people I know, are at Wreck Beach. Going up to the top, I'm ignored, like a piece of shit."

The regulars at Wreck Beach feel a strong sense of belonging, a feeling that is exacerbated in their struggle against city officials and police officers who try in vain to enforce the rules.

When city officials emerge on the beach, as they do at least a few times a day, I urge Croc to shut his trap door. But he's brazen. He says they already know about his place, so he goes right up to them and brings them over.

One of the officials tells me they will take down his house in a few days when Croc's not there. Croc must know this because he's shouting: "Destroy it. Go ahead. Do it and I'll laugh my balls off. It's a fuckin' playground. I'm just playing. I'm just biding my time."

Later, he tells me he's been playing "this Mickey Mouse game" for 20 years. When they destroy his house, he'll just build another, better one.

Croc's contrary feelings of anger and indifference at the impermanence of his home is an attitude shared by most Wreck Beach regulars. They resent the patrols but understand them.

In 1993, there was a murder on the beach. There is a marble memorial plaque marking the spot just a few feet into the bushes near the top of the trail. It's hard to spot, but the fresh flowers indicate the community still remembers Tina, a 20-year-old beer vendor. Her death, by a man who turned himself in to the police two years later, has been the only homicide in the area other than the beating death of a homeless man in 1990.

There was a rape in 1994, and in the same year, two young girls were sexually assaulted in the woods. It's a menacing legacy and the beach, especially at night, can feel ominous. I wouldn't go alone after dark. I'm not even completely comfortable during the day. It's not the nudity that bothers me, but an underlying current of wild, raw and barely controlled male energy. There are men with video cameras hidden in their bags, men in the bushes wacking off, men in the bushes having sex with other men. Granted, this doesn't happen often. But it happens.

Even Judy Williams, the director of the Wreck Beach Preservation Society and a long-time advocate for nude beaches across the country, says she wouldn't go down to the beach alone at night. She says the people who hold the raves at night are a rough crowd and have nothing to do with nudity. "If they were nudists, it would be peaceful and free like 25 years ago."

But Williams says during the day, the crowd is different. "The beach replaces lost family structure," she says. "We are a family."

I notice a Japanese couple, fully clothed, walking along the water's edge. They have the requisite camera and aren't shy to use it.

Some nude bathers are braving the water and the beach has filled up with couples and single men. There are hardly any women on the beach. There are two women sleeping in their clothes by the fire pit and there are some hanging out, clothed, by the bar. But there is only one naked female vendor. She walks around with a tiny cooler full of food, a tiny string purse around her shoulder and heavy eyeshadow. I want to ask her if she's ever afraid, but she doesn't want to talk.

A tan, weathered, naked man walks in front of me with a long pair of tongs for picking up garbage. This is Frank, the beach cleaner. Not a job for which he gets paid, but a job that makes him feel like he's making his contribution to the planet. He picks up broken glass and the odd needle. He doesn't usually pick up cigarette butts (which are so rife, you can't pick up a handful of sand without finding one) unless he's really bored. People admire Frank; they call him the backbone of the beach. But he's too busy to talk. And too wary.

He eyes me suspiciously as I wander over to talk to Ron, a naked man sitting in front of a few feet of reflector board. He's sitting with his legs positioned to hide his private parts from my view. I appreciate his sensitivity. He tells me about the community, which is "like a village where most of the population changes day to day." The "rules of snivilization," he says, don't apply. Here, there are a different set of rules: No gawking, no hidden video cameras, no hard drugs, no jerking off in the bushes. And when those rules are disregarded, the regulars take action.

At the bar down the beach, the captain of "the ship," as he calls it, tells me he patrols the beach for perverts and wackos. He says

he has no tolerance for guys whom he catches panning their bags, a sure sign of a hidden camera. He says they will usually go away with just a talking to.

The captain is Dave Gordon, a 32-year-old who works as a doorman for a crime-infested eastside bar. Down at Wreck Beach, he's created a driftwood lounge complete with bar stools, tables and "a \$2-million view." He makes me a strawberry margarita, with fresh strawberries, as we talk about life on the beach. "The parties are awesome," he says. He puts candles on the tables at night and about 50 people show up regularly to jam, drum and get high.

Gordon says he's half-Indian, a Lakota from the Plains. He says the blond hair is from too much Sun-In. "Every one of us feels Wreck offers something away from western society, from the corruption. When you're naked, you can't hide anything." The boat metaphor, he says, helps keep the unity. "We're castaways of a sort. Here we live like kings. Not under somebody."

He introduces me to one of the ship's "admirals" -- Dennis Gray-Grant. Dennis is 81 and missing his front teeth. He's been coming down to the beach for 28 years. "The fact that I can pull my clothes off any time of the day or night is significant enough," he says. But more significant, he adds, is being part of a tribe of young people. "Coming from the senior's home where most people walk around with walkers, this helps keep me young."

He's so frail I can't believe he climbed the hundreds of stairs down to the beach, or that he'll make it back up. He laughs at my amazement, ascending as quickly as I do. He climbs the stairs every day, he says.

Sometimes twice. I'm out of breath and I let him go ahead. "They get easier every day," he says, and disappears into the trees.

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