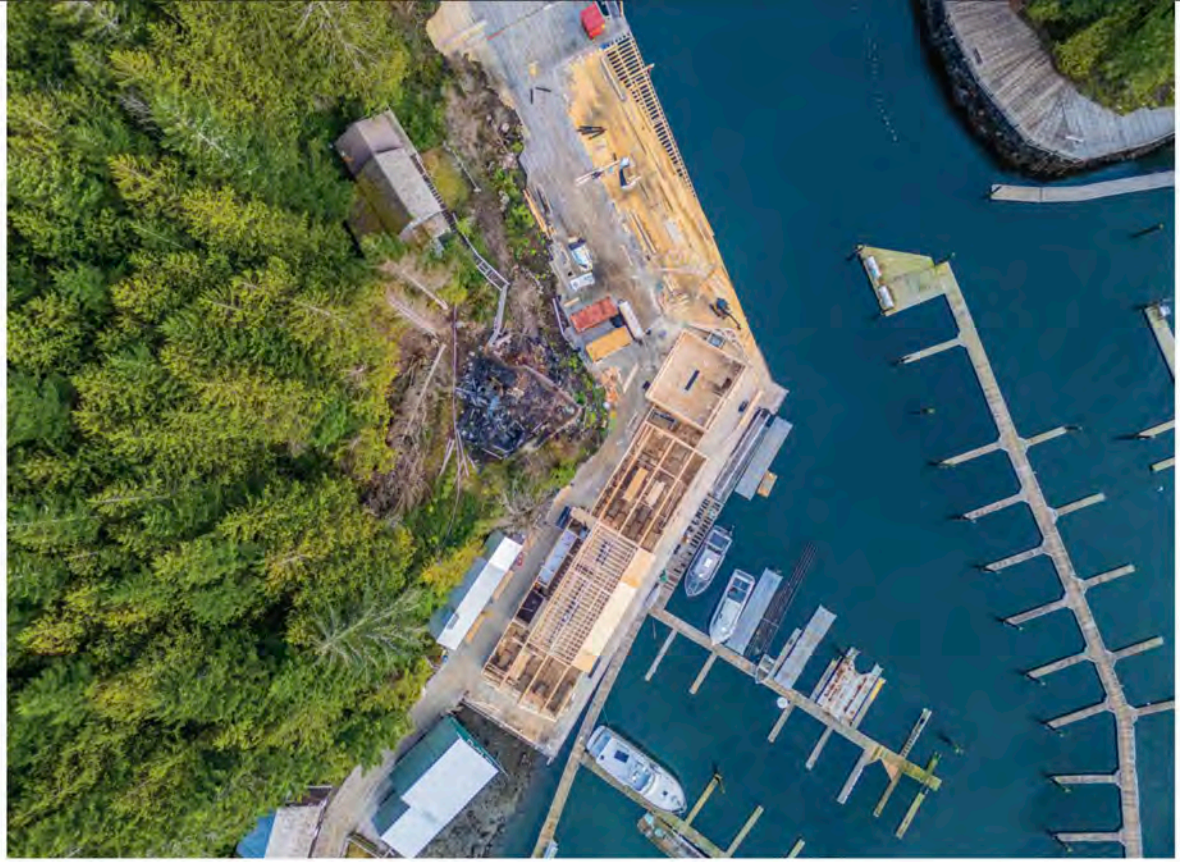
FROM THE ASHES

AT REMOTE, HISTORIC TELEGRAPH COVE, A COMMUNITY REBUILDS AFTER A DEVASTATING FIRE.

By Linda Barnard | Photos by Rob Hilts



Two years after a fire destroyed much of historic Telegraph Cove — including the world-renowned Whale Interpretive Centre — the pier has been rebuilt and a chapter of Vancouver Island history brought back to life.



What does somebody think about as they watch years of their life burn?

It was yellow cedar for Gordie Graham, cofounder and owner with his wife, Marilyn, of Telegraph Cove Resort on Northern Vancouver Island.

Gordie knows wood. Now 81, he spent 40 years in the North Island logging industry as feller and bucker, a highly skilled job cutting down and segmenting trees. He prizes yellow cedar for its durability and he'd need it to rebuild the Cove and his life's work.

"I'm looking at that fire burning. You know what's going through my mind? Where are we going to get yellow cedar? Because yellow cedar grows up high and so it's logged in the summertime, and this was New Year's," Gordie says.

It was, as it turns out, just the beginning of a remarkable story of resilience and recovery.

UP IN FLAMES

Early in the morning of December 31, 2024, fire broke out in a corner of the Old Saltery Pub on the Telegraph Cove wharf, caused, Gordie suspects, by rodents gnawing through an electrical wire. The fire began just beyond the stretch of the marina-fronting boardwalk that figures in so many tourists' photos, where the story of the Cove and its early residents is told on info plaques posted outside colourful houses and cabins.



The fire consumed the pub, Killer Whale Café and the Tide Rip Grizzly Tours office. It destroyed the Prince of Whales whale-watching booking office. And it engulfed the Whale Interpretive Centre (WIC), which drew more than 12,000 visitors each year to see its famed collection of marine mammal skeletons. Everything inside the centre was lost, including Finny, the 20-metre immature fin whale skeleton that was suspended near the entrance, where it seemed to swim in mid-air.

Volunteer fire crews from Port McNeill, Port Hardy, Hyde Creek, Sointula and Alert Bay battled the flames from the water and shore, containing the fire and saving the rest of the resort.

Left: *Volunteer fire crews from Port Hardy, Alert Bay and other communities fought the fire from land and water. Rebuilding the wharf, docks, pilings, understructure and buildings continued through 2025 and '26, all adhering to new building codes while recreating the resort's original character.*

Mary and Jim Borrowman live across the marina from the Grahams. Their dog Buddy started acting up well before dawn that morning. Mary, a WIC director and treasurer, woke and looked out the window. "The sky was just orange. I knew the Cove was on fire," she says.

Jim, a conservationist and WIC chair, has been a part of the Telegraph Cove community since the 1970s, when he started work at the Cove sawmill. In 1980, he began Stubbs Island Whale Watching, the first whale watching company in British Columbia. His rich collection of marine mammal skeletons, laboriously collected over decades, formed the initial exhibits when the non-profit WIC opened in 2002.

"Jim's lived here for over 50 years. He basically watched his whole life go up in flames," says Mary.

After the fire, locals mourned the loss and offered help. So did visitors who had been coming to Telegraph Cove from all over the world for years. The WIC, which is operated by registered charitable organization the Johnstone Strait Killer Whale Interpretive Centre Society, started a $1-million fundraising campaign to help rebuild its collection.

As 2025 began, despair gave way to optimism. The Grahams and Borrowmans decided to rebuild. Everything would look the same from the outside, but be even better within.

"We believe it's our responsibility for the North Island, where we lived for 40-plus years," Gordie says. "Without Telegraph Cove, there's no tourism up here."

A COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER

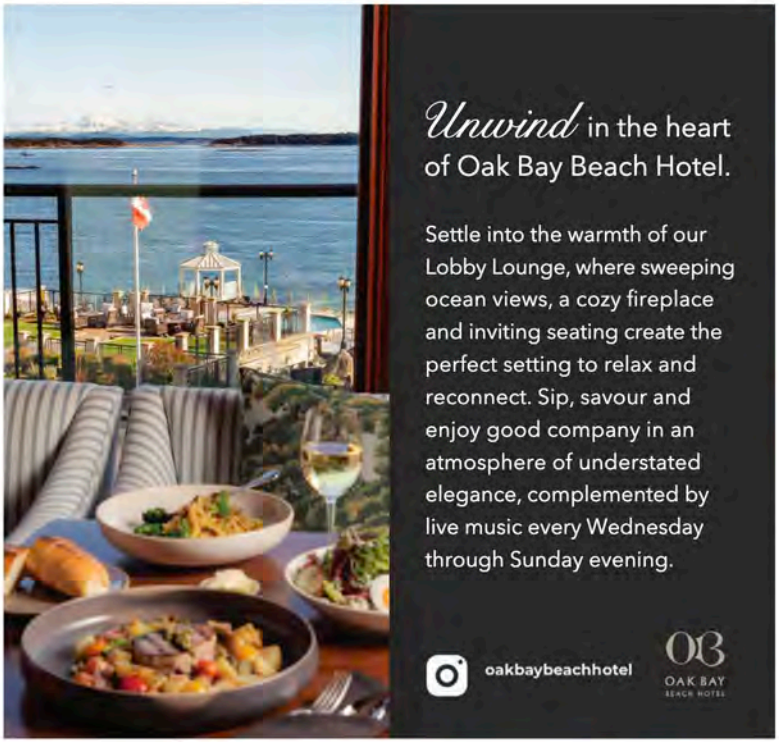
Change was coming to Telegraph Cove even before the fire. The Grahams were feeling their years and were about to sell the resort, with a special lease arrangement for the WIC. The buyer was expected to sign the papers just days into the New Year. After the fire, Gordie and Marilyn cancelled the sale. They wanted Telegraph Cove rebuilt as it was and to be at the helm to see the project through, with as many North Islanders as possible on the job.

"We're completely focused on the rebuild and looking after our guests," Gordie says. As for the sale, that will come in its own time.

Meanwhile, the massive environmental cleanup started in March 2025. Stuart Abernethy, owner of Abernethy Contracting in Port McNeill, and members of the Indigenous-owned K'awat'si Construction Company in Port Hardy continued working through the summer, fall and winter of 2025-26 to rebuild the wharf, docks, pilings, understructure and buildings, adding a larger sewage treatment facility and ensuring everything met new building code requirements.

Five months after the fire, while construction was still underway, Telegraph Cove opened for the 2025 summer season.









They had to do things differently. The café was closed. Sally's Snack Shack, named for the Grahams' brave little dog who was killed while chasing a bear out of the Cove, became the prep kitchen. An outdoor grill was used for mains like cheeseburgers and souvlaki. Grab-and-go breakfasts, snacks and hot drinks were served in the general store, which had a covered eating area outside.

The WIC operated from a temporary Whale Shed on the rebuilt part of the boardwalk. With the wharf under repair, Prince of Whales tours were restricted to Zodiacs. Tide Rip Grizzly tours went ahead.

By early July 2026, around the time the Graham's celebrated their 57th wedding anniversary, the Killer Whale Café and Old Saltery Pub reopened.

FROM TELEGRAPH TO ECO-TOURISM

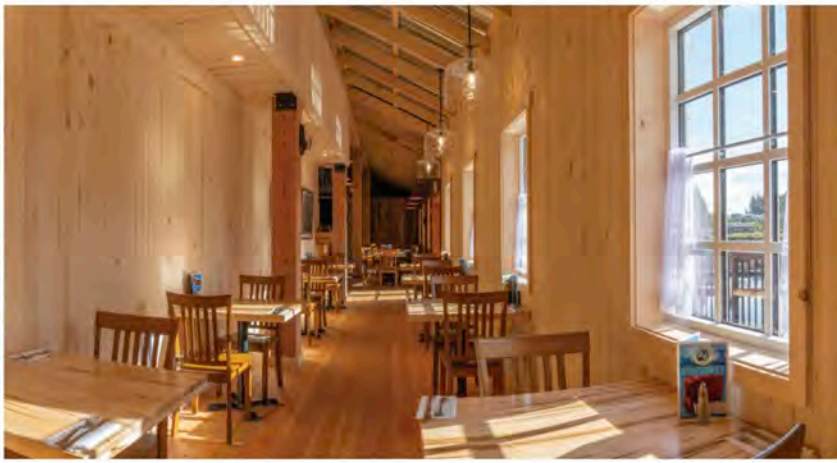
Ask Gordie whose idea it was to start a business in Telegraph Cove and he smiles at Marilyn. "I blame my wife."

Marilyn, a former public health nurse, wanted him to quit dangerous logging work to pursue another of his passions: fishing. "She said, 'We should build a small fishing resort. It'd be a nice semi-retirement.' Well, now we have 75 people working for us," Gordie says.

Although the land where Telegraph Cove is located has been part of the traditional territory of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations for at least 12,000 years, it was only in 1912 that it became a one-man telegraph station, the northern terminus of a wire from Campbell River. In the 1920s, the village grew with the addition of a sawmill and salmon saltery; during the Second World War, it became a military relay and logistics station. Still, it was accessible only by boat until a rugged road was built in 1956.

Then, in September 1979, the last stretch of Highway 19 to Port Hardy was completed and Marilyn saw the tourism potential of the area, with its stunning natural beauty and the rich marine wildlife of the Johnstone Strait and Broughton Archipelago.





Above: *By July 2026, operations such as local eco-tours were slowly resuming at the resort.*

Right: *The Killer Whale Cafe and Old Saltery Pub have been rebuilt, now with a convenient passage between the two and a modern, West Coast vibe.*

That same year, the Grahams started leasing land in Telegraph Cove for a campground and sport fishing marina. They bought the property and rundown boardwalk buildings in 1988 and embarked on a continuing renovation and rebuilding project, much of the work done by Gordie himself. He even milled the logs at the village sawmill. The pub and restaurant opened in 1998. Everything was made from yellow cedar.

A couple of years later, Jim Borrowman asked Gordie for some space in an old freight shed to open the WIC. The footprint expanded as the collection grew.

Over the years, Telegraph Cove became one of North Vancouver Island's top tourist attractions. It drew summer visitors from B.C. and beyond, from weekenders to international tour groups. Gordie figures that what's most telling about how much the Cove means to



Do Your Eyes
Itch, Water or Burn?™

Dry eye care starts with understanding the cause.

Watch Dr. Anita Narang explain how Island Eyecare's Dry Eye Treatment Centre combines detailed diagnostics, advanced in-clinic treatments and personalized home care to help improve comfort, with ongoing follow-up.

WATCH VIDEO

Scan to watch the video and book a complimentary 15-minute dry eye discovery call with our Patient Care Coordinator.

ISLAND EYECARE
OPTOMETRISTS

VICTORIA'S DRY EYE TREATMENT CENTRE
1059 Fort St, Victoria | 250.383.3937

Say Goodbye To Dry Eye™

LANGHAM ★ COURT ★ THEATRE

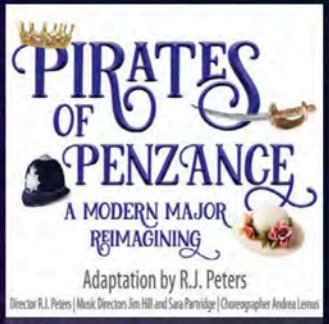
presents the first shows of our 2026/27 Season



A comedic thriller that will have you screaming with laughter and terror.

November 19 – December 6, 2026

PREVIEW November 18



Gilbert & Sullivan's swashbuckling musical.

February 18 – March 7, 2027

PREVIEW February 17

Check out the rest of our **2026/27 Season**, featuring award-winning plays and musicals by local and international playwrights.

GIFT CERTIFICATES MAKE A GREAT GIFT!

For information about our plays, auditions, tickets, and more, please visit our website at

www.langhamtheatre.ca



Above: The Whale Interpretive Centre was the last building to be completed. A major fundraising campaign and donations from the Royal BC Museum have helped to replace artifacts and specimens lost in the fire.

"WE HAVE FAMILIES THAT HAVE COME HERE FOR 30 YEARS, EVERY YEAR."

visitors is the number of people who have spread their loved ones' ashes here.

"We have families that have come here for 30 years, every year," he says. "There's something special about it, and I try and figure it out. I have ideas, but it's funny, this little place up in the middle of nowhere."

THE WOW MOMENT

This past summer, Gordie and his canine sidekick, Penny, took me on a tour of the newly finished wharf buildings. As the Grahams wanted, the pub and restaurant look the same as before from the outside, with brick red-painted cladding and white-trimmed mullioned windows. Inside, the rooms have the doughy smell of yellow cedar.

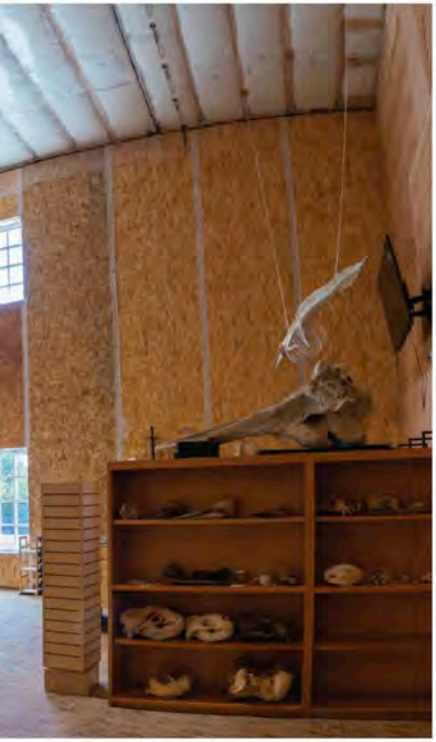
An open passage links the pub and cafe. Gordie chose the modernist glass light fixtures that hang from the restaurant ceiling. Lifelike bird carvings by former biologist Barry Saunders of Parksville, including pileated woodpeckers, swallows and crows, seem poised to fly. Osoyoos stained glass artist Neil Relkie came out of retirement to replicate the lost stained-glass double doors on the café and pub, one a pair of killer whales, the other, a replacement of an anniversary gift from their daughters, shows realistic fish.

A new four-bedroom guest suite with kitchen was added at the end of the wharf.

Mary McFarland painted the new Telegraph Cove sign to replace the one lost in the fire. Her mother Margaret Fleming (Griffiths) designed and painted the original Telegraph Cove, Broughton Lumber and Trading and Telegraph Cove Mills sign in 1946. She was the Telegraph Cove schoolteacher. Her schoolhouse is the Grahams' home.

The WIC was the last structure finished. Now weatherproofed, it opened for August and September with the interior partially finished.

Fortunately, three skeletons were offsite during the fire: a Dall's porpoise, a Risso's





dolphin and the only pygmy sperm whale ever recorded in B.C. They spent 2025 and much of 2026 hanging in the Borrowmans' expansive great room overlooking Johnstone Strait, where one side of the room was filled with specimens, from a walrus skull to whale vertebrae, waiting for their new permanent home.

The Royal BC Museum has donated display cases for the new WIC, along with a pair of four-metre blue whale jawbones. A Bryde's whale skeleton will also be part of the WIC's rebirth story, reconstructed by Mike deRoos and his partner Michi Main of Cetacea on Salt Spring Island. DeRoos was the WIC's first employee in 2002. Finny was his first skeleton articulation.

The wow moment, as Mary calls it, will come in May 2027, when the transformation is complete for the start of Telegraph Cove's tourism season. It will have the same footprint, but look very different inside. The Borrowmans say when the WIC doors open, guests should expect a big surprise.

It's a pleasant thing to anticipate.

Telegraph Cove began as a one-person telegraph station in 1912. Today, it's famous for wilderness, eco-tourism, outdoor adventure and especially whales. But the mythic phoenix may also be in residence in this tiny tourist community, a symbol of the time Telegraph Cove faced a devastating fire and rose stronger from the ashes.

