



That View, Though

For two weeks on Penobscot Bay, a writer is willing to put up with a rental's many quirks — and bring his own frying pans

By Gary Schiro

I will never forget the first time a real Mainer walked into the cottage we rent on an island in Penobscot Bay. He was a massage therapist whose business card advertising in-home treatments I'd found on a bulletin board at a nearby market. Pausing on the threshold, a heavy massage table under his arm, he exclaimed in a thick Down East accent, "Well, that's gotta be about the best view in all of Maine."

My husband, Bob, and I began

coming here more than two decades ago, on the recommendation of a friend who spent childhood summers in the area, and we've returned every year since. Perched high on a rocky bluff above the bay, the place sports a long stretch of windows that frame spruce-studded islands for miles. Except for the mornings, when the rising sun exposes reflective glass on distant shores, the view is the same as it must have been for millennia, with not a power line or building in sight. There are paths that lead to a private beach and loads of wild blueberries. Just before dinner, you can

watch the sun dip behind blackened hills, leaving a massive pastel painting in its wake. It is heaven.

The inside of the cottage is another story. Built in the early '60s, its furnishings reflect a utilitarian, slightly Danish Modern aesthetic. I couldn't tell you why all this stuff is so low to the ground — according to a 2016 study in the science journal *eLife*, Danish men are the fifth-tallest population in the world. How all this dinky furniture ever got foisted on these giants is a great mystery. Maybe there is another study that shows Danes have the best knees in the world. Perhaps

the trend was a hoax perpetrated on naive Americans desperate to be stylish. Regardless, it's been at least a decade since I could coax my 6-foot-3-inch frame up off the teak sofa.

Next to the couch is a rattan chair on a circular base that sort of spins, sort of rocks on springs. I only tried to sit in it once, as it seems fragile and better suited to tossing one's jacket on when you come through the door. On the opposite windowed wall, there is a long, built-in bench. This is a more reasonable height, but perching there faces you entirely away from the view, and the backs of your knees stick to the black Naugahyde. Early on, there was a comfortable Mission-style Morris recliner. Not since childhood had I so often heard a seat declared as "saved" when someone got up to use the loo. But, alas, one year, it was unceremoniously replaced with a blue velour recliner so worn out you can feel its wooden frame.

Speaking of the loo, I should mention that it's sort of outside. Or at least, one has to go outside to access it off the front deck. A three-foot-wide overhang shelters you most of the way, but in rain you can be certain that the vintage wooden gutters will be leaking, leaving you soggy, and the runoff will puddle in front of the bathroom door. The beds — foam mattresses atop plywood bases — are similarly forbidding. You will never oversleep here. At the first bird chirp or ray of sunshine, trust me, you want out. Fortunately, the mornings



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are glorious when the air is clear. But, this being Maine, they often aren't clear, and, sometimes, neither are the days. One summer, we were socked in by fog for 11 of the 14 days we were at the cottage. Without the view, the place quickly descends from rustic to primitive.

On those cold, foggy days, you'll want an excuse to turn on the stove, despite its heat-activated mouse-dropping scent. Only two of the four burners work reliably. The others are a gamble — scorching hot or downright tepid, you never know which will manifest. The *batterie de cuisine* is a jumble of mismatched pots and pans and lids that fit neither. If you're seeking a walk down memory lane to the kitchen of your childhood, I've got the cupboard

for you: "I remember this avocado-green Pyrex dish!" you might exclaim. Or perhaps, "We had those same yellow-plastic iced tea glasses!"

No matter how much of it we bought and left behind, somehow, every summer, the stemware would be reduced to a single glass. So now we bring our own, along with dozens of other oddities and essentials catalogued on an oft-edited Google Doc. "Essentials" like a salad spinner. Because of those spectacular sunsets, we haven't gone out to dinner in years. Every day, we hunt down fresh produce from one of the farm stands that blessedly surround us, but the lettuce can be sandy and requires multiple dunkings and twirls to be palatable. Our wooden spoons, spatulas,



tongs, and knives are so numerous we tote our own caddy, in hopes they won't disappear in the mess of bins overflowing with every gadget you never wanted. A rotary beater? It's here! A spring-shaped whisk? Check! The cottage's sheet pans are perennially greasy and the four non-stick skillets leave Teflon flecks in scrambled eggs, so those essentials made our list. So did a rolling pin: we're talking about pie season after all.

The afternoon sun is positively blinding, so a deck umbrella was deemed indispensable. It may seem strange to bring a small lampshade to deposit over the exterior glass fixture above the kitchen sink, but if you are facing that direction at night, the glare really makes you squint. You'd be surprised how many times one can utter, "Gosh, ya know what would really make this place better...?" over 20 years. Then you too might have a spreadsheet that ends with "At least one comfortable chair."

But, oh, there are those sunsets. And the blueberries. And the baby foxes that trot across the scrubby land; the noisy battles between the eagles and ospreys in the spruces; and the seals and porpoises playing peekaboo in the water below. On a clear Fourth of July, 20 different sets of fireworks color the sky. Once, I made the mistake of telling someone where the cottage is. She swooped in and rented it out from under us. Now mum's the word. I'll bring my own chair. Just let me keep coming here.

Oh, and Landlord, if you're reading this, I didn't mean a word of it. I take it all back. I swear. □

Gary Schiro is a writer, performer, teacher, and nonprofit consultant. His work has appeared on the websites *Food52* and the *National Center for Arts Research*, as well as in the *Poughkeepsie Journal* and *Berkshire Review*. His performance works have been awarded fellowships from MacDowell, the Millay Colony for the Arts, and Art Matters. He lives in Litchfield County, Connecticut.

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