

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

A New Season

MARCH 2021

W1999

We're Ready
for You, Spring



"This was the first view Jason and I had of the Pacific, after walking through a tunnel of trees. Insert sound of crashing waves and the smell of cypress."

INTO THE WOODS

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY TAMARA SHOPSIN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON FULFORD



"A path led us to the Walk-In Cabins, a cluster of dwellings accessible only on foot. Each has a giant skylight to reveal the forest canopy above."

Peer through the redwoods lining a certain stretch of northern California coast, and an architectural vision emerges. The Sea Ranch was conceived in the 1960s as a place where

humans could live in harmony with nature. Though the project eventually lost momentum, its ahead-of-its-time ethos is now beckoning a new generation.

WHEN THE SEA RANCH, a planned community on a remote stretch of northern California coast, opened in 1965, its designers proclaimed it “the most unusual second-home colony ever conceived by nature and man.” My husband, Jason, and I first heard of the place in 2019. Friends had seen an exhibition about its history at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and they soon made the three-hour pilgrimage. “The hedgerows!” one of our friends gushed, trying to explain what made the Sea Ranch so wonderful. Jason and I agreed that we had zero interest in seeing it—why would we want to spend days trapped in a glorified gated community? It turns out we were very wrong.

The idea for the Sea Ranch was born in the early 1960s, when an unconventional developer named Al Boeke fell for a rugged, 1,000-acre former sheep pasture just south of the small town of Gualala. The project was ostensibly a financial investment for the Hawaiian company that employed Boeke, but for him, it was also a chance to explore the way design intersects with ecology, social justice, and the idea of “living lightly with the land”—a phrase coined by one of the Sea Ranch’s architects, Donlyn Lyndon.

Boeke hired San Francisco-based landscape architect Lawrence Halprin to help lead the project. Halprin was a kind of architectural shaman who wore cowboy boots and made hand-drawn plans that looked like hippie manifestos. His guiding principle for the Sea Ranch was to preserve the natural character of the landscape. He assembled a dream team that included future graphic-design legend Barbara Stauffacher Solomon; architects Joseph Esherick, Charles Moore, and William Turnbull; and master builder Matthew Sylvia.



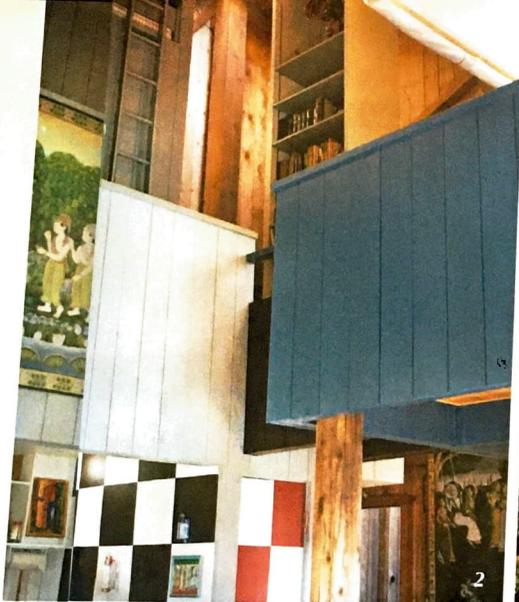
▲ Charles Moore, architect and onetime resident of the Sea Ranch.



Magic happened. Houses were built with charm and modesty. Development bylaws ensured that the land was shared and unspoiled. Trails wound along the cliffs to private beaches and into upland forests of redwoods; communal recreation centers were built with swimming pools, tennis courts, and saunas, their walls decorated with playful, oversize motifs in primary colors that later became known as “supergraphics.”

Then the spell was broken. Utopian and capitalist impulses began to butt heads, and the schizophrenic nature of the project was revealed. During the next two decades, architects and designers jumped ship and a few mega-mansions appeared among the community’s some 2,200 properties. But thanks to Halprin’s vision and renewed enforcement of the bylaws, the Sea Ranch spirit is alive and well. A new wave of families is moving in, and

1. We felt alone walking through the former sheep meadows, which are a communal space shared by residents, until Jason whistled and birds sprang out of the grass.



▲ Graphic-design legend Barbara Stauffacher Solomon.

2. We made a pilgrimage to Unit No. 9 in Condominium One, where architect Charles Moore once lived. He was a free spirit who filled the space with objects from his travels.

3. Exploring the Bluff Trail, we came upon this scene, which probably hasn't changed in more than 100 years.

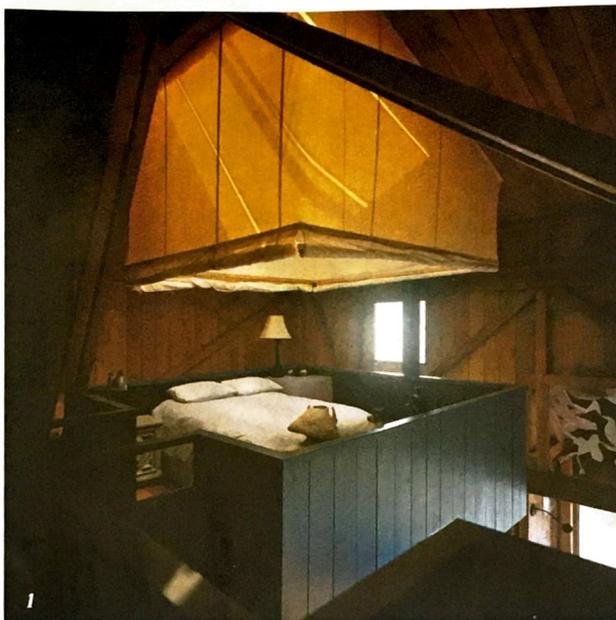
4. Moore's knickknacks are fun to look at, but there's a reason the chairs all face the windows.



▲ The exterior of the Mini-Mod, where Jason and I stayed at the Sea Ranch.

1. The sleeping loft in Moore's condo is like a tree house within a house.

2. Architect Joseph Esherick came up with the jazzy nickname the Mini-Mod for his puzzle of a house, which makes use of every inch of vertical space. It made a great HQ, and we built a fire there every night.

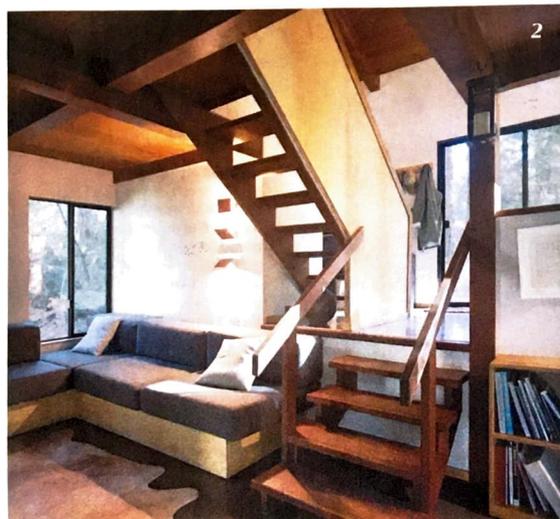


a younger generation of design enthusiasts is starting to visit.

Since the Sea Ranch is a private community, you have to rent a house within its bounds if you want access to the exclusive trails, beaches, and recreation centers. There is a "choose your own adventure" aspect to renting there. You can stay on a windswept bluff, deep in the redwoods, in a spartan cottage, or in a glass box—the list is long. Be warned: on arrival,

you might find yourself asking, "What's the big deal?" But after seeing those fairy rings of redwoods and the lines of the Modernist structures through rising sea mist, you will become a believer. ✦

The Mini-Mod and other Sea Ranch properties are available to rent at vacasa.com. For more information on the community and its architecture, visit tsra.org.



▲ Sheep were the previous inhabitants of this land. A roving flock helps cut the grass today.



▲ Lawrence Halprin, landscape architect and original Sea Ranch spirit guide.

3. You need a wet suit to swim in the ocean here, but not in the heated lap pool at Ohlson Recreation Center.

4. Jason made fun of my crush on the designer Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, but changed his tune as soon as he saw the men's changing room of Moonraker Recreation Center, which is decorated with her supergraphics.

5. On our last day we tried to sneak in to the Sea Ranch Lodge, which is currently being renovated, hoping to find an exit sign that Solomon had designed. We had no luck, but we did find this pathway leading to the sea.

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▲ One of Charles Moore's personal tchotchkes.