

It's The Yurts

A SMALL BUSINESS WITH LARGE EFFECTS

Mary and I are at Treebones Resort, perched on the western slopes of the Santa Lucia Mountains, at the end of the road on the Big Sur coast. About a year ago, the largest slide ever on the Big Sur coast closed the coast highway a mile south of here, turning the highway into a gorgeous 70-mile long, dead-end road.

We arrived just ahead of the storm we had been dancing with all down the coast. It rained hard for the rest of the afternoon and into the night. The Santa Lucia Mountains would get over seven inches of rain that night, with wind gusts up to 50 mph. All the while, we were warm, dry and comfortable in our yurt, a little piece of Oregon on the Big Sur coast.

Not long after the Handy family purchased their land at Big Sur, they started looking for a unique lodging experience for their resort. The Handys wanted the lightest possible touch on the land. On a trip to Oregon in 1998 John Handy discovered Pacific Yurts in Cottage Grove.

Handy purchased one yurt and took it back to Big Sur. He and his wife, Corinne, lived in it, testing it for lodging potential. They liked it. In 2003 the Handys placed an order for 15 yurts, and Treebones Resort was born. They purchased more the following year. So now, our refuge from the storm here at Treebones was a Pacific Yurt made in Cottage Grove.

After dinner, a fire blazed in the lodge's stone fireplace as guests played board games. Outside, the storm raged. We learned there had been more slides to the north, and the highway was now closed in that direction as well. We were not going anywhere. We were stranded until they reopened the highway. It was a scene right out of a murder mystery movie. Luckily, we had our cozy yurt to comfortably wait out the reopening of the road.

Alan Bair was a Hoedad tree planter in Cottage Grove in the mid 1970s. He was looking for a structure to function as a home base for the tree planting crew when he saw a photo of a yurt in *National Geographic*. He was intrigued by the design and built one for the tree-planting camp. It worked so well that he later moved it to land he and his wife, Elizabeth, had purchased near Cottage Grove, to live in.

While they lived in the yurt, people asked Bair if he would build yurts for them. So, in 1978, he started Pacific Yurts in an old dairy barn in Creswell, moving the business to a former skating rink on Highway 99, north of Cottage Grove, in 1980. For the first decade or so, they mostly made yurts for the local Oregon market. Bair says, "It was amazing to me what fertile ground Oregon was for our young enterprise and the outdoor lifestyle it represented."

He took classes in small business management. He met with Gov. Barbara Roberts who, at that time, was looking for ways to boost value-added wood products manufacturing. Pacific Yurts fit the bill, and so got a low-interest loan from the state's new economic development department.

The game-changer came in 1993 when Greg Tutor, Northwest regional manager for Oregon State Parks, visited the Pacific Yurt display at the Oregon State Fair. State Parks was in a funding crisis at the time and needed a way to be more self-sufficient. Tutor thought yurts could generate revenue with yurt rental fees and an extended camping season. And they did.

In 1993 State Parks ordered two 14-foot diameter yurts for Cape Lookout State Park. The yurts were installed in January of 1994 and, with just word-of-mouth advertising, the two little rentals steadily gained in popularity and started making money for the park. State Parks ordered 14 more yurts that year.

Today there are more than 200 Pacific Yurts in Oregon state parks, as well as in state parks in over 20 other states. The original two yurts at Cape Lookout are still in use. Pacific Yurts continues to employ people at family-wage jobs to manufacture their state-of-the-art yurts for Treebones, and the world, right here in Lane County.

On the second day of our trip, the storm eased up, allowing us to get outside. We set cruise control at 30 and drove down the Big Sur coast, never needing to pull over. It's what happens when you are at the end of the road. Humpback whales breached just offshore and sea otters floated on their backs in the surf. California condors soared over the Santa Lucias. And, the next day, the rockslide to the north was clear.

Yes, Treebones is a special place. It would be special just for where it is looking out over the sea at the south end of the Big Sur coast. It's special because it is owned and operated by the Handy family. The Handys and their staff operate it as responsibly as possible, as if it were their home, which it is. But there is something else that makes the place special. It's the yurts. It's very much the yurts.

Bob Warren retired in 2012 as the regional business development officer for Business Oregon for Lane, Lincoln, Linn and Benton counties. Prior to that, he was a senior policy advisor to Gov. Barbara Roberts and district aide and natural resource advisor for Rep. Peter DeFazio.

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