

Travel



The New Dungeness Lighthouse in Sequim, Wash., charges volunteer keepers \$350 per adult per weeklong stay

Duties include cleaning the public restrooms and mowing the lawn

Light Sleepers. A new breed of B&Bs offers beacon and eggs

By Adam Fisher

NOT LONG AGO, RICHARD NEAL, A 51-year-old software salesman in Charlotte, N.C., was killing time on a slow day at work, surfing the Web. "I had always heard that you could get fantastic deals on surplus government property," says Neal, who comes off as a straight arrow not prone to making impulse purchases. Typing *North Carolina* into the GSA website (the General Services Administration, in addition to its lavish spending habits, is known for unloading Uncle Sam's surplus property) brought up exactly what one might expect—worn-out prefab buildings, post offices, an old bank, ugly things. But then something caught Neal's eye: a special search function just for lighthouses. Soon he found himself looking at what appeared to be an oil rig in the Atlantic Ocean. The government's online brochure included photos of the hulking 85-ft.-high platform with a light tower, a helicopter deck and

5,000 sq. ft. of ransacked living quarters. Inside, he says, "it looked like Animal House after the big frat party."

He had stumbled upon—and hastily bid on—one of the 84 lighthouses that have traded hands over the past decade as part of the federal government's lighthouse-disposal program. Automated lights, not to mention radar and GPS, have pretty much made manned lighthouses obsolete as navigation aids, but the structures have found new life as waterfront real estate. Some have been converted into private residences, others into museums, and increasingly they're occupying a niche as something in between. Along the nation's perimeter, including the coasts of the Great Lakes, dozens of historic lighthouses offer overnight stays as bed-and-breakfasts, vacation rentals or volunteer-keeper programs that make guests pay for the privilege of running the place (including

cleaning visitors' restrooms) for a week or two. "Originally, my quest was to stay at every lighthouse in the country that I could," says San Diego electrical engineer Kraig Anderson, who keeps a list of such places at LighthouseFriends.com. "But it's not going to happen. There are just too many new ones offering overnight accommodations."

People who buy old lighthouses and fix them up do it for love, not because these purchases are especially practical. Lighthouses are expensive to restore and maintain, and the ones that the GSA has sold tend to come with a host of restrictions. There are rules for renovating historic structures. Some lighthouses are still considered active aids for navigation, meaning that the Coast Guard requires 24/7 access in case anything goes wrong. They are often hard to get to—and hardly posh. Neal warns adventure travelers considering a weekend at his offshore B&B, whose grand opening is in May, that the accommodations are "rustic," by which he means "covered in rust."

His lighthouse, which charges \$300 for a two-night stay, not including transportation, stands above a notorious



House rules The East Brother Light Station B&B serves up four-course dinners and views of San Francisco, but even guests paying \$415 a night can't shower unless they stay more than one night

underwater hazard known as the Frying Pan Shoals off the coast of the Carolinas. The shallows swallowed many a ship before the lighthouse was installed in 1966, and its proximity to the deeper waters of the Gulf Stream make it an ideal place to fish, so Neal is hoping anglers and wreck divers—many perhaps traveling the 60 nautical miles from Myrtle Beach, S.C., a popular seaside destination—will help recoup some of the \$85,000 he and several friends kicked in to buy the place and the \$25,000 they have spent so far on repairs.

With a lot of luck, the Frying Pan Tower will do as well financially as the East Brother Light Station, a large Victorian house and tower on a flyspeck of an island in the strait between San Francisco and San Pablo bays. One of the first lighthouses to be saved from destruction by being converted into a B&B, more than 30 years ago, it rents its cheapest rooms for \$295 a night, including meals and ferry transportation. Tom Butt, president of the nonprofit that manages the lighthouse, says East Brother “more or less breaks even on revenue” but relies on grants and

donations for capital projects. Its highest priority right now: a new copper roof for the lantern gallery that is expected to cost \$25,000.

East Brother, which is within sight of San Francisco, draws cosmopolites looking for a romantic getaway: urban types who find it charming that guests can't shower unless they stay more than one night, since the island's only water source is a rain-filled cistern. At a lighthouse B&B on the Hudson River in Saugerties, N.Y., a two-hour drive from Manhattan, rooms usually book up six months in advance despite the half-mile hike that guests have to take with their bags and the ban on hair dryers and other modern conveniences that would trip its ancient electrical circuits.

A handful of offshore lighthouses along the East Coast are coming up for sale this summer.

Even skeptics—most notably Neal's wife Rhonda, who is neither a diver nor an angler—have been won over. There is tranquility in spending a weekend out of sight of land, watching the sun rise and set on the horizon, listening to the sounds of the birds above and the waves below. “I'm happy to go out there,” she says, “as long as I never have to clean the toilets.” ■

The owner of this North Carolina B&B, which opens in May, warns guests that it's “rustic,” as in “covered in rust”



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