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LAP OF LUXURY

It's just you, the sea and lavish comfort at Nick's Cove on Tomales Bay.

RUSS PARSONS REPORTING FROM POINT REYES >>> Hotel rooms often are boring places you have to put up with just to explore some place exciting. At Nick's Cove, a new complex on Tomales Bay an hour or so north of San Francisco, you could be perfectly happy spending most of your time just exploring the hotel rooms. ¶ Not that you'd actually call any of these places "hotel rooms." ¶ A string of a dozen cabins, cottages and other assorted structures stretched alongside Highway 1 just north of the town of Point Reyes, Nick's Cove is a kind of Ralph Lauren meets Northern California fever dream of a resort. ¶ It's almost impossibly chic but not in an overly obvious way. Rather than settling for the kind of streamlined, highly polished glamour you find in most luxury resorts, Nick's revels in eccentricity. ¶ Most great hotels want to make you feel as though you're rich. But Nick's also wants to make you feel as though you're tasteful, [See Nick's, Page L5]



SHORE LEAVE: A colorful array of kayaks brightens up a foggy day along Tomales Bay, the region's prime base for Pacific oysters, located about an hour's drive from San Francisco.

A cottage industry at Tomales Bay

[**Nick's**, from Page L1] well-traveled and just plain interesting. And you'll find lots of great stuff to boot.

Take the cabin called Nicolina, where I stayed when I visited in early September. It's built on the frame of a houseboat that had been transformed in the 1950s from an old hay scow once used to move feed across Tomales Bay to the dairy farms of Point Reyes. Before that, it was a rail car.

Now it juts out over the water on pilings. It no longer rocks with the waves, but when it's quiet, you can still hear them softly slapping against the shore underneath.

The interior is snug and shipshape. Highly varnished dark wood ribs contrast against bright white wainscoting. A kind of clerestory lets in light.

You sleep on crisp white linens in a captain's bed surrounded by padded bumpers and flanked by portholes. In the bathroom, a big claw-foot tub gleams with chrome piping, including a rain-style shower head. The tile floors are heated. For the gadget-minded, the sink empties by flipping up.

You eat, read and write at a breakfast nook anchored by a highly varnished foot-thick mast.

Stacked in one corner of the room is an assortment of antique fishing rods. Alongside is a tackle box, full of old fishing lures. A framed collection of outsized specimen moths hangs on one wall, a 1930s sportfishing map of the United States on another.

There are seashells galore, pictures of fishermen and a basket made from an armadillo shell. Go figure.

The place is so set-designed that

when a floorboard creaked underfoot, I almost believed that it must have been planned as a sound effect. Yet everything is put together so artfully it never quite crosses into parody.

This could be because, as improbable as it may seem, the whole thing is rooted in reality.

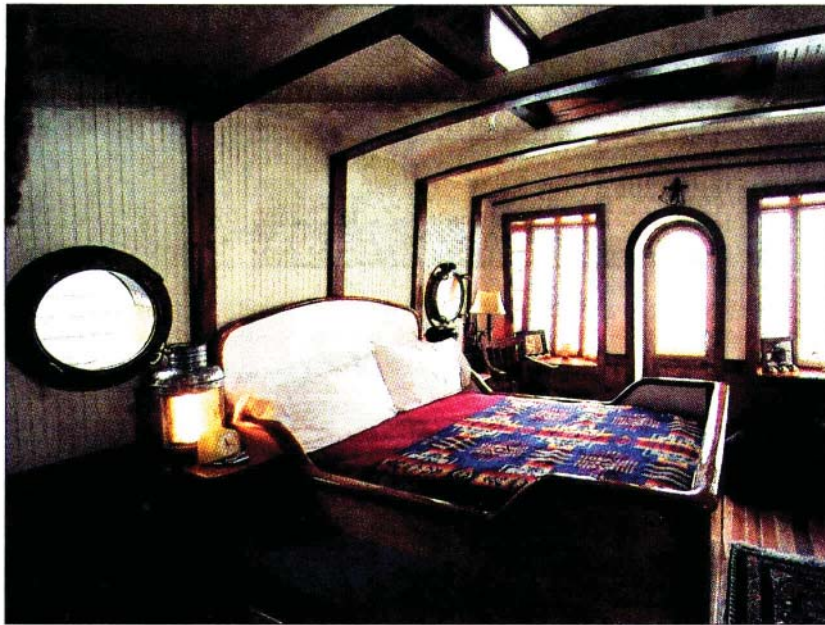
Although the name Nick's Cove sounds as though it might have been focus-grouped by a Hemingway book club, it really was the name of the fishing camp that Bay Area restaurateur Pat Kuleto bought to build the property. (The settlement was established in the 1930s by Nick Kojich, a Slavonian fisherman, and some of his friends.) Some of the individual cabins and cottages are named after longtime inhabitants of the Marshall area.

Kuleto is a well-known San Francisco restaurant designer and owner, with places such as Farallon, Boulevard and Jardiniere. Indeed, the chef at Farallon, Mark Franz, is a part-owner of Nick's Cove and helps run the restaurant there.

The food is very good, and of course based on local and seasonal products. This is Marin County. The oysters, farmed within a couple of miles of the restaurant, are terrific, and I particularly liked the grilled sardines that were a late-summer appetizer.

Kuleto and Franz bought the property in 1999 and it took eight years of fighting with various governmental and environmental entities to get it open. (The restaurant menu features a mock item of "Red Legged Frog" served with "mounds of sticky red tape" priced at \$2 million.)

From my perspective, it was all well worth it. Nick's Cove is so marvelous



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

HOUSEBOAT HAVEN: The Nicolina cabin at Nick's Cove is a remodeled rail car that juts out over water. Portholes flank the captain's bed.

If you go

NICK'S COVE

23240 Highway 1, Marshall, Calif.
(415) 663-1033.
Cabins from \$225 to \$695.

that you can easily imagine spending a whole weekend without leaving the premises.

That would mean missing out on some treats, though. Tomales Bay is one of the prime oyster-growing areas on the West Coast and the drive along Highway 1 is punctuated with places to stop and slurp. There's the well-known Hog Island Oyster Co. and the Tomales Bay Oyster Co. Be sure to stop at the Marshall Store, where the barbecued oysters come finished with a shot of chipotle sauce and accompanied by Kermit Lynch wines and Cow-

latimes.com/nicks Cove

Secluded shore

Go online for more scenic views of Tomales Bay and Nick's Cove.

girl Creamery cheeses.

Indeed, Cowgirl Creamery, one of the finest artisanal cheese makers in the country, has its headquarters in the charming little town of Point Reyes Station, just a few miles south of Nick's. It's a great place to spend the day, with a food hall, a bakery, a really good bookstore and several galleries.

Or you can travel on another couple of miles to the Point Reyes National Seashore, a splendid place for long, foggy walks on the beach. If you're feeling really energetic (or merely anticipating a big night of oys-



DOUG STEVENS Los Angeles Times

ter-eating), hike down to the lighthouse, where winds of more than 100 mph have been clocked. Of course, coming back up to the parking lot is like climbing a 30-story building.

On the other hand, you might want to go in another direction entirely. Wait for the breakfast delivery at your cabin — freshly baked pastries, ripe fruit and a strong pot of filter-press coffee. Wrap yourself in a warm robe and snuggle into bed with a mystery, listening to the rhythmic slap of the waves and watching out the window as the gray dawn skies gradually clear.

It's good to be rich and interesting, even if only for a morning.

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