

BudgetTravel.com

## A Treehouse Adventure

To celebrate our 10th anniversary, we invited readers to pitch us ideas, and we sent five of them on assignment. This writer and his brother went out on a limb to report back on several treehouse hotels in the Pacific Northwest.

Jeremy Gates  
June 2008 issue  
Tuesday, May 20, 2008;

### About the author

Jeremy Gates, 33, is an IT-support specialist and graphic designer who works for a family business in West Chester, Pa., outside Philadelphia. His brother, Tim, 27, is a film and video editor in Philadelphia. "Ever since childhood, I've been drawn to trees. My sense of exploration demanded that I take hold of Grandpa's grandest oaks and climb toward the heavens—at least until Mom summoned me down. I recently learned about treehouse hotels, many of which are in the Pacific Northwest, and I'd like to write about them. They sound like the kind of trees even my mother would climb."

\*\*\*

Driving east from Seattle on a country road, I wonder, *Is this happening?* Looking to my brother/navigator, Tim, for confirmation, I ask, "Are we really on assignment for *Budget Travel?*" Tim, the tree-climbing partner of my youth, nods.

After a stop at Snoqualmie Falls—a sight *Twin Peaks* fans would recognize—I begin to get why there's a high concentration of treehouses in the Northwest. As Special Agent Dale Cooper put it, "I've never seen so many trees in my life."

We pull in to **Treehouse Point** in Issaquah, hoping to meet Peter Nelson, who owns the place with his wife, Judy. He's one of the treehouse experts, having recently completed his fifth book on the topic. Peter also builds high-end residential treehouses and teaches laypeople how to do the same. Alas, he's away. The free tour, however, quickly lifts my spirits. The event center can accommodate up to 50 people and has hosted execs from Microsoft and other corporations; it's also available for functions such as weddings.

Treehouse Point is in the process of becoming a full-fledged hotel (but because most of the suites haven't been built yet, I chose not to book there). The first suite, Temple of the Blue Moon treehouse, was completed in December. The second one is under construction. Four or five more rooms are being planned, and they'll be linked by wooden suspension bridges. We stop to admire a stairway. Each baluster is a tree branch that's been sanded smooth. "Peter is an artist," declares our guide, Russell.

We cross a bridge and enter the Temple of the Blue Moon. Its cedar interior is bathed in light from an abundance of windows. If not for the views, I'd scarcely believe the room is in a tree, what with the electric lighting, stylish leather furniture, and adjacent bathroom. I regret that I didn't book a stay.



Late in the afternoon, at **Sky Riverhaven** in Gold Bar, Tim and I get our first good look at the Cascade mountains. We stand on owner Barb Furlan's deck, where she teaches yoga and tai chi, gazing at a pair of splendid peaks across the Skykomish River.

Barb didn't want a treehouse, but her landscaper kept insisting that she had a great cluster of trees and that he'd always wanted to build one. Eventually, with her grandchildren in mind, she gave him the go-ahead. Later, she started a B&B; she donates the proceeds to local charities. (After our visit, we learn that she's putting the property on the market and will take reservations only through June. If the house doesn't sell, she's willing to keep up the B&B.)

One hug and two dinner suggestions later and I'm climbing 12 feet up a narrow staircase to a yurt secured to a wooden platform. The room is cheerfully decorated, with colored Christmas lights hanging above a teddy bear that sits on the commode. (There's a shower and another toilet in Barb's house.)

With gusts of wind buffeting the treehouse throughout the night, I feel like I'm in a boat being tossed around by waves. Or maybe it feels more like I'm in a wok, being gently stir-fried? Or am I rocking in a cradle, like the "Rock-a-bye Baby" before the gruesome bough-breaking episode?

At breakfast, Tim and I sit in a sunroom and look out at the mountains, trees, and river. Barb dances in, bearing blueberry pancakes. The next morning, the dance is repeated—this time with "exotic eggs." And then Barb, who once performed in the jazz clubs of Seattle, slides over to the piano and plays Gershwin to accompany our meal.

A scenic ferry ride takes us to Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island's eastern shore. After an hour's drive north, we arrive at **Free Spirit Spheres**, where we meet Tom Chudleigh, creator of the spherical treehouses. Tom introduces us to his partner, Rosey Cowan, and then takes us on a tour of the five-acre property. Just beyond the bathhouse (with sauna) and near a pond, we enter a patch of trees.

Pointing up, Tom introduces us to Eve, the smaller of his two spheres. Her name is appropriate: She's the first of her kind, and like Adam, I can't take my eyes off her, a giant Christmas bulb encased in bent yellow cedar. Eve's younger sister, Eryn, is larger—about 11 feet in diameter—and hangs higher up. A system of ropes tethered to nearby trees holds her 1,500-pound body about 15 feet off the ground.

Before Eve and Eryn became hotel rooms, they were only for family and friends. Now honeymooners and pregnant couples who want a "womb-within-a-womb" experience are booking stays. Tom currently has plans to add one more sphere, which is in production. He may move them to a new piece of land, though, if his neighbor continues clear-cutting.

We climb up to Eryn. Tom's boatbuilding background is immediately evident. The teak interior and circular windows call to mind a glamorous yacht. There's a coatroom, cupboards, shelving, booth seating with a table, a countertop with a sink, a double bed, and a bunk—and not a hint of unused space. Yet the room doesn't feel cramped and can sleep three. (The nearest toilet is an outhouse down on the ground.)

A microwave, a fridge, an iPod docking station, electrical outlets, and reading lights add convenience to the charm. Even modest movement causes the sphere to jiggle, however. When I slide out of the bunk, my brother bounces like he's in a Jolly Jumper.

The following morning, Tom shows us his workshop. Except for the windows, each entire sphere is crafted here, including all metal handles, hinges, and brackets. I step through the doorway of Melody, the sphere in production. The acoustics are wacky; words reverberate the moment they leave my lips. As I exit, Tom vocalizes what I've been feeling throughout my incredible journey: It's high time we start thinking outside the box about our living spaces.

## **Lodging**

### **Treehouse Point**

6922 Preston-Fall City Rd. SE, Issaquah, Wash., 425/441-8087, [treehousepoint.com](http://treehousepoint.com), \$149

### **Sky Riverhaven**

17815 433rd Ave. SE, Gold Bar, Wash., 206/465-6797, [skyriverhaven.com](http://skyriverhaven.com), \$100

### **Free Spirit Spheres**

420 Horne Lake Rd., Qualicum Bay, B.C., 250/757-9445, [freespiritspheres.com](http://freespiritspheres.com), from \$125