

#### QUICK TOUR

**WHERE:** south of Gualala, California, on the Sonoma Coast ■ **SIZE:** about 3,800 acres on a thin property that follows the coast for about 10 miles ■ **HOMESITES:** 2,288 ■ **HOMES BUILT:** 1,738 ■ **HOME SIZE:** varies from 700 square feet to more than 4,000; all custom built ■ **GREEN SPACE:** 2,250 acres; known as the Common Area

#### THE CONDOMINIUM

The 1960s structure shown here was a brainchild of architects Charles Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull, and Richard Whitaker.

# The story of Sea Ranch

begins with four young architects sitting atop 100-foot cliffs that plunge into the Pacific. They dream out loud of creating a new model for coastal development. That was in 1965. What happened next was monumental



RICHARD WHITAKER (left), one of Sea Ranch's founding architects, enjoys his quiet, redwoods-encased retreat. Below: his living room

CENTURIES-OLD CYPRESS hedgerows (right) were planted as windbreaks between the grazing meadows. Now they protect the houses lining their edges and the hikers walking beside them.



## Stacks of wood-clad cubes

that form the Condominium building make a collective tapered whole that seems shaped as much by the wind and salt spray angling up from the sea as by the hands of those founding architects—Charles Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull, and Richard Whitaker. Today, their vision has grown into The Sea Ranch, one of the nation's first master-planned residential communities and a high-water mark for conservation-minded architecture.

These men, along with landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, knew there was magic here. The Mendocino Coast rises out of the Pacific in folds of tall-grass meadows framed by cypress, eucalyptus, and redwood forests. The sense of remoteness is not lost as Highway 1 winds past a few blue-collar-artsy towns and rickety barns hunched in pastures. About 100 miles north of San Francisco, The Sea Ranch stretches along

10 miles of coastline. When the ubiquitous fog thins away, it takes a second to see the silhouettes of the low-slung houses, the meadows, the forests, and the bluff. Then the fog returns, and they seem figments of imagination. Were those really houses tucked against that cypress row? How could it all blend so effortlessly?

To the architects and Halprin, understanding the history of the land was a crucial part of the design process. In the spirit of the Pomo Indians, the coast's first inhabitants, the men wanted The Sea Ranch to be a celebration of individuality, community, and place. Lawrence Halprin's brilliant landscape design took cues from the Pomo and the subsequent sheep ranchers whose cypress hedgerows defined the meadows and defended against strong winds.

One of Halprin's most lasting legacies here seemed crazy at the time. Common real estate





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### PLAN YOUR STAY

**GETTING THERE:** From San Francisco, drive north on Highway 1 from Point Reyes for a few beautiful hours to The Sea Ranch, just south of Gualala.

■ **WEATHER:** Foggy, sunny, misty, sunny, foggy. Every 10 minutes. ■ **LODGING:** Get the full Sea Ranch experience at The Sea Ranch Lodge. Its restaurant is one of the Sonoma Coast's best; 800/732-7262 or [searanchlodge.com](http://searanchlodge.com). Or rent a house through Sea Ranch Getaway ([searanchgetaway.com](http://searanchgetaway.com)), Rams Head Realty ([ramshead.com](http://ramshead.com)), or Sea Ranch Escape ([searanchescape.com](http://searanchescape.com)).



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## THE SEA RANCH ESSENTIALS

**1** This shingled house exemplifies more-recent interpretations of the original Sea Ranch look. **2** Brilliant planning here keeps houses off the coastal bluffs, leaving them open for a natural scene enjoyed by all. **3** The property was once grazing land for sheep and livestock owned by ranchers and homesteaders. Some of their historic structures continue to inspire residential design. **4** An airy, rustic/luxury room at The Sea Ranch Lodge **5** Donlyn Lyndon, one of the community's founding architects **6** Paths connect clusters of residences across meadows left open in an effort to tread lightly on the coastal landscape. **7** House shapes follow an indigenous, modern, simple form, such as this larger home in the redwood-tinged hills.



**MAYNARD AND LU Lyndon** built this 1,750-square-foot home on the edge of a meadow. They wanted a place with good light, an open floor plan for entertaining, and a connection to the natural beauty outside.



**COASTAL  
CONFIDENTIAL**

**WHAT  
DEVELOPERS  
CAN LEARN  
FROM THE  
SEA RANCH**

**EXPAND THE VIEW.** While it's tempting to divide prime seaside lots for individual homesites, preserving that perfect overlook means everyone can enjoy it.

**KNOW THE HISTORY.** The original inhabitants of the land generally had a good idea of how to work with the weather patterns and use natural features to make life comfortable. At The Sea Ranch, cypress hedgerows make for wind blocks, trails can become roads, and newly planted trees replace those clear-cut a century ago.

**HONOR THE VERNACULAR.** All Sea Ranch house plans must be approved by the Design Review. The review board's decisions are final and uncontestable, which frustrates some owners, but the goal is to encourage modest homes that fit their immediate environment and the overall Sea Ranch aesthetic.

**DEFER TO THE LANDSCAPE.** Turn back to page 84 and note how the roofline seems like an extension of the ground. The colors of the buildings here blend seamlessly with the trees, meadows, and rocks. Let the humble austerity of the exterior give way to personal expression inside.

practice then and to this day places a premium on coastal bluff homesites. But the landscape architect had a different idea of value: Instead of giving that prime location to a single homeowner, he left the bluffs open to all, thus making them a community amenity. And he went further—he also allowed only 50 percent of the land for private ownership; he designed roads to follow the land's natural contours; and he emphasized bluff, meadow, hedgerow, and forest over ostentatious house placements.

The houses needed to blur into the setting. Strict architectural guidelines calling for low structures and natural wood materials govern the construction practices, though there are a variety of house styles here, especially in the newer phases. This design restraint, as much as the original landscape

**THE COMMUNITY** varies from full-time citizens who get this Xanadu all to themselves during most weeks to second-home owners and vacationing renters.

**A RARE CAPE COD-STYLE HOME** (opposite) backs up to the cypress hedgerow, allowing its residents to enjoy breakfast in peace regardless of the winds whipping down the coast.

plan, explains the sense of architectural calm that pervades Sea Ranch's coastline.

Bruce and Trudie Scott came up to The Sea Ranch from the Bay Area when Trudie was working on her Master in Education. A little Cape Code-style shingled house caught her eye on daily walks. Now she and Bruce own it, a retreat a few hours from home. "It's the quiet," Trudie says. "We get up on Saturday and decide what to eat that night. Then we walk the trails and return here to cook. When winds blow strong we can sit on our back deck and not feel it because of the house's position against the cypresses."

The Sea Ranch has its detractors: Some view the architectural guidelines as a hassle; others lament the exclusivity. But not many communities appreciate why people love the coast so much in the first place. The Sea Ranch understands that it's not only the beaches and ocean view but also the abrupt bluffs, the subtle hills covered in windswept grasses that rise into forests, the big sky, and the respectful community that create place. And above all, it's the sense of restraint—informed by this landscape and its history—that makes it timeless. 🌿



Design restraint, as much as the original landscape plan, explains the sense of architectural calm that pervades Sea Ranch's coastline