

The Cat's Meow: My Experience at a Cat Bordhi Knitting Retreat

by Patricia Alderson of the Gilli-Hook Knitting Guild in Calgary, Canada

What's guaranteed to inspire you to knit outside the box and expand your technique repertoire? A four day retreat with Cat Bordhi, designer of the Mobius Cast-On and Sweet Tomato Heel socks.

Last spring, partially sponsored by a Memorial Fund grant from the Guild, I traveled to San Juan Island (just off the U.S. west coast) to attend a session with this respected teacher, writer and designer. I wasn't sure what to expect, so packed an assortment of needles, my ipad and a downloaded copy of one of Cat's books. Armed with enough stitch markers to drop along the path should I lose my way, I flew from Calgary to Victoria, then hopped on to a ferry to this small Gulf Island.

"Relax, you're on island time now," quipped Ken, the resident taxi driver. "I came for a vacation and never left. You'll see why; things are different here." They certainly are. San Juan Island prides itself on being a low-key, laid back place where time moves at a pace that suits, not demands - perfect for a knitting retreat.

Cat greeted us on arrival at the Lakedale Resort, a charming collection of lodge rooms and log cabins, all with lake views and private balconies. During our stay, we were well fed by a local caterer and welcomed by shop owners whenever we ventured into the nearby seaside town of Friday Harbor.

Each morning, twenty avid knitters gathered in the lodge's great room for instruction with Cat, who seemed genuinely interested in sharing her knowledge with us. Her teaching style is one that respects the different skill levels and interests of individual knitters. Rather than expect us to follow along like sheep (no offense, dear animal provider of luscious yarns) we were encouraged to pick a project from several selections, or work on something brought from home that was causing us difficulty. The emphasis was on learning new transferrable techniques and to challenge ourselves as knitters.

Small groups took turns watching Cat patiently demonstrate each of her methods. Her past career as a schoolteacher became obvious when she urged us to use memory triggers to master a seemingly complicated technique. Around the room, a low murmuring of "The mother comes through the front door; the boyfriend goes out the back and over the roof..." could be heard as several of us worked on perfecting our Mobius Cast On. Cat also explained a true mobius is one continuous length, not something twisted and joined, as many patterns instruct. "I consider those 'Faux-bius,' not mobius," she laughed.

My favourite experience was learning the Sweet Tomato Heel for socks. This is a completely smooth (like a tomato) short row method that doesn't require wraps, but is miraculously free of holes and surprisingly snug. Cat explained to those of us dubious about the durability of a smooth heel, that if the knitted fabric is dense and the sock well-fitted, it is just as strong as a ribbed version.

Mornings were devoted to learning, and after lunch we were free to work on projects, tour San Juan or take a ride on the inter-island ferry. It was too early in the season for whale or dolphin watching, but several of us grabbed our knitting bags and spent a great afternoon on the ferry as it made the rounds from one small island to another. Apparently groups of people knitting at sea are not too common. Several passengers stopped by to ask about our work and I couldn't resist saying we were a pilot project of the Washington State Ferry to promote fibre arts in the region. So far, I haven't been struck by lightening or the dropped stitch demon for that little white lie.

After dinner, we gathered again in the great room to knit and listen as Cat shared stories about her experiences and involvement in the knitting community. I was fascinated to realize how much she has affected the quality of knitting books through her annual Visionary Retreats, also held at Lakedale Resort. New and established designers take turns sharing their book concepts and the group responds with objective, non-competitive comments and concrete suggestions. Over the years, these retreats have helped many designers take their published work to a new level. Five of the top ten knitting books currently recommended by U.S. based The National NeedleArts Association (TNNA) are by Visionary authors, including *Knit, Swirl* by Sandra McIver (#2) and *The Sock Report* by Janel Laidman (#3). A list of past Visionary Retreat attendees reads like a Who's Who of popular knitting gurus, and includes Deborah Robson, Cookie A. and Chrissy Gardiner.

I came away from this adventure with new knitting friends, a greater sense of the unlimited range of what we, as knitters, can accomplish, and several new techniques I truly love. I've also reserved my place at one of next year's spring sessions, available first to returning knitters, with remaining spots open to anyone looking for a profound experience. I am grateful to our Gilli-Hooks Heritage Knitters' Guild for this opportunity and encourage all members to expand their horizons by applying for a grant and investing in personal skill development.

Many of Cat Bordhi's techniques are demonstrated on YouTube, including her Mobius Cast-On and Sweet Tomato Heels. Search Cat Bordhi on YouTube and a list will appear. Please note, most of these videos supplement the instruction provided in her books, so for best use, you'll need to buy one of them. I highly recommend her ebook, *Cat's Sweet Tomato Heel Socks*, which is chock full of innovative sock patterns, including clear how-to instructions. You can also join the Ravelry Sweet Tomato Heels group and read forum comments. For more information about next year's island retreats, visit her website, www.catbordhi.com.

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A Grateful Gilli-Hook