

Valley of the Moon 1997

by Michelle MacGregor

The following is a long recitation of my trip to the Valley of Moon, Scottish fiddle camp during the last week of August, year 1997.

It all started on a cool early spring day, when my fiddle teacher told me about this fiddle camp that she had been to. I looked over the brochure, and promptly tucked it away in my music bag, with the intention of sending it first thing..... Well, needless to say, the day before the dead line, I found that paper!! I sent it next day air, in hopes that it would arrive in time for the lotto drawing. Well, about a month later, I received a post card in the mail with a big check mark in the box that said ----You're in!!!! (in so many words)... I was ecstatic! I just could not wait for the summer to end, so that I could go to camp!

The months past slowly, and then, finally the time had come. IT was August 29th, 1997 and I was on my way to Denver International Airport to board my plane bound to San Jose California.

DIA is a new international airport. I found it to be exceedingly huge. The roof is made to look like the great rocky mountains. The architects have tried to achieve this with some sort of heavy duty flexible material. The terminals are so far apart, that you need to take an underground rail to get to them. Boy, that little train really hauls down those winding passages. It reminded me of what it might be like to ride in an old coal mine bin--at warp speed. I found my terminal and gate with ease, and boarded the flight. Two hours and 12 min. later (I was counting the minutes) I landed at San Jose. I found my humongo forest green duffel bag, which was packed full with sleeping bag, pillow, clothes and all, and head toward the designated meeting area of the " Valley of the Moon." It was easy to find---20+ fiddle cases (with fiddles), a few cellos and some guitar cases clumped together by a luggage pick-up bin, along with the perspective owners. All waiting for the big old yellow school bus to pick us up and take us away. The bus did its duty (on time) and we found ourselves winding up a two lane narrow road, through the great redwoods, on the way to camp. The thing that sticks with me the most about that ride, was the beautiful smell of the forest. It was wonderfully overpowering.

Arrival!!

Yeah!! we made it!! After finding my stuff through the masses--I trekked up the hill towards camp.(I was quite overloaded with my huge bag, backpack, and my fiddle - it hurts to think about it.) I walked over a bridge, crossing a slow moving stream, which was green with algae, yet clear enough to see the round rocks on the bottom. There were canoes and rowboats tethered in on a small dock, for campers to use at will (with the ever presence of a life guard) Finally I made to the main lodge, where all the camp staff was waiting with smiles to pass out our name badges(free stickers to put all over them were included in the deal) schedules, compete with a chocolate mint (I think they gave that as an incentive to actually read the material) Martin Hayes and Alasdair Fraser were both there to meet the on rush of fiddlers and other various musicians.

After check-in, it was time to find my cabin. My initial view of the camp was breathtaking. The redwoods are growing all around the camp, with the cabins all tucked in between them. There is one main lodge for eating, dancing, music and such-- also the bar was parked there (important feature). There is a building name the Sommer lodge. where I happened to have all my fiddle classes in. The ceiling must be about 30 ft. high, with big solid wooden beams. Two sides of the building (adjacent to each other) are complete windows, with a fantastic view of the trees, and on the deck, you can look over that same slow moving algae filled stream. The bathroom reminded me of being in highschool again. you know--- multiple stalls for toilets and massive all-in-one shower facility, of course, if you wanted to wait your turn, you could get a shower with a curtain. The cabins were sparse, yet quaint. 5 bunk beds per cabin. There were 5 fellow cabin mates in my cabin. I was the only one with the top bunk (self inflicted decision) The top bunk proved to be an interesting hurdle as I wrestled to get into bed gracefully and quietly every night (after visiting the bar)--I tried to keep it quiet as to not wake up my fellow mates (I was always the last to bed).

Trying to feed 200+ starving musicians, three times a day could prove to be quite the chore, but the kitchen staff pulled it off with a bang. everyone had to help at their designated times to set up the tables. Food was served family style, with one person from each table being the "hopper" or the one to get the food, man! Meals were at 08:00 (kind of a toughie, after going to bed at 2-3a.m. each night!), lunch at 1:00p.m. and dinner at 6:30p.m. Following dinner was a little free time, then back to the main lodge for lots o' music and fun.....

The first two nights, all the instructors on staff, gave a tremendous concert. The talent was unbelievable-- difficult to put into words. Following the concerts, almost every night there after, we all had ourselves a ceilidh (pronounced kay-lee; a drinking party set to live music and dance) Try to imagine the energy of dancing to the likes of Martin Hayes, Alasdair Fraser and Bruce Molesky as your band!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I could not get my feet to stop moving!!!!!!!!!---even after my injury (hurt foot) I still danced on.... the energy carried me through the pain (till the next morning).

One night we actually broke free of the big lodge, and each cabin had their own "theme" for a cabin party. The whole camp went out on an adventure tour of the various cabins. The ones that stick out in my mind the most would have to be the "old-time music/massage therapy/ while your sipping free whiskey cabin" there was a queue (line) a mile long for that one!!!! and one of the cabin members just happened to be a professional (at least that's what he said -ha ha) The other crew that was --shall we say ingenious-- would have to be the "funk trunk" These guys took a keyboard, complete with amp, and set up inside of a hollowed out redwood tree. They then proceeded to play funk music! It was a great crowd pleaser. I'm not sure Bruce Molesky ever did make it out of there...

The "three day ceilidh was a great hit. It was actually only one afternoon, and went into the wee hours of the morn' as did everything else. This was something like a performance, from camp members to camp members. It did not matter what level you play at, you just get up and contribute something to the group---anything. I'll give you some examples----"second voice" = the art of playing a tune in perfect pitch (no Martin, not peach, pitch!) and rhythm, by cupping your hands together and creating a fart-like noise.-----"whars da bar" (wheres the bear) = a little story, which, if you are a participant, you end up in a heap on the floor with all the other participants.....there were some awesome skits of various acts, and some awesome fiddling going on as well. I myself, of course, had to join in the fun. Some folks and I got together and formed a little band. A fiddler by the name of Alex played a pretty air, and then we jumped in with a tune by the name of " old grey cat" If you have ever seen me play, this might be easier to imagine, because I have a tendency to move around quite a bit. And so, for this tune, I donned a pair of ears and a tail, and became " the old grey cat" especially on the "b" part of the tune when I turned my back to the masses and "shook my tail" It went over quite well, I must say. I think I already have a nick name for next year--everyone kept calling me "the cat" or just "meowed" at ,e --It was a real blast!!!

I also had a chance to partake in a "waulking" this is new to me, I hope I understood the story correctly. A "walking" is when, in the old days, families would get together with all of their winter weavings and waterproof them. This was done by soaking the wool in urine (we used soapy water----thank god!) and then sitting around a table in a circle , would pass the cloth around, while scrunching and beating the cloth on the table. This is all done while singing ancient Gaelic songs. The cloth shrinks as it dries, and becomes waterproof. It was great to be involved with that.

Classes were all day long, They were about 1hour, 15min each. The instructors rotated around, so their times varied. If I went into all the classes and all that I learned, or at least all that I was taught, this letter would never end, so I will keep this part simple. Of course, I went to the fiddle classes- which were remarkable. I also took a bodhran class, which was held in the chapel, which is actually a bunch of benches, smack dab in the middle of a grove of redwoods. I also attempted some Appalachian clogging--what a blast! I would have continued with that, but I hurt my foot. Oh yeah, I can't forget the rhythm class, which was held on that deck I described earlier-- I never knew how uncoordinated I was till I took that class!

Some free time was spent in the canoe... paddling quietly down that stream. How beautiful and tranquil that was (until someone ran into me with another canoe) You can really see the root systems of those trees from the stream-- the banks were vertical with the huge roots reaching out at you. The moss on the trees was very apparent to me from that vantage. It was an awesome sight, I hope my pictures turn out! I also spent some time at the swimming pool. R&R is a wonderful thing--till I self inflicted a head-butt to a basketball, while trying to pretend I knew how to head-butt a ball.

Some very special magical times were when Alasdair and Eileen (the dancer) had an impromptu moment, where Alasdair would play a tune and Eileen would counter with dance.... back and forth they each tried to out do each other ---- is was a very wonderful moment-- a lot of great energy created out of that one!!!! We also had some very special guests drop in on us... Paul Machlis (piano) and Darol Anger from the Turtle Island Quartet. They shared their musical gifts and then left like a whisper.

The grand finale was the concert that we performed for 500 people in Santa Cruz (we had to turn away 200 people at the door) The concert was beyond words I cannot tell you what it was like to be on stage, performing with Alasdair, Bruce and Martin, not to mention Dennis Cahil (guitar) Barbara Magone (piano), Aby Newton (cello) and so many other talented people. The energy was so intense that I could hardly keep my emotions in check.. Bruce, Alasdair and Martin all played a set together--each in their own styles, and they made it work! it was great!! there was dancing and music and song---- the grand finale was the best--- I don't even think this one was planned. We were going to town on a tune (I think it was Perrie Werrie) When all of a sudden Alasdair started to walk off of stage-- while still playing, he motioned to the rest of us to " come on" --- and we did !!! 200+ musicians all still playing, walking up the isles of this theater, The crowd was on their feet!! We walked straight out to the courtyard and proceeded to play for another 15-20 min, with the whole audience around us!!! It was absolutely beyond words. I cant even begin to tell you the feeling of that night.

And so I think I will leave the letter on that grand exit. My eyes are tearing just thinking about it. I hope I haven't babbled on too much here--- I just cant help it. This camp has been a life-changing experience, and I intend to make the most of it in every way possible.