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Muskoka: The Malibu of the North

Hello, Goldie! Hollywood Has Discovered Muskoka in Ontario



Steve Payne for The New York Times

ON GOLDEN PONDS For decades, Muskoka, a large lakeland area north of Toronto, has been host to celebrity industrialists and financiers. Now, it has become a playground for big names in entertainment and sports, too.

By **DENNY LEE**

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HERE is another reason to blame Canada. For years, movie studios have been flocking to Toronto and Montreal to make films on the cheap. But now Hollywood is outsourcing another resource to the land of maple leaves and moose: celebrity second homes.

Just two hours north of Toronto, Muskoka is a region of lakes and jutting granite cliffs that recalls the breathtaking vistas of the Adirondacks. More recently, however, it has begun to feel more like Malibu, as film stars and the very rich erect trophy homes along its pristine shoreline.

Never heard of Muskoka? You're not the only one. Scott Wittman, the lyricist for the Broadway musical "Hairspray," hadn't either, until the comedian Martin Short invited him up this summer. "It's a little bit of Hollywood up here," said Mr. Wittman, a [Manhattan](#) resident, who spent a month writing and swimming at Mr. Short's cottage on Lake Rosseau. "It's like Golden Pond. You almost expect Katharine Hepburn to come around the corner at any moment."

Or at least Goldie Hawn, Kurt Russell, Tom Hanks or Steven Spielberg - all either own cottages in Muskoka or visit often.

The celebrity appeal is not hard to appreciate. Encompassing an area about the size of Rhode Island, Muskoka is clustered around three big lakes - Muskoka, Joseph and Rosseau - that are carved into the Canadian Shield and framed by a dense canopy of hemlocks, pines and maples. With a galaxy of private islands and thousands of miles of glacial shoreline, Muskoka is "beautiful and secluded, with palatial homes for the Canadian superwealthy that fit the Hollywood model elegantly," said Noah Cowan, co-director of the Toronto International Film Festival, which ends tomorrow. "People come to the festival, then hang out in Muskoka."

Hockey players (this is Canada, after all) huddle here. "Every single member of the Toronto Maple Leafs has a place in Muskoka," Stephen Levine, 45, a Toronto accountant who owns a cottage in the area, said with slight exaggeration.

And if this were an episode of MTV's "Cribs," the vehicle segment would not focus on Bentleys but on torpedo-shaped speedboats, mahogany racers and G.P.S.-guided seaplanes. "You don't see sailboats or canoes anymore," said Bob Topp, 71, a fourth-generation Muskokan who lives in Toronto. "The new people are anxious to show off their wealth."

But not all the money is new. Captains of Canadian industry like the Labatts, Bronfmans and Eatons have spent summers here since the beginning of the 20th century. They were joined by Pittsburgh barons like Mellon and Carnegie, who built huge houses along a narrow channel on Lake Muskoka known as Millionaires Row.

The rest of Ontario's cottage country, however, remained middle-class. Torontonians of more modest means could afford a cabin on the lake. "Blue-collar guys could put away some money and buy a small place," said Steven Curry, a broker at ReMax Muskoka Realty.

But in the last decade, a new generation of millionaires arrived, buoyed by a hot Toronto economy, a real estate boom and Muskoka's newfound cachet as a retreat for the rich and famous. Small cottages were snapped up, torn down and replaced with oversize facsimiles.

"We couldn't afford our cottage anymore," said Pat Sinclair, 65, a retired nurse from Toronto, who sold her place last year after the property taxes rose to about \$9,500 from about \$2,500 in 1990. "Everything now is high-end, high-end, high-end."



The Cottage Industry: Kevin and Linda O'Leary travel from Boston to enjoy Lake Joseph, where they have a 9,000 square foot seven bedroom house. Their boathouse, right, has a sun deck on the second floor.

For anyone casually acquainted with Muskoka, what passes for a cottage these days may come as quite a shock. Take the home of Kevin and Linda O'Leary, a couple from Boston who built a cottage on Lake Joseph five years ago. Now, rising like a wedding cake from the lakeshore, is a periwinkle-blue structure with white trim, wraparound cedar decks, three boat slips and a second-floor sun deck that is larger than some marinas here.

And that is just the boathouse.

Behind it, perched on a huge slab of pink-and-gray granite, is the 9,000-square-foot main house with seven bedrooms, four stone fireplaces, a wine cellar carved into the native rock and a lofty sweep of terraces.



Chefs prepare dinner in the O'Leary's restaurant-grade kitchen.

"This is a very typical room in Muskoka," Ms. O'Leary, 41, said during a tour of her cottage earlier this month. The room had 30-foot cathedral ceilings and a wet bar. In a restaurant-grade kitchen, a staff of three was preparing sweetbreads and lobster for 17 people, including colleagues from her husband's former software company. "I wanted this to have a country cottage feel," she said.

No amount of weathered shingles or barn wood flooring however, can obscure the fact that the age of McCottages has arrived in Muskoka. "Everyone wants the Olde Muskoka look," said Jeff Buddo, a real estate agent from Chestnut Park Real Estate. "When people say they have a 'cottage' these days, what they really mean is 'mansion.'"

There is little confusion, however, when it comes to price. In 1993, the average price of a house on the three lakes was about \$225,000, according to the Muskoka & Halliburton Association of Realtors. That figure is now nearing \$1 million, with some prices exceeding \$4 million.

"All of Muskoka has become a Millionaires Row," said Anita Latner, a real estate broker. "Muskoka is to Toronto what [the Hamptons](#) are to New York."

Except that in Muskoka, everyone is on sparkling blue lakes and the curb appeal is from a boat. On a windy Friday afternoon, James Crowe, 40, an heir to a tire manufacturing fortune, offered a real estate cruise aboard his 27-foot-long Sea Ray runabout. "See that boathouse?" Mr. Crowe said, pointing to a typical structure in the distance. As he got closer, the contours of a large green house came into view. "It's owned by some American worth \$700 million, and nobody here knows or cares."

As he sped north, the cottages grew larger, the buffer between boathouses farther and the names more familiar. There were Kenny G's log cabin-style villa, on a private island, that Cindy Crawford rented this summer; the sprawling compound of Ted Rogers of Rogers Communications; the cliff-top cottage of Robert Lantos of Alliance Atlantis, the Canadian entertainment conglomerate; and the relatively modest getaway of Eric Lindros, the hockey star.

"Here, at the top of Lake Joseph, it's called Billionaires Row," Mr. Crowe said.

THAT'S not to suggest that Lake Rosseau, its sister lake, is shabby, especially when the neighbors include Goldie, Kurt and Martin. The less known announce their presence through architecture: The six-slip boathouse for a private regatta of antique racers and fishing boats. The two-island estate linked by a footbridge flanked by twin turrets - one with a hot tub, the other with a sauna. The water slide that is chiseled into the sloping granite.



Country Living:
Bobbie Genovese's
cottage on Lake
Rosseau has a water
slide.

"My 3-and-a-half-year-old son lives on the waterslide," said Bobby Genovese, 41, who divides his time between a place in the Bahamas and 10 other homes. His Muskoka cottage, built three years ago at the cost of about \$7.5 million, might be his favorite. "Where else can you get to three of Canada's best golf courses by boat?"

That's assuming, of course, you're a member. There are now about two dozen golf courses and counting in Muskoka, including six that are private. The newest, Öviinbyrd, tries to be so exclusive that its phone number is unlisted and the entrance is unmarked. Membership, roughly \$85,000, is limited to friends of the owner, Peter Schwartz, a dot-com alumnus.

"It doesn't matter how much money you have or how famous you are - it's about who you know," explained Dave Gardiner, Öviinbyrd's general manager. "Martin Short's wife came to play the other day, but she couldn't because she wasn't a member."

The one sport that everyone seems to share is celebrity-spotting.

"I won't drop names, but we get a fair amount of the movie set, like Kurt Russell, Tom Hanks and Bill Murray," said E. J. Gordon, who has a no-autographs policy at his restaurants in Port Carling, where the three lakes meet.

"Steven Spielberg was here a couple of weeks ago," said a worker at the Muskoka Airport, where the Gulfstreams are parked like taxis.

"Kate Hudson drops by," said Ronald Brabander, who runs Blondie's Restaurant in Gravenhurst on Lake Muskoka.

The air of celebrity is so thick that the novelty may be wearing thin. "I've seen them at the grocery store, I've seen them at the marina, I've seen them playing golf," said Bob

Schultz, a Toronto investor who has been coming to Muskoka for 35 years. "Nobody pays attention to them anymore."

If You Go

Muskoka is a two-hour drive from Toronto, going north along Highway 400. Rental cars can be picked up at Toronto Pearson International Airport.

Taboo Resort, Golf and Spa (Muskoka Beach Road, Gravenhurst; www.tabooresort.com; 800-461-0236) has single rooms starting at \$250 and four-bedroom cottages for \$920. Cottage rentals from \$800 a week to more than \$3,000 are listed on Port Carling Boats (www.portcarlingboats.com). Other accommodations can be found at the Muskoka Tourism's Web site (www.discovermuskoka.ca).