

# TRUE NORTH

Nothing beats a summer's day in Ontario cottage country. BY JORDANA DIVON



**F**or big city residents, spending summer weekends at the cottage is as Canadian as ... well, hockey. That quiet, rustic escape from the concrete jungle provides more than an oasis of calm; it's a chance to regenerate the reserves after a long winter, fire up the barbecue, and splash around in the lake like a five-year-old who just busted his water wings.

Now imagine you're a pro athlete railed after a grueling season, and you can safely multiply that effect by a hundred. "For me, coming up here is a great place to get away and clear your head. So much of hockey is mental, and being at peace is huge. Places like Haliburton [Ontario] help [me] achieve that," Colorado Avalanche star forward Matt Duchene says of his hometown, an area roughly three hours north of Toronto.

There's a reason NHL stars – and celebrities from all arenas – flock to Ontario's northern counties: the region offers the best of all worlds. Just travel a few hundred miles north of the Canada/U.S. border and you suddenly find yourself in a spectacular wilderness throwback straight out of an Annie Dillard novel. One trek through the woods and it's easy to imagine a time when men

chopped their own wood to keep the home fires burning, and you could go for days without so much as a glimpse of a lawyer, press agent or accountant. Of course, if your idea of roughing it means wiping your ass with recycled toilet paper instead of three-ply cashmere, there are plenty of luxury cottages to suit your fancy. Muskoka's lakefront hosts a litany of multimillion-dollar cottages, and perhaps the highest per capita rate of Maple Leafs at any given time outside Toronto's Air Canada Centre. But in order to crack a six-pack with Colby Armstrong or Doug Gilmour, both of whom have summer homes in the exclusive Georgian Bay enclave, you probably need a disposable income equivalent to a developing country's GNP.

Thankfully, the water's free – and there's lots to go around. Over 250,000 lakes span the perimeter of the province, making the region a wakeboarder's paradise. "Canada, and especially Ontario, is a land of lakes and rivers," says Terry Rees, executive director of the Federation of Ontario Cottagers Association. "By sheer geography, we have a significant amount and variety of aquatic habitat. We also have a human history spanning 10,000 plus years of reliance on the wa-

terways for our health and subsistence, our economy, and the place where we relax with our families, and where we play."

Unlimited playtime is another reason people consider the cottage a prime refuge. Between the boating, the hiking, the skiing, and the golf, the athletically inclined, like retired Penguin Dave Roche, never run out of things to do. Roche, who lives on Chemong Lake in Ennismore, Ont., says there's nary a dull moment between seasons. "There are tons of activities we're able to do, like skating on the lake in the winter, and the tubing, wakeboarding, knee boards and swimming all summer," he says. "There are also lots of golf courses to choose from, even a couple we can boat to and dock [in] right there." As for the rest and relaxation your weary body requires, try to picture a scene more peaceful than taking in the sunset in your wicker chair, a cold one sweating in your right hand, and a copy of TFP in your left.

So, for everyone who dreams of spending August swatting black flies, reading crap novels, and seeing how many hot dogs they can shove down their gullet before choking, here's a comprehensive guide to Ontario's top cottage hotspots. ■





## MUSKOKA

There's a reason The New York Times called this patch of mega-cottages "The Malibu of the North." For starters, you need a bank account at least six zeros deep, and a BlackBerry full of the private cell phone numbers of the rich and famous, like your country neighbours Mark Messier, Tom Hanks, and golfer Mike Weir. Muskoka's tony shores encompass the area west along Georgian Bay and are bordered by Parry Sound, Algonquin Park, and Lake Simcoe. This is the place to see and be seen, as the high-density waterfront hosts the crème de la crème of summering urban dwellers.

## PARRY SOUND

An hour's drive from Malibu North, this patch of wilderness might as well be called the anti-Muskoka for its relatively wild frontier and more, er, "traditional" accommodations. By summer, the tiny regional population of 18,000 swells to about 60,000-plus, and the area's magnificent parks and forests – many of which have been immortalized by famed Canadian painters, The Group of Seven – fill up with eager sightseers. Parry Sound's real claim to fame, however, lies in its history as the birthplace of Bobby Orr. Locals can enjoy a calendar full of cultural events at the performing arts centre named after the legendary hall of famer.

## HALIBURTON

Named after a famous 19th century author and judge, this bustling seasonal retreat is quickly catching up to Muskoka in popularity. The 1,500-kilometer stretch of natural habitat may be best known for its overnight camps: many a youth has passed a blistering summer on the cool lakes of Camp White Pine or its rival Camp Timberlane. It's also turned out an impressive cache of NHL stars, including Matt Duchene, playoff-bound Canuck Cody Hodgson, and old-timer Bernie Nicholls.

## SIMCOE

A small(ish) region smack dab in the center of things, this parcel of land is home to Wasaga, the world's longest freshwater beach, as well as the oldest fishing weir in Canada, and some of the best year-round fishing in the province. A major landscape feature in the Simcoe region is the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve, a region protected under UNESCO's decree since 1990. Collingwood, a district cottage town, is arguably second to Muskoka in popularity. Simcoe can also claim hometown rights to scrappy right winger Ryan VandenBussche and Chicago defenceman Jassen Cullimore.

For more information about Ontario's cottage country call the Federation of Ontario Cottagers Association at 705-749-3622, or visit [foca.on.ca](http://foca.on.ca).



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