

THE VIEW FROM HERE

*MUSKOKA'S TOUCHSTONE RESORT MAKES
GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL A BREEZE*

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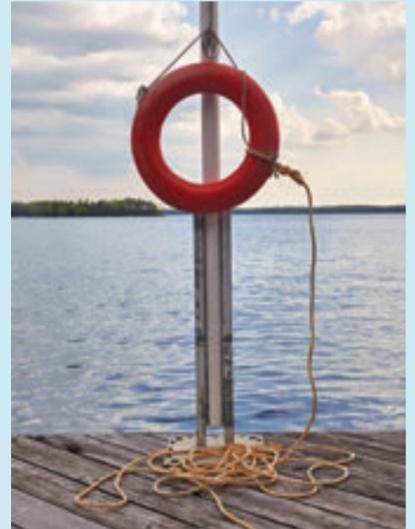
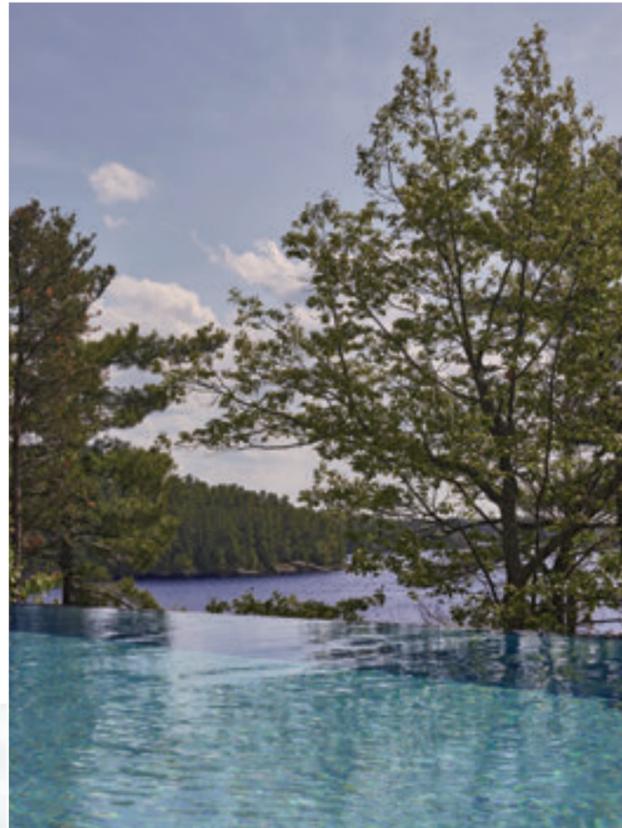


It's just after midnight and I'm sitting at the edge of a dock, cocktail in one hand, iPhone flashlight in the other. "Turn it off," says my friend, and in total darkness we hear the call of loons echoing across the lake. As if on cue, we look up at the night sky and see thousands of stars above. Suddenly Toronto seems worlds away from this idyllic Muskoka scene. It's hard to believe that just hours ago I was scrambling to meet a work deadline and frantically shuffling my kids off to baseball practice. But such is the power of Muskoka: Drive two hours north of the city and your biggest dilemma is which type of wine to drink while watching the sun set.

On this particular day, I escaped the city with a friend for some female bonding. We headed to Touchstone, an upscale resort in Bracebridge that boasts panoramic views of Lake Muskoka. Unlike a cottage, which involves constant maintenance, Touchstone offers a series of fully furnished condos available for ownership or rent. Much like city condo living, Touchstone's units are worry free, except that they come fully furnished, including a well-outfitted kitchen and a fireplace, and offer a view of the beach or the lake.

The idea is that you can just show up and not have to worry about a clogged toilet or overgrown lawn or whether the barbecue is working. There are no responsibilities here other than choosing which activity to try first: Touchstone has complimentary canoeing, kayaking and paddle boarding, while speedboat and Sea-Doo rentals can be booked through the resort. Then, of course, there's the lake itself: There are few things better in life than that first dip following a brutal Canadian winter.

We arrive at the resort just in time for dinner at Touchstone Grill. As someone who grew up with a family cottage, it's a treat to simply turn up and dine al fresco without the hassle of packing up and then unloading a weekend's worth of groceries (most of the condos come with kitchens, though, so those inclined to cook can drive to the nearby Bracebridge Farmers Market—the fresh trout filets from Milford Bay are to die for). First up are cocktails, expertly concocted by food and beverage manager Dillon Hughes, who puts a creative twist on the classics (the Instagram-worthy cucumber margarita is amazingly refreshing on this hot, muggy night). Dinner is sumac-crust Ontario pickerel, which is simple and delicious (everything really does taste better outdoors). The



MUSKOKA FUN

Peace and tranquility may be the goal but when you've had enough of the Muskoka chair, here's what to do:

Muskoka Yoga Studio

Imagine doing downward dog while balancing on a Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP). That's the premise behind SUP yoga, a fun, challenging way to spice up your regular practice and catch some rays. Killer core workout, too. muskokayogastudio.com

Grand Electric

The much-loved Parkdale bodega opened up a lakeside spinoff last year, dishing out cold beer and tacos to the cottage crowd. grandelectricmuskoka.com

Muskoka Bay Club

Get in a game of golf at Gravenhurst's award-winning Muskoka Bay Club—worth the short drive for the breathtaking views alone. muskokabayclub.com

Bracebridge Farmers Market

Open Saturdays (8:30 am–1 pm) in downtown Bracebridge, this market has everything from locally grown produce to gluten-free bread to fresh maple syrup. If you're visiting midweek, check out markets in Bala (Mondays), Gravenhurst (Wednesdays), Port Carling (Thursdays) or Rosseau (Fridays). thebracebridgefarmersmarket.com

Webers

No drive to or from cottage country is complete without a stop at Webers. The iconic joint on Hwy 11 has been serving up the best burgers and fries (try the mystery seasoning) since 1963. webers.com

The Kee to Bala

Nothing like live music and dancing to round out your Muskoka getaway. The Kee to Bala, a 30-minute drive from Touchstone, is where it's at—everyone from Drake to The Hip have played this classic venue. thekee.com

Muskoka Drive In

Go retro at Muskoka's drive-in movie theatre in nearby Gravenhurst. The best part? Fifty-cent popcorn refills. muskokadrivein.com

“THIS IS LUXURY MUSKOKA WITH A LAID-BACK FEEL—THERE’S NO PRETENSE HERE. IT’S WHERE PEOPLE COME TO UNPLUG AND RELAX.”

best part, however, is our beautiful natural surroundings: towering maples and pines, giant rock ridges and calm waters below.

“We have the highest elevation in all of Lake Muskoka,” Tony Schaschl, Touchstone’s director of sales and marketing, tells me over drinks. “This is luxury Muskoka with a laid-back feel—there’s no pretense here. It’s where people come to unplug and relax.” Come fall, Touchstone will undergo a major expansion to include an additional 66 condos, ranging from bachelor condo suites to four-bedroom treetop penthouses.

While it’s easy to get around the 22-acre property, families with young children tend to gravitate toward the beach-house area, which features tennis and volleyball courts, a small playground, fire pit and, best of all, shallow water entry from the private sandy beach. It feels a bit like overnight camp; I half expect a cute scraggly-haired guy to break out the acoustic guitar. Expansion plans in this area include a swimming pool and dock with modern, Miami-style cabanas.

Those on a couple’s weekend or girls’ or guys’ getaway should check out the private 2,200-square-foot treetop penthouse suites, boasting an indoor-outdoor fireplace, private hot tub and killer views. “It’s the closest thing you can get to having your own cottage in a luxury setting,” Schaschl says, adding that Touchstone has taken care of everything from linens to cutlery.

Our room, in the resort’s main lodge, is clean and comfortable. As the morning sun peeks in, we get ready for a dip in the infinity pool before grabbing coffee and a quick bite. The spa awaits, and it takes me a moment to wrap my head around being pampered while in full-on cottage mode (swimming counts as showering, right?). There are dozens of treatments to choose from, including a deluxe pedicure and hot stone massage; I opt for a seaweed body wrap, my friend goes for a facial. An hour later, I’m sipping cucumber-infused water in a breezy spa lounge, once again marveling at the view and feeling more relaxed than I have in months.

It’s time for our final meal before heading back to the city (clearly food is a major theme of this trip). We grab our usual spot at the Touchstone Grill. A second restaurant, Boathouse Lakeside Lounge, was set to open come summer. Situated on the water, it will have a relaxed atmosphere with traditional Muskoka fare (fish tacos, hamburgers and so on). Schaschl expects it will attract locals and cottagers via boat because of its prime location to nearby lakes Joseph and Rosseau.

As I take in this gorgeous view one last time, it’s easy to see why Torontonians are crazy for Muskoka. Dubbed “the Malibu of the North” by *The New York Times*, celebs like Steven Spielberg, Kate Hudson, Cindy Crawford and Rande Gerber are undoubtedly drawn by the peacefulness of this region. It’s happening enough that you can dine and hear live music on the water or shop the chic boutiques at nearby Port Carling, and yet it also offers what anybody with a busy lifestyle truly craves: seclusion and unbridled natural beauty. **KW**

