

# DIPPING INTO CANADIAN COTTAGE CULTURE

## LIZ LOWE

Sometimes it's only with hindsight you realise how special an experience was, but there are times when you can't fail to see it in the moment.

It's late July, a sun-baked Saturday afternoon, and I'm swimming alongside a raft and paddleboard loaded with two and four-legged friends and chilled drinks. We float between tree-fringed riverbanks, passing cottage garden jetties and bridges where laughing teens challenge each other to take the plunge. The sounds of Montreal indie-rock drift across the water while damsel flies skirt the surface. Life is undeniably good.

Gliding with the current down the Gull River towards the township of Minden is a favourite local pastime and we share the river with several other groups and their

inflatables. "Our rivers are known to provide a perfect float on a hot summer's day," says Manager of Tourism for the County of Haliburton, Angelica Ingram. It takes around 45 minutes to reach the wooden dock in the centre of town where independent shops and eateries – including one shaped like an ice cream cone – await us. Although we're under three hours' drive from Toronto, the city couldn't feel further away.

We left the downtown heat yesterday afternoon, heading north to experience a weekend of Canadian cottage culture in the lake-studded Haliburton Highlands. As we got further from Toronto, the roads became quieter. We passed stands selling freshly harvested corn cobs and saw red-winged blackbirds perching on cattail reeds in the marshland. My companion visibly relaxed as we pulled up at Gooderham Lake where families were soaking up the remnants of

the day as the water turned silvery in the soft dusk light.

Staying in a rustic cottage and immersing yourself in the wild is a quintessential



Escape into nature on a Yoga Camp in the Haliburton Highlands

Canadian experience. Cottage culture means indoor/outdoor living, forest hikes, campfires, stargazing and drawn-out days spent in or on the water. It's getting away from life's frenetic pace and coming back to nature and, as I jumped off the jetty into the weekend, I could see why they love it so much.

Our hosts have had their cottage on the Irondale River for several years. "It's given us so much – it's been the setting for irreplaceable time spent with family and loved ones," says Scott Richer, who visits throughout the year with his wife and three sons.

People come to this area for many reasons. Simone Nitzan, founder of Yoga Camp, has run yoga retreats in the Haliburton Highlands for many years. "It's in the Canadian Shield," she says, "so it's rocky and hilly, making for a beautiful landscape." Simone cites the pristine lakes and quaint towns as highlights but mainly loves that "it feels quiet and serene and isn't overrun by people. You can really escape into nature here".

The diversity of swimming spots is a major draw for swimmers, who can explore sandy lakeside beaches, rivers and waterfalls. As Angelica says, "with over 600 unspoiled lakes and rivers, Haliburton County is a swimmer's paradise". It's the lakes that the region is predominantly known for though, and there are many to choose from, each with a different character.

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Angelica highlights the area's most famous lakes, such as Redstone or Kennisis, "where you can swim from your cottage, your dock or a public-access swimming spot".

Simone's favourite lake is Elephant Lake, which sits northwest of the town of Bancroft and has around 22 miles of shoreline but is home to only around 100 cottages. "It's the lake we host Yoga Camp on," she explains. "It's perfect because it's not too big but it's big enough to feel somewhat expansive.



Elephant Lake



Escape from life's frenetic pace



Gliding down the Gull River





Image: Darren Lum



Image: Thom Lambert

Silent Lake

There aren't a ton of boats on the lake and there aren't many other cottages, but it's big enough that you can really go explore."

Locals and regular visitors all have preferred spots to take a dip and are happy to share tips and advice. Scott suggests we try Glamor Lake Beach, a smaller lake around twenty minutes from Haliburton village with under seven miles of shoreline. He also tells us about the popular High Falls on the York River in Algonquin Park, and Ritchie Falls – a series of waterfalls along the Burnt River. The

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Downtown Minden

largest of the latter's falls is under the Ritchie Falls Road bridge which has parking nearby, making this a very accessible destination.

If you're happy to put some effort in by foot or paddle, you might be rewarded with a tranquil swim spot all to yourself. "I love this waterfall in Algonquin Park close to the southern entrance," says Simone. "You have to hike into the falls for about 30 minutes but it's a gorgeous spot for a picnic and to swim and most likely you won't run into anyone else there." Similarly, Scott's favourite swimming hole – Three Brothers Falls, found near the confluence of the Irondale and Burnt River – can only be reached by paddle.

Many delightful spots require little effort to find though. Angelica points us towards Head Lake Park which sits right in the middle of Haliburton Village and is home to a popular river and a bridge where kids can often be seen jumping into the water. When we visited, there was a bustling arts and crafts market, and there is a regular farmers' market here on Tuesdays between May and October which moves to Minden on Saturdays.

Alongside swimming, visitors can enjoy stand-up paddleboarding, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, boating, water skiing,



Image: Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization

The region has over 600 lakes and rivers

hiking and cycling. Summer is the most popular season to visit, and in July and August the area comes alive with festivals, events, arts and culture, markets, outdoor activities and much more. For those who like to combine adventures in nature with a touch of luxury, there are several spas and five-star dining experiences to sample.

"There's also a lot to draw people to the area in the fall," says Angelica. "We have an abundance of fantastic fall foliage that lights up the sky during September and October, and various lookout towers in the region where you can take in the autumn scenery. We host a popular hiking festival in September and there are also activities like camping, live music, theatre and more."

In the winter, plummeting temperatures make swimming a trickier proposition, but there's skiing (downhill and cross-country), snowmobiling, ice fishing, snowshoeing and winter camping to keep visitors busy.

"It's a true four-season destination for any outdoor enthusiast or nature lover," says Scott. "The raw beauty of the highlands with dense, dark forests carved by its lakes, rivers, and waterfalls...it's magic."

As I towel myself off on the Minden jetty and discussions around where to head for refreshments begin, I wish I could



Image: Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization

And relax!

spend longer in the area. We pile into a nearby restaurant and are soon digging into dishes of Poutine, a much-loved Canadian speciality. Poutine originates from Quebec and consists of French fries topped with gravy and cheese curds. As a post-swim belly warmer, it works perfectly.

While a couple of days here has left me refreshed and revitalised, I feel I've only dipped my toes in all the region has to offer. I vow to return with more time and perhaps an extra swimsuit or two.

RESOURCES

- **My Haliburton Highlands** has a ton of information for visitors and a brilliant Instagram account. [myhaliburtonhighlands.com](http://myhaliburtonhighlands.com)
- **Yoga Camp** offers outdoor inclusive, unique and intimate outdoor summer camp experiences. [myyogacamp.com](http://myyogacamp.com)