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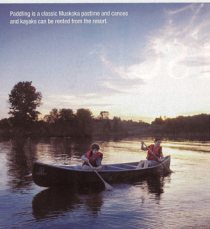
In the fall, Ontario's Deerhurst Resort lets families enjoy prime cottage country without the crowds *by Pamela Cuthbert*



If the arrival of autumn stirs a longing for the glories of summer, I can recommend an effective antidote: the blaze of brilliant fall colours as reflected on the still waters of pretty Peninsula Lake. This is the heart of Ontario's Muskoka cottage country and home to the Deerhurst Resort, which was made famous as host to President Obama and other world leaders



Paddling is a classic Muskoka pastime and canoes and kayaks can be rented from the resort.



at the 2010 G8 Summit. I was there with my family in the peak of mid-summer, when shrieks of playing children echoed off the busy lake and the splash zone and beach were as packed as the resort's calendar of events. No question, it was a lot of fun.

But on a return trip on a crisp October morning, I welcomed a different kind of pleasure. My son built a sandcastle with a new friend while my husband and I kicked back on one of the wooden lake-side chairs — Muskokas, naturally — and planned a weekend of activities. On offer were forest treks, golfing, harvest feasts, a pony ride, water-play and some much-needed downtime in front of our suite's inviting fireplace.

The only action on the lake was a dozer Canada geese paddling against a backdrop of boats

There are three restaurants on-site, one offering dishes served to world leaders at the 2010 G8 Summit.



Muskoka, an area of about 6475 square kilometres with 1600 lakes and waterfalls, has been a holiday retreat since the 19th century. Early European settlers discovered that the rocky shell of the Canadian Shield, which covers the region, made the land useless for agriculture. But the dazzling scenery and meandering waterways, including nearly 14,000 kilometres of shoreline, proved a natural draw for adventurers.

Entrepreneurs realized the potential and soon a network of canals and locks was developed in order to facilitate steamship travel. Waterside inns and private summer residences were built, making the most of the area's riches of lumber and rock, and Muskoka became a famous holiday attraction. To this day, it has its fair share of celebrity cottagers, including Tom Hanks and Goldie Hawn.

Over time, more than a dozen towns and villages, many of them quaint, sprung up around the tourism trade. Services grew to include a wealth of aquatic activities, from boat tours to tube rides, a handful of golf courses, a casino, kilometres of hiking and biking trails, a few provincial parks and more. And its reputation continues to earn honours, such as the *National Geographic Traveller* nod as one of the top 20 places to visit in the world for 2012.

With the gateway town of Gravenhurst just two hours north of Toronto, Muskoka is an easy weekend getaway — especially in the shoulder season of

The dazzling scenery made Muskoka a famous holiday attraction. To this day, celebrity cottagers include Tom Hanks and Goldie Hawn

autumn when traffic is low. In fact, summertime Muskoka is notorious for crowds, traffic jams and pricey cottage rentals and high room rates. In the shoulder season, we discovered that we had the place to ourselves. What's more, the accommodations at Deerhurst came at a discounted rate. We chose a one-bedroom suite located in the renovated Summit Lodges, where we had a kitchenette and dining nook, which was yet another cost savings as we had the option of preparing meals in our comfortable room.

There was more to do than we could squeeze into a weekend, so we began closest to home, at Deerhurst. The complex sprawls over 320 hectares and features outdoor and indoor pools, two 18-hole golf courses, an indoor rock-climbing wall, a gym, many trails, a small farm with horse-riding lessons, boat rentals and outdoor tennis courts.

Where to start? It was a fine dilemma we mullied over during a slow and satisfying breakfast in the lake-side Eclipse restaurant, where standards such as eggs Benedict and berry waffles were supplemented with some more inventive fare like quinoa-and-butternut squash pancakes (which proved light and delicious).

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TURNING A NEW LEAF

Deerhurst Resort (tel: 855-461-4393; deerhurstresort.com) is a vast property with a wide range of accommodations three hours north of Toronto.

Sold two years ago to Skyline Hotels and Resorts, it previously suffered many years of neglect, especially in the condo units lakeside — apart from the updates made for the G8 Summit in 2010, for which the federal government famously shelled out for gazebos.

Currently, renovations are underway with plans to mandate owners to update some units and promises to improve facilities, including boat rentals that need upgrading. There are also plans for extensive residential developments with a village along the lines of the Intrawest-owned Blue Mountain in Collingwood, ON.

In the meantime, book a suite at the Summit Lodge and confirm that you are getting a renovated room — that worked well for us.

For more on travel to the region, consult **Discover Muskoka** (discovermuskoka.ca).



Highlands was named as the top resort course in Ontario for 2011 according to *Score Golf* magazine.

The sun was shining and the crimson-and-gold maple forests beckoned, so we headed up the hill for a post-prandial hike. The Huckleberry Rock Lookout Trail, which offers spectacular views over Peninsula Lake, is an easy walk and well-marked. There are more challenging loops for older children and adults, but our hour-long tour was just enough to set us on our next adventure. We divided and conquered, with my son and me tackling the climbing wall — he was the champion, of course — and my husband heading for a meditative paddle in a canoe.

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At lunchtime, we met up at the room and had a meal with simple market goods brought from home. Then, with a shuttle ride awaiting, we headed to a neighbouring farm for a pony ride. Trouble was the horse's name and she was anything but. It's clear the animals are well-cared for on this working farm and the teacher, a young woman who aspires to be a professional rider, was attentive and kind.

Over the next 24 hours, we took turns splashing in the pool, putting on the green — there was no time alas for a proper round of golf — hiking more trails, exploring “downtown” Huntsville and the newly refurbished **Portage Flyer Steam Train and Steam Museum** (88 Brunel Road, Huntsville, muskokaheritageplace.org; closed Sundays in low season) and tasting some of the area's cottage-country cuisine, including the juicy burgers at **Three Guys and A Stove** (Highway 60, Huntsville; 3guysandastove.com/muskoka.html). At night, the sky was clear and we idled on our balcony, gazing at the stars and then warming up fireside with a digestif.

Sunday afternoon, we took one last walk to the lake. Under grey skies, the surrounding colours were more intense than ever and the only action was a dozen Canada geese paddling across the lake, with a backdrop of boats and docks hauled up on cottage lawns on the far shores. As a crisp breeze picked up, we knew it was time to hit the road and head for the concrete jungle. We did, with thoughts of returning not for a hot and busy summer escape but sooner, when the temperatures drop below zero. ■