

# *Muskoka, Canada's Vacation-Home Haven, Gets a Modern Makeover*



A new cohort of younger and wealthier buyers has discovered Muskoka, a scenic vacation area north of Toronto, creating lavish homes, helipads and a bit of local pushback.

*By Leigh Kamping-Carder | Photographs by Jennifer Roberts for The Wall Street Journal*

**P**atrick Dovigi's preferred method of getting to his cottage is chartered seaplane. From his Toronto home, it is a 45-minute trip to the dock at his 3½-acre private island in Canada's Muskoka region.

Star Island had been in the same family for generations before he bought it for US\$2.9 million in 2013, Mr. Dovigi said. The 37-year-old founder of an environmental services firm added a 7,500-square-foot home and two boathouses. "We've been everywhere in the world," Mr. Dovigi said of his wife, Fernanda, and three children, ages 3, 4 and 7, "and there's nowhere else we'd rather be in the summer."

Mr. Dovigi is one of a new cohort of buyers in Muskoka—sometimes described as Canada's Hamptons. The enclave of high-end vacation homes is clustered around the "big three" lakes of Lake Muskoka, Lake Joseph and Lake Rosseau, set among granite cliffs and towering pines about a two-hour drive from Toronto.

Prices for luxury cottages here start at around 1.5 million to 2 million Canadian dollars (US\$1.2 million to US\$1.5 million). While the area has long attracted celebrities like model Cindy Crawford, hockey player Wendel Clark and some of Canada's oldest families and business elite, younger, wealthier buyers have flocked to the area in recent years. As rustic cabins are replaced with cliff-top mansions, newer arrivals are changing what it means to be a "cottager" here.

"People are just buying the old cottages and knocking them down and building palaces," said Jason "Chefy" Fitzsimmons, a private chef who moved to the area full-time in 1999 and works for local homeowners.

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## 'Cottage' Living in Canada's Muskoka »

Wealthy buyers are building increasingly palatial homes in a region clustered around the 'big three' lakes of Lake Muskoka, Lake Joseph and Lake Rosseau



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The living room and dining area of Patrick Dovigi's 7,500-square-foot home on Star Island.

Prices have taken off, buoyed in part by the relatively stable economy and spillover from Toronto's competitive market. In July, the median sale price for a waterfront home rose 11.8% to C\$425,000 over the same period in 2015, and the number of sales climbed 15.4% to 165, according to the Canadian Real Estate Association. The C\$3 million-plus market is the fastest-growing segment, said Heather Scott, an agent with RE/MAX Hallmark Realty.

Don Evans of Royal LePage Lakes of Muskoka Realty is listing a 65-acre property for US\$7.7 million. Its 8,000-square-foot home, which the current owners built in 2000, is classic Muskoka. There are two great rooms, one with 28-foot-tall ceilings and another with an imposing hand-carved fireplace; one of two decks is cantilevered over the water; a helipad—installed after the

owners' son suffered an accident and had to be airlifted to the hospital—offers easy access.



This 8,000-square-foot home is classic Muskoka. There are two great rooms, one with 28-foot-tall ceilings and another with an imposing hand-carved fireplace.



On 65 acres, this property is listed with Don Evans of Royal LePage Lakes of Muskoka Realty for US\$7.7 million.

The price would have been unheard of a few years ago, but several record-setting sales in the past year have shifted expectations. In July 2015, a 15.7-acre island sold for C\$10.5 million, crushing records set before the market slumped in 2009 and 2010, local agents said. That was followed by a C\$12.5 million sale in

March and a C\$11.4 million sale in July.

Kevin O'Leary, chairman of O'Shares ETFs who appears on the ABC reality television show "Shark Tank," spends more than half the week in Muskoka during July and August. He splits the rest of his time between Toronto, Boston, New York and Los Angeles.

His 35-acre property has 1,150 feet of shoreline on Lake Joseph, a 9,800-square-foot main cottage, a boathouse and an artist's shed. He also built a broadcast studio off the great room to accommodate his frequent television appearances on CNBC and other networks.

"I can do the hit, walk out and get on my boat," said Mr. O'Leary, who said he purchased the land in 2000 for around US\$766,000 and spent around US\$4.6 million building the house. (He has since spent an additional US\$3.5 million on three separate renovations.)



Kevin O'Leary, chairman of O'Shares ETFs who appears on the ABC reality television show 'Shark Tank,' drives a boat in front of his family cottage in Muskoka.



Mr. O'Leary's cottage and boat house is on Lake Joseph.

Kevin O'Leary's Muskoka home has a great room and a broadcast studio.



While the area boasts high-end golf courses, Muskoka life revolves around the water. A luxury Muskoka home is incomplete without a boathouse (with sleeping quarters) and a screened-in porch off the main house known as a Muskoka room. “You don’t have a car here; you have a boat,” said Mr. O’Leary, explaining that the hours between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. are unofficially reserved for drop-ins at neighbors’ docks.

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- A New Wave of Luxury Boathouses (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-wave-of-luxury-boathouses-1438264918>)

Cottage season gets going in the late spring, peaks in July and August, and lasts through Canadian



Thanksgiving in mid-October. Traffic out of Toronto can be a hassle, but luckier cottagers charter planes into the Muskoka Airport, and some have installed helipads on their properties. (The airport is currently studying opening its runways to commercial passenger flights.)

A boathouse, like this one on Patrick Dovigi's private island, is a must-have in Muskoka.



Florida this isn't: Winters can be brutal, and not all cottages are usable year-round. You won't find sandy expanses of beaches like in the Hamptons. And prices are much steeper than other parts of Ontario popular with cottagers.

As building prices rise, technology can help with access issues. Judy Steeves, 73, and her husband, Ted, 84, retired to Muskoka about a decade ago. They spent US\$3 million building a modern house and, earlier this summer, installed a four-person railcar to transport people from the dock to the house up on the cliff top. With plans to move to her native Australia, they have listed the home with Ross Halloran of Sotheby's International Realty Canada for US\$2.5 million.



The modern home of Judy and Ted Steeves, who retired to Muskoka about a decade ago. PHOTO: SOTHEBY'S INTERNATIONAL REALTY CANADA

The biggest shift for some locals has been the mushrooming number of lavish, modern homes. When Dave Spolnik opened his architectural design firm Sprout Studios in 2004, many clients wanted their new homes to look 100 years old. Now, "they want to do something sleek and contemporary almost half the time," he said.



With plans to move to Australia, the Steeves have listed the home with Ross Halloran of Sotheby's International Realty Canada for US\$2.5 million. *PHOTO: SOTHEBY'S INTERNATIONAL REALTY CANADA*

Muskoka has responded to the changes. In 2011, a group of cottagers founded Safe Quiet Lakes, a nonprofit that works to educate boaters about proper boating etiquette. Some had noticed a “shift in the culture, a loss of some of the respect that is part of the culture of the lakes,” said spokesman Greg Wilkinson, carefully noting that offenders were as likely to be lifers as newcomers.

In 2005, local authorities imposed limits on house sizes, partly in response to a boom in mega-size homes. On the “big three,” main residential properties are capped at 7,500 square feet, the first levels of boathouses can take up only 16% of a property’s shoreline, and only 10% of the acreage within 200 feet of the water can be covered in structures with roofs, among other restrictions.



Joan Kelley Walker drives a boat at her family's compound on Lake Joseph.

Residents who want more space simply purchase neighboring lots. Joan Kelley Walker and her husband, Don Walker, the CEO of auto parts manufacturer Magna International, have spent 14 years creating a family compound on Lake Joseph.

Their first property, now their main cottage, is a 6,500-square-foot home that accommodates their two sons and Mr. Walker’s two children. Over the years, they bought three adjacent parcels as well as a 3-acre island a short boat ride away. Altogether, the holdings total about 18 acres, said Ms. Kelley Walker, a writer and TV host. Similar acquisitions would have cost about

US\$9.6 million, she said.

They recently hosted a conference for Canadian technology executives at which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made an appearance. But in true Muskoka fashion, Ms. Kelley Walker cites card games and cocktails on the dock as popular pastimes. “Forget the nightlife and the parties and the Champagne cruises,” she said. “It’s just old, traditional Canadian family time.”

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Mansion | Muskoka, Canada’s Vacation-Home Haven, Gets a Modern Makeover

By **LEIGH KAMPING-CARDER** | Photographs by

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