

An American in Muskoka

In Canada, we often stereotype Americans as bullies in the world – pushing others to accept their values and ideals of governance. They appear to us as a people relentless in the promotion of their materialistic lifestyle and culture.



In a corner of Lake Joseph, in an area called Muskoka, two hours north of Toronto Canada, there is a small group of Americans who defy the stereotype. These American families have spent summers here for over a century; originally traveling north by train and boat. Today, the 4th, 5th, and 6th generations enjoy large tracts of land and the glorious homes and cottages that their families developed over 100 years ago. On the water, they like to travel in traditional old wooden launches canoes, rowboats and sailboats or perhaps a restored steamboat. It is the American traditions-how they have built their houses and boathouses, the way they think about and use the land and the water, and their love of the history and traditions of this area that contributes to the quintessential meaning of Muskoka.

But Muskoka is rapidly changing – and it's not all for the better. *The New York Times* travel section recently featured the area with the headline "The Malibu of the North – Hello, Goldie! Hollywood Has Discovered Muskoka in Ontario". It's often compared to Lake Tahoe because of the development and astronomical prices to match. Sadly, it's mostly wealthy Canadians with oversized egos and the new money to match who are destroying the traditions of the past. They build monster houses – "McCottages" on small lots, with ostentatious boathouses to match. It's Canadian kids who roar around the lakes in massive cigarette-style boats; buzz around in jet-skis; and throw off damaging wakes with their wakeboard boats as music blasts from their speakers. Although many Canadians oppose the 'progress' that is bearing down on the area, in this corner of Lake Joseph it is the Americans who are holding tightly to the traditions and values-the essence of what defines Muskoka.

It is a surprising role reversal-not one most Canadians are used to seeing. Can it be that Americans are preserving history and tradition in Canada while some Canadians are actively wiping it out? How long can the Americans hold out? Although their wealth has been a bulwark against lot-splitting and other intrusions into the area, that wealth is dwindling as it is split among generations. Some of the grand estates are in danger.

An American in Muskoka sets the changes in Muskoka against the backdrop of the daily cottage life of an American family dynasty as they spend their summers on Cliff Island in Lake Joseph. The island with its mainland holdings is one of the most unique and valuable properties in all of Muskoka. But with the recent death of the 'patriarch', the future of the island has been thrown into doubt. Can these Americans continue to stem the tide of change in their corner of the lake? Let's hope so, because if they fail, their large tracts of land will be redeveloped quickly and dramatically, to the point where all that will remain of the history of this beautiful part of Canada will only be seen in fading pictures.

Perhaps what's good for these Americans is good for Canadians too?

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Run time: 76 min.