

**At just 28, J.D. Petit built his dream cottage from the ground up, with no DIY experience, and he lived to tell the tale. Here's how he did it**

**DIY  
DESIGN**

*By Susan Nerberg Photography Alexi Hobbs*





J.D. Petit and Chanelle Riopel's Scandinavian-inspired cabin is open and uncluttered, the sightlines from the kitchen to the living room broken only by the stovepipe from the Don-Bar woodstove that sits between them. J.D. chose tongue-and-groove pine in varying widths for the walls. The effect is warm, a counterpoint to the stark feel of the industrial-looking metal staircase and the polished concrete floors. "The overall aesthetic

is very modern," says J.D. "All of our friends say this cabin is the best way to describe my relationship with Chanelle. Somehow, this place represents both of us, even though we're worlds apart. Chanelle is a fashion stylist, and I run an outdoor company. She wanted beautiful architecture, high design, and complete freedom. I wanted trees, lakes, and solitude."



**Look for deals in unexpected places**

Inspired by a trip to Copenhagen, J.D. and Chanelle knew they wanted a cottage that was minimal and striking. "We couldn't afford to hire an architect, but I played hockey with one," says J.D. "He wanted experience in residential architecture, so he gave us a deal." The architect, Philippe Bergeron, took their sketches and made a design that could mostly be built with standard-size materials to save money. For example, J.D. had wanted 60-foot ceiling beams, but opted for standard 56-foot ones, reducing costs while achieving almost the same floor area.

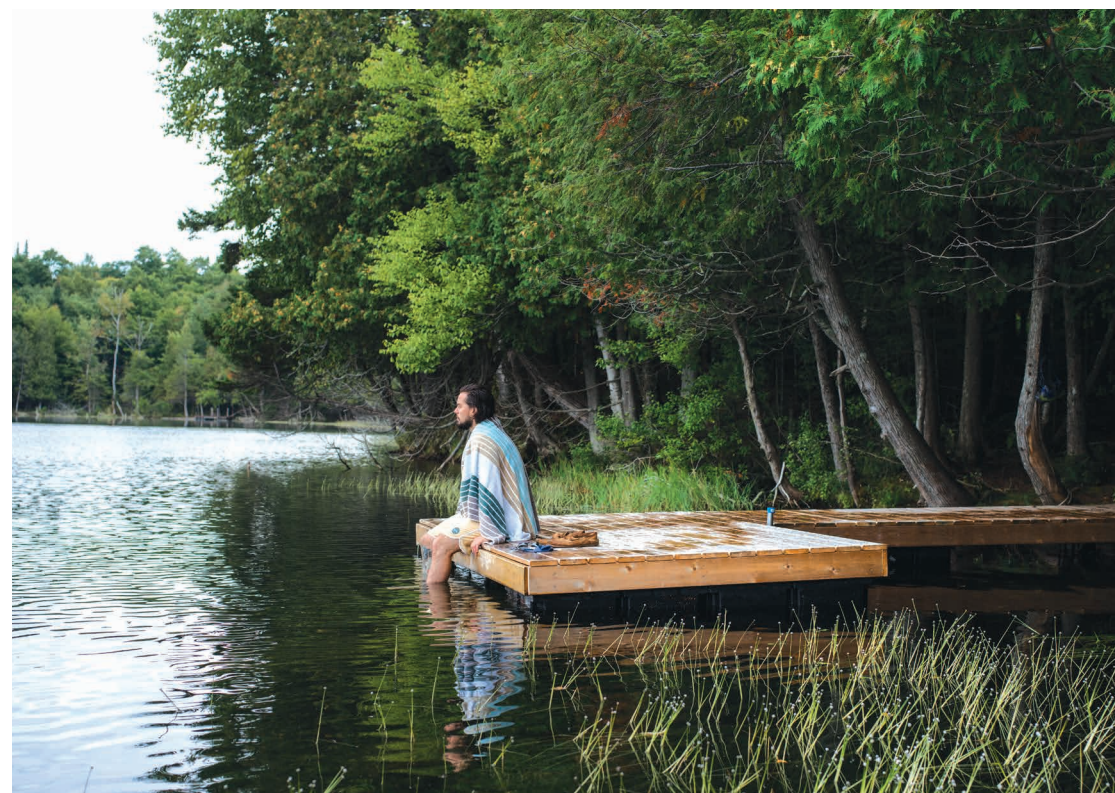
The front wall is lined with windows. "It's almost all glass," says J.D. "That natural light creates passive heat on sunny winter days." But the glass was costly. Several window retailers quoted J.D. the same steep price: \$50,000 for a 55 ft. wall of eight-foot windows. But J.D. called a manufacturer to ask about the product, and ended up buying directly for half the price. "That won't happen all the time," says J.D. "But if you don't try, you'll never know."

**J**

ean-Daniel Petit stands under a cedar tree, a striped towel draped around his shoulders. His dark locks are dripping with lake water—he's just had a swim, even though it's October, and fire-red leaves are falling into the water around us—and he can't stop smiling. Everything is quiet, and we can smell split wood and damp earth. J.D. takes a deep breath. "It's always been my dream to have a cottage. I just didn't think it was going to happen this early in my life," he says, nodding uphill toward the modern cabin he shares with his girlfriend, Chanelle Riopel. "I thought a cottage was something you bought in your forties, after getting a house in town."

Yet before he turned 30, J.D. and Chanelle had their own lakefront property on Lac Creux, a small but deep, spring-fed lake brimming with trout, an hour and a half east of Montreal. "Faster, if the traffic is good," he says, flashing another smile.

And as if acquiring a cottage isn't itself enough of a feat in today's economy, the kid built the thing himself. All in, J.D. got his dream for \$280,000. Now here he is, chopping wood for the fireplace in his 1,900 sq. ft., two-storey cabin. So how did he do it? Well, he had some help—starting with Google. >>







“It never occurred to me it couldn’t be done”





**DIY TIP**

**Do a dry run**

Before you start to build, map out where everything will go on the property—the septic tank, the driveway, the path from the parking spot to the cottage entrance. This will help you to avoid expensive building mistakes and ensure that you’re following local bylaws. “We went through five rolls of orange flagging tape to delineate all the different parts,” says J.D. “That way, we were able to see it all and move the placement of things if they were too close together.” That’s how he realized he needed more room for the driveway.



“Denmark was our inspiration,” says Chanelle (above, left). “That’s how we came up with the black exterior, instead of just going with natural wood.” She and J.D. share a love of modern architecture. “There was something so satisfyingly minimalist about the structure,” says J.D. “It’s just two boxes, one on top of the other.” In the bathroom (opposite, bottom left) the couple kept the design simple (and the cost manageable) with a free-standing bathtub and an overhead shower. There’s no need for expensive ceramic tiles and glass doors thanks to walls lined with untreated cedar and an industrial drain in the concrete floor that services the entire room. The DIY bed in the master bedroom (opposite, bottom right) is made from pine 6x6s. J.D. and Chanelle wake to a view of the forest; they sacrificed a lake view to keep most of the trees on their lot, which gives shade to the cabin and hides it from their neighbours. “We don’t need curtains, so we wake up with the sun,” says J.D.

Look around cottage country—especially those areas just outside of Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver—and you’d be hard pressed to find many owners under the age of 45. With the price of recreational properties going through the cedar shingles (winterized properties often start at \$350,000, even in the relatively cheap Quebec market), these places are simply out of reach for younger people who are starting their careers. Like J.D. and Chanelle, they may not even own a primary property yet. And the rare millennials who do own cottages have likely inherited them. But that wasn’t in the cards for J.D.

He grew up in a large family in Abitibi-Témiscamingue—a forested region of Quebec that stretches along the Ottawa River across from North Bay, Temagami, and Timmins—and feels most at home outdoors. “There were lakes everywhere, and I was always camping, swimming, and fishing with friends,” he says. “When I moved to Montreal in 2005 to become a graphic designer, I missed that.”

In his job at a Montreal advertising agency, he was often travelling (today, he’s running his own canoe and kayak manufacturer, Abitibi & Co.). “I didn’t have much time—or a place—





# DIY TIP

## Learn from J.D.'s mistakes

To cut costs, J.D. bought planks that were unsanded and unfinished. In hindsight, he says, the work involved was not worth the savings. "It took 12 people three weeks to sand, stain, and varnish all the pine on the interior walls. I saved maybe \$4,000. If I were to build another cabin, I'd rather pay for prefinished wood and save the time." The wood shingles on the second-floor exterior are a different story; only available untreated, they had to be waxed by hand. "But we wanted a certain patina. At least it's an inexpensive material, and it lasts for 20 years." The master bedroom, which occupies the second floor, overlooks the lake to the south. On the east wall, a patio door leads out to the rooftop of the main building. "We weren't planning on having a door out to the rooftop, but I realized I wanted to be able to walk out there and lie down to watch the stars, or to sunbathe. If I could do it again, I'd spend the \$2,000—that's all it costs—for trusses that support the weight of a green roof."



The custom-made dining table (above) is crafted from hollow metal with a wood core that extends to create more room at the table when friends (and former work-crew recruits) visit from Montreal. The rest of the furniture is equally simple and functional: benches for extra dining-room seating, wooden Muskoka chairs in the living room, a birch round as a side table (left), and, in the kitchen, open shelves made from two-by-16-foot raw planks. Though J.D. built nearly everything himself to save

money, he didn't skimp on little touches that make the cottage feel luxurious, such as 11-foot ceilings and heating built into the concrete floors. The result is a peaceful retreat from his busy city life. "Two days at the cottage feels like a one-week vacation," he says. "You're not so overstimulated; you're just relaxing in nature. There are no blinds anywhere in the place, just 55 feet of windows looking out into forest."

for alone time, for time with Chanelle, for time in the woods. We were renting an apartment in Montreal and had started looking for a condo in the city. But the ones we liked were too expensive. So I said, "Why don't we buy land and build our own cottage instead?" Empty lots were cheaper than built ones, plus, then the couple could design the exact structure they wanted. "I was not convinced," says Chanelle, a prop and fashion stylist, as she leans on the cottage's polished-concrete kitchen counter. "I'm such a city girl, and I really didn't want a shack in the woods, far from everything except mosquitoes." But she finally agreed—provided they build something stylish and no more than a couple of hours from Montreal. "The only other criteria was that it had to be affordable," says J.D.

The couple started looking in the winter of 2010. It was a year of disappointments. "We thought it would be easy—no matter where you look on the map outside Montreal, there are lakes, lakes, and more lakes," says J.D. But it turned out there weren't many empty lots for sale, and the ones on the market were priced too steep: in the Eastern Townships, where cottages tend to go for half a million dollars, most of the empty waterfront lots went for \$320,000—about four times what J.D. and Chanelle were willing to spend. Several lots they looked at were on ponds that would dry up in summer or were too open. "I wanted there to be lots of trees, so the cottage would be hidden in foliage," says J.D.

{Continued on page 106}



JD PETIT

{Continued from page 81}

Still, the roller-coaster ride of searching for property was a thrill, at least in the beginning. "At first, you're super excited, and you think you're going to get one the next day," he says. The couple spent an hour each weekday scouring listings on Kijiji, MLS, and on local agents' websites. Each week, they made a list of five lots in one area, then headed out on the weekend to investigate. "It was exhausting," says Chanelle. "Eventually, you become a better critic," says J.D. "You can tell when a place sounds great on paper, but not in real life."

So the couple revised their strategy. They ignored the listings. By now, they had learned through experience that in person they could find hidden gems for sale that they didn't catch online. They had to be on the ground. J.D. and Chanelle returned to Google, this time to locate lakes near Montreal that they could visit and scope out. "I was looking for lakes with few roads. I wanted to explore the places not too many people

know about." That's how they found Mandeville, Que., a cottaging region full of lakes along the Mastigouche River northeast of Montreal. They spent a day exploring, and eventually stumbled upon Lac Creux, literally "deep lake." There, they found a one-acre lot on a hill, for sale for \$89,000.

"We got it for 80," says J.D. "But we didn't have the cash, so we had to borrow. We went to a small bank in Mandeville that was hungry for clients, and willing to give us a deal. They gave us the loan for the land with no down payment and a 2.9 per cent interest rate." The couple signed an agreement to build on the land within two years. J.D. says that once he submitted his building plans for the project, the bank loaned him the money he needed for construction, confirming that the value of the finished cabin would far exceed the cost of labour and materials. "We were lucky. But then I actually had to build the dream," says J.D. "Being a dreamer helped—I didn't realize the scope of what I was getting myself into, and so it never occurred to me it couldn't be done."

As he walks into the kitchen of his dream cabin, J.D. points to the polished concrete countertop. "We made that by layering mesh and pouring concrete into a wooden mould after watching a video tutorial. We just needed our plumber to help lift it up onto the island—it weighs 400 lbs." J.D. admits that he's handy—in his teens, he worked summer jobs on construction sites with his uncle—but he'd never built anything from scratch or crafted furniture. "Don't worry if you don't know how to do something," says J.D. "I googled how-to videos all the time. Without them, this would never have happened." He watched YouTube tutorials on how to fit tongue-and-groove pine boards on the inside walls and on how to install cedar shingles on the second-storey box that holds the master bedroom. "Sometimes we would forget a detail, and we had to drive far enough away to get reception so we could download a video to learn how to do some little thing," he says.

J.D. spent his holidays working on the cottage, and Chanelle would make visits on the weekend. "You could call them

inspections," says J.D. with a laugh, and Chanelle replies, "Yes, I was like the foreman, coming in to fix things."

That first winter, J.D., Chanelle, and her family were working on the cottage, before the kitchen was built, so the gang cooked on portable propane stoves. "It was like camping," says J.D., smiling at the memory. "That weekend we got the season's first snow, and everything was blanketed in white." Working together on the cottage allowed him to get to know Chanelle's family better, including her grandfathers, who offered advice and passed on their skills. "I learned from several generations," he says.

J.D. also credits a crew of close friends with helping get the work done. One weekend, 12 of them descended on the construction site to lend a hand—and a voice. "Some were waxing cedar shingles, others were painting or installing tongue-and-groove. Everyone was singing 'Blurred Lines.' It was like a symphony of people singing, 'Hey, hey, hey!'"

But the real MVP was J.D.'s father. "On his first day of retirement, he packed up his car and joined me at Lac Creux."

Their time together made for some of J.D.'s best memories of the project. "My dad and I were at the cottage 24-7. We had no electricity, so no radio or anything, and I really got to know him as a person. I'll never forget that time."

Of course, the build wasn't all sing-alongs and happy memories. Once, to fix a plumbing issue in the bathroom, J.D. had to remove 30 pieces of carefully placed pine siding in the kitchen. To keep from losing their intricate pattern, he had to number them and painstakingly reinstall them in the correct order. "I lost hours," he says.

Today, J.D. and Chanelle escape the city for the quiet of the cottage on weekends, often bringing their friends (a core group who put in the most muscle power—they have free access when J.D. and Chanelle aren't using it). The open plan of the cottage creates a social atmosphere. "When I'm cooking, I can still see and talk to someone in the library on the other end of the house," says Chanelle as she checks on a stew simmering on the stove. "We like to just hang out and relax here. And because we

have no Internet, no TV, no cellphone coverage, we get to catch up on a lot of reading that we don't have time for in the city." The cottage is a retreat—or, considering the big fireplace in the middle, a welcoming hearth for gathering around. When it's not occupied, it's available to rent, which will help fund their next DIY projects: an outdoor kitchen and a garage with a studio.

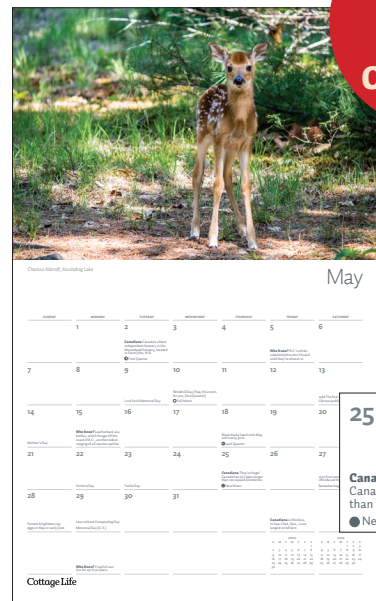
In the meantime, J.D. is happy to sit back and reflect on all that they have accomplished. "This project brought together my family and closest friends, and we built something that will last a lifetime," says J.D., as he sinks into a couch by the fireplace. Some 3,000 man-hours and two years after the project began, the old work crew has good reason to come back. Except, now, they're only required to bring a bottle of wine rather than a hammer. "They've really earned the downtime," says J.D. "But that doesn't mean I won't ask them to sing with me from time to time." 🐾

Montreal's Susan Nerberg is the deputy editor of *Air Canada enRoute* magazine.

## Our 2017 Cottage Life Calendar is now available!



Get this unique 13-month calendar, featuring favourites from the Cottage Life photo contest, moon phases, and fun trivia for each month. Plus, lots of space for cottage scheduling!



Order yours today ONLY \$9.95

Even better, order two and take one to the cottage. **But hurry, quantities are limited!**

To order simply go to Books/Magazines menu item at [shop.cottagelife.com](http://shop.cottagelife.com) or call (877)874-5253 EXT. 0

Install a bathroom anywhere with our upflush toilet system... **without breaking the concrete or your budget.**

2+1 YEAR LIMITED WARRANTY

After

### Saniflo is your solution for any bathroom renovation:

- Reduce costs and mess with no need to break the floor or the concrete.
- Simple installation allows you to complete your dream bathroom or powder room quickly and easily.
- A cost-effective way to install extra bathroom facilities virtually anywhere.

Visit [saniflo.ca](http://saniflo.ca) or call us at 1-800-363-5874 for information on our full range of plumbing solutions and to find a certified installer in your area.

**SANIFLO**  
A PUMP COMPANY SINCE 1958



1.28 GPF



Before