



We're New Here
It's obviously a fixer-upper, but at \$59,000, how could they go wrong? Turns out, there is a lot to learn

“Cottages aren’t for us,”

I remember saying to my husband, Julian. “I totally agree,” he replied. We were up at our friend’s cottage for the weekend and getting ready for bed after a lovely day.

As much as we were enjoying being out of the city, we didn’t quite understand all the fuss. Julian grew up in London, England; I grew up in Seoul, South Korea. Translation: we have absolutely no idea about cottages. We’ve never looked at cottage real estate. We haven’t even been to that many cottages. The concept just didn’t appeal: dealing with neighbours, the constant upkeep, and the nightmare traffic—no thanks. Not to mention that we couldn’t afford it. We had a giant mortgage from gutting and renovating our city home, Julian was starting a business, and I had just left a full-time job to spend more time with our two kids.

Plus, my ideal cottage was a friend’s island getaway on Georgian Bay, which I figured must cost upwards of \$300,000 (I found out it was more like a million-plus, which shows you how clueless I was about cottage real estate). And, we told ourselves, scratching our multitude of bug bites, we had parks nearby in the city. “Yup,” I resolutely repeated, “cottages are not for us.” Then we went to bed.

Julian woke me up the next morning, all breathless and excited. He’d been up most of the night because the cottage’s

tight quarters meant he had to share a bed with our seven-year-old son, Oliver, who kicks in his sleep. So Julian did what he does when he can’t sleep. He read the news on his phone, checked social media, and then, with nothing else to do in the middle of the night at a friend’s cottage, opened his GPS-enabled real estate app.

“Check out this listing,” he said, passing me his phone. Before I had a chance to read it, he was describing the place in detail. It was a 3½-acre water-access lot on the Moira River, not far from where we were, with a small hunting cabin, generator, propane fridge, and stove. The astounding part? It was listed for \$69K! “Let’s go see it,” Julian said, “just for fun.” Our friends spurred us on, even offering to come along. We threw a canoe on top of the car, and seven of us (four adults, three kids) headed out to meet the agent at the boat launch.

The launch was literally a muddy bank. The agent grabbed the rickety tin boat resting on a grassy knoll nearby that came with the cottage. It had a huge dent in the bottom; I made sure the kids were wearing lifejackets, and we piled on, while our friends got in their canoe. The agent had brought a trolling motor, also included with the cottage, and we were soon cruising at a brisk two km/h. Our friends breezed past us, shouting that they’d wait for us up ahead.

We finally turned around a marshy bend to find the river opening up. It was peaceful and pretty. After about 10 minutes, we arrived at our destination. Our friends were there waiting. We pulled up to the dock and tied up. I volunteered to stay down by the water with the kids, who quickly busied themselves catching frogs, while the others made their way

New cottagers Julian and Catherine on a break.



Love nature and cottage creatures. Try not to get too cranky with them.

—Della Lischka,
Arm Lake, Alta.

That dock that needs to be fixed will still be there tomorrow.

—Laura Wilson,
Last Mountain Lake, Sask.

We asked the real experts, our readers, for their best cottage advice >>



Hanging out in their retro and rustic, but comfortable, kitchen.

There is always something to fix, except in July or August.
—Jennifer Spence, Lyndhurst Lake, Ont.

Keep a separate bank account for cottage needs and fun.
—Michele Herr, Mabel Lake, B.C.

If the water smells funny, there's probably a dead frog in the well.
—Julie Rovinelli, French River, Ont.

Be prepared for rainy days that turn into rainy nights.
—Liz Goheen, Boshkung Lake, Ont.

up a steep rocky pathway to check out the property. At this point I didn't care if I saw the place or not. I was just happy to go along for the boat ride and let my husband scratch his real estate itch. It wasn't like we were seriously considering it. After all, we had just decided the night before that cottages weren't for us.

Five minutes later, Julian called me to come and have a look. Why not, I thought, just for fun. Our friends came down to the dock to relieve me from minding the kids, and I made my way up the steep bedrock. As the cottage came into view, I couldn't believe what I saw. "Wow," I whispered. It felt like I was at that ideal Georgian Bay island cottage. A quintessential little wooden cabin was sitting right on the face of the Canadian Shield, flanked by tall white pines and overlooking the glistening waters of the river below. And not a neighbour in sight. It was exactly the kind of place I had in mind when people talked about getting away to the cottage—a perfect rural escape, but at a bargain basement price.

I wanted it. I looked at Julian. He was grinning back at me. I knew what that meant. It was the same grin that led us to buying a plot in Tulum, Mexico, and the very one that had us putting in a private offer on our current city home, a neglected Victorian beauty known in the neighbourhood as the "crack house."

Sure enough, a few hours later, back at our friends' place, we found ourselves putting in a bid for \$55,000. The offer came back to us at \$62,000. We offered back at \$59,000, and the deal was done. We were proud owners of a riverside recreational property, an impulse purchase courtesy of our line of credit. Never could we have imagined that a cottage weekend getaway would result in a cottage of our very own. "You guys are so badass," our friends told us. Once we knew the cottage

was ours, I felt a rush of adrenalin—"Did we just do what I think we did?" mixed with "We can't believe our good luck!"

A month later, we got possession, and reality started to sink in. Our little cabin ("cottage," we decided, was too lofty for what it was) had no electricity or running water. It had been abandoned for the past three years and was filthy. I don't think the previous owner, a bachelor in his 60s, cleaned the place once in the 20 years he'd owned it. The cabin was stuffed with knick-knacks, had not one but three TVs, and came with a mice infestation.

Undeterred, we spent the first week at our "new" cabin cleaning non-stop, with frequent trips to the dump. A low-light? Pulling down the Murphy bed to discover three years of mouse excrement covering the mattress. I almost threw up. The filth, the vermin, and the stench made sleeping in the cabin impossible. So the four of us spent the first days of cottage ownership in a tent.

That's when my uber-urban spouse really stepped up. He scrubbed the entire cabin from top to bottom, his unabashed enthusiasm for the place never waning.

And it wasn't just the dirt that was a challenge. The only breaks we got were panicked runs down to the dock, where our kids spent hours catching frogs, when we heard our four-year-old, Zoe, shrieking—a habit she had recently acquired when she was upset about anything. The quiet would periodically be broken by nails-on-a-chalkboard wails. >>



**Don't park
over the
septic tank.**

— John Paré,
Rice Lake, Ont.

**Go as much
as you can.
It's always worth
the drive.**

— Steve Long,
Butterfly Lake, Ont.

**Remember,
it's 12 o'clock
somewhere.**

— Lynn Harpley,
Lake Huron, Ont.

**Listen!
Even the silence
is speaking to you!**

— Don Clarke,
Lake Panache, Ont.

**“It's
definitely
for us”**

**Schedule times
when tools
are put away.**

—James McLarnon,
Saturna Island, B.C.

My enthusiasm was starting to wane. But just when I would begin to doubt cottage ownership, I'd catch a glimpse of the beautiful heron that lived nearby or see my kids frolicking naked in nature or have a rejuvenating swim in the soothing cool waters. And all would be right again.

During our third week, while we were still too busy cleaning, our kids decided to amuse themselves by jumping onto the roof of the old tool shed from the stairs leading to the back of the property. Zoe let out one of her classic shrieks. We dashed over to find her halfway through the rotting roof. Thank God, she didn't fall through—it was a good 10-foot drop—but she did make a hole the size of a beach ball. Our generator was stored there, so we needed to fix the roof stat, and after looking at some online videos, Julian set about the task. That meant getting supplies, including two 4x8 sheets of plywood, which we loaded into our old tinny along with the four of us and rowed over (the trolling motor battery had died the second day we used it). We weren't sure if the boat could handle the weight, but we had no choice. We didn't drown. Let's just say we weren't using our "nice voices" that week, as our neighbour across the river can probably attest.

But throughout the stress, the workload, and the exhaustion, we never doubted this was one of the best things we'd done as a family. For one, our decidedly urban kids were now communing with nature in ways they could have only dreamed about. We had a lot of frogs by our dock, and the kids would catch them in a net, put them in a bucket, and give

them names like Baby, Jumpy, and Lazy. One day, as we were leaving for a canoe ride, a snake that was also a fixture on the property gobbled up Lazy in one swift gulp. The kids were horrified. It was an introduction to Mother Nature that you would never get in the city.

It was three weeks before we started sleeping inside. Once we had the place under control—we even got rid of the mice—Julian and I could finally relax.

We discovered a soccer-field-sized rock clearing toward the back of our property, flat enough for the kids to throw a baseball and frisbee around. We found wild blueberries and blackberries growing all over. And we saw turtles, otters, deer, and so much more.

Sitting around the outdoor firepit perfecting our s'mores, seeing Zoe learn to manoeuvre the kayak on her own, or watching Oliver catch his first fish—a smallmouth bass—I knew we were making precious family memories, the kind that Julian and I had missed out on.

Having access to the cabin has opened up a whole swath of country for us to explore as well as provided the perfect escape from the heat and congestion of the city. Yet, after a few days there, we found we appreciated our city life more. It really was the best of both worlds. I was finally starting to get the lure of the lifestyle firsthand.

It's not all rest and recreation, however. There's plenty more work to be done. We need to fix the propane fridge, replace the deck, and maybe install a water pump—the novelty of carrying water up from the river is starting to wear thin. But, as we're learning, this too—the breaking and the fixing and the tinkering—is simply part of cottaging. We realize our cabin isn't for everyone. Though we also know it's definitely for us. 🐸

Catherine Jheon is a freelance writer and radio producer in Toronto.

When guests arrive, everyone wants to be outside, by the water.



**Buy your
cottage while
your kids are
young.**

—Mara O'Brien James,
Lac Vert, Que.

**Time at a
cottage is the
crown jewel of a
child's summer
memories.**

—Pronica Janikowski,
Koshlong Lake, Ont.

**The
hardware store
is a long
way away.**

—Julie Glover,
Dickey Lake, Ont.

Always
cherish every
moment.

—I. Anne Link,
Farm Lake, Que.

70 Years (and counting)

There's no such thing as a cottaging expert. But after so much water under the bridge, here's what I've learned

By Roy MacGregor Photography Raina + Wilson

Dear Catherine,

Congratulations. You have just taken leave of your senses—creature comforts, reliable services, traffic ease, handy shopping—yet are entering a whole new world that, with each passing year, will come to make more and more sense.

Cottages, in fact, *are* for you.

Believe me, I know of what I speak. I am coming up to my 70th summer at the lake, given that I was all of four days old when I was taken to my grandparents' log home on a rocky point on Algonquin Park's Lake of Two Rivers. We stayed all summer every summer until the grandparents passed on and the cottage sold. In the years since, as much of summer as possible has been spent at a small cabin on Camp Lake, which receives its clean, clear water from a waterfall on the very edge of Algonquin.

You may think that 70 summers at the lake would make me an expert on cottaging, but there is, in fact, no such thing. Nevertheless, there are a few tips I might hand on to someone just starting out.

Your new place sounds like quite the bargain. Think of it as a good buy rather than as an RRSP with waterfront. If it must be considered an investment, think of that in terms of time and family rather than money—but one with guaranteed returns.

Your cottage is rustic. No electricity. No running water. I can relate to that. We had no such luxuries in all those years on Lake of Two Rivers. My grandfather

was a park ranger. He built the log home, the cabins, and, of course, the out-house, a two-seater. We hauled cooking and washing water up from the lake. Drinking water required that you carry a pail more than half a kilometre along a rocky, root-riddled trail and across a beach to a small spring where a dipper was conveniently kept.

For more than three decades there was electricity but no running water at our current spot on Camp Lake. No one complained. Then, however, a small inheritance suggested it was time to put in water, septic, a bathroom, a hot water heater for showers, and a small washing machine to cut down the trips to town.

You will not be able to resist putting in that water you mentioned, Catherine, but let me tell you, on behalf of all cottagers with a salty sailor's vocabulary, that there will come a day, usually late in November, when your cold, unresponsive hands will have to haul plastic pipe out of the water, twist off a locked-on foot valve, bleed the pump and the hot water heater, sponge out the toilet, blow the lines clear with a temperamental compressor, and fret all winter long that your pipes have frozen and split.

There is something to be said for no running water, you know.

Every late spring, someone at your new summer place will say that the blackflies are worse this year than they have ever been. Every time they say it they will be right.

There will be no ordering-in at the cottage. You will eat out more often, but only once the blackflies have died down.

I note you have children: Oliver, who is seven, and four-year-old Zoe. Youngsters and water are a good mix, when carefully watched, during the day and before bed. No one, however, is capable of watching all the time. My mother's solution was to tie me to a tree using a length of rope and a leather harness. While effective, this method would not be recommended today. What you can do, though, is institute a hard rule about lifejackets and swimming only when a grown-up's there.

There will be trying times. You need to stress the importance of respect for wildlife—even to those who are only four years old and never meant to hug that little toad to death.

Back in the 1950s, my sister Ann and I fell in love with watching dragonflies hatch. We would hover over them as they emerged from their nymph stage in the warm sunlight, waiting for their sparkling wings to unfold and dry before flying off in search of mosquitoes. We wanted them to stay so badly that we pinched off the wings. Ignorance is no excuse, of course, but it's the only one we have.

We left frogs to dry out in pails. We put minnows in jars, tightened the lids, and, next day, were aghast to find them floating upside down. "Catch 'n' release" is a good philosophy for all ages. (With our own four children, we made sure that they had a shaded tub in which to place toads, frogs, and salamanders, and made them empty it each day.)

Soon you will find the delights of toad-hunting will turn {Continued on page 96}

70 YEARS (AND COUNTING)

{Continued from page 73}

to the teen lament: “There’s nothing to do.” The easiest solution, of course, is to pack a friend or two when heading for the lake. Choose carefully, especially if you stick with the notion of no electricity and no running water. What lies under the bed at night pales compared to what lies down that dark and threatening wooden hole on which a city child is about to place a bare bum.

Use boredom as an opportunity to introduce the delight of board games. Monopoly, Clue, Scrabble, checkers, and—the greatest of them all—crokinole are, for reasons never fully understood, pure delight at the lake and of next-to-no interest at home. And just as it is always advisable to have a good supply of pancake mix at the cottage, it’s equally wise to have a healthy pile of Archie comics.

The day will come, not long after that stage, when your children will no longer consider themselves children. One of them will ask to have the cottage without you for the weekend. It will happen. It

might be about the gang or, as happened to us, about someone you suspect may be more than just a friend. Your weekend in the city will feature a great deal of tossing and turning, yet I am here to tell you this: it will all be just fine. It passes.

At some point down the road—let’s hope not too soon after—you will be entering the realm of grandparenting, which is the secret joy of cottage life. The first sign one sees upon entering our cabin is: Welcome to Grandma’s: No Rules! No Parents! No Bedtime! There is a pure delight in having grandchildren there, all to yourselves, where you can say to them, as Rat said to Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*: “Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.”

I do have some very practical advice for you, as well:

Hide a key. You will be astonished how often it will come into play.

Buy, and learn how to use, a chainsaw. Also learn how to sharpen one. You do this by taking the chains into a place that sells chainsaws.

Find your own “Old Guy,” though he may actually be fairly young and he may be a she. Someone who knows how to do things—fell threatening trees, jury-rig a water pump, fix the roof, solder copper pipes—and can be trusted to use that hidden key. Once you find yours, treat him or her as a god, as gods of cottage country these people most assuredly are.

If you can get in, visit during the winter, even though there is no road access and, obviously, no central heating. Once you get there and get the place warmed up, there is nothing quite so precious as the deep silence of a winter’s day.

Understand that your assertion “we even got rid of the mice” is, sadly, wrong. You will never, ever, ever be totally mouse free. Live with it.

Finally, I would advise you to take time each closing up to appreciate the season past. You will not always be aware of what was notable and what memories will last longest, but many, if not most, will come from this very special place.

I came to realize this through my mother, the person who carried me to the cottage when I was all of four days old.

Her cottage memories, surely, would revolve around hard work. She had to carry the buckets up from the lake to do the dishes, fire up the woodstove to cook—the stove blazing hot even on the muggiest days of summer—and haul the ice block out of the ice-house sawdust. She did the washing, the cleaning, looked after her four kids and, usually, various other cousins, dropped off the way kittens are sometimes left at the end of a farm lane.

Her escape was to go for an evening canoe ride. I would sometimes go with her—she taught me how to paddle—but there would rarely be any talking. It would be so quiet you could hear a trout surface, the light kiss of water being punctured. You could hear every stroke and draw of her paddle.

One would think, then, that she might resent such a life of constant work, but in fact she treasured it more than anything else. Nearing 80, she suggested a return to Lake of Two Rivers. Cousin Don McCormick and I drove her up to Algonquin and we parked at the side of the road, the parking spot long ago grown over. We tried to make our way down

the long path to the point, but windfall and overgrowth made it impossible, so we bushwhacked. At one point Don held my mother under her arms and I carried her by her legs as we made our way through a tangle of fallen trees.

But we made it. She went around to all the nearly invisible sites—a few stones from the old fireplace, the crooked tree in front of where the outhouse had stood, the piled rocks by the point that had served as a foundation corner for the kitchen where, it seemed, if she wasn’t cooking she was ironing, if she wasn’t washing she was cleaning up.

Then she went and sat on a log and quietly stared out at the water for what seemed like an hour. She knew she would not be there again.

Years later, when her mind was wandering, and she was in the hospital, the end obviously near, she coughed, and I asked her if she would like a drink of water. “Yes,” she said. And then, in a young voice perfectly lucid, she proceeded to tell me where to go to find that water. “There’s a trail back of the big house,” she said. “If you stick to it and stay by

the water, you’ll come to a place where you can climb down...”

I did not interrupt her or even consider correcting her. I sat as she described the roots-and-rock trail along the cliff and down, the walk across the beach, and the trail that led to the little spring with the handy dipper.

I just let her go, the two of us, two different generations, lost in the same memory of where we both, and countless others in our family, spent so many of our happiest days.

What I hope this story tells you, Catherine, is that though it is often said that time stands still at a cottage—it does not. The woman who carried her infant to the lake that day eventually became a very old woman, yet in her cottage memory she is forever young, forever in love with what would always be, to several generations, the most treasured place on earth.

Welcome to the cottage.

Enjoy, Roy 🐾

Roy MacGregor’s latest book is *Canoe Country: The Making of Canada. He lives in Kanata, Ont.*



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