



Going to the cottage is the quintessential summer experience for Canadians. Isn't it?

Breaking the colour code

By Elamin Abdelmahmoud

Do you remember the first time you stepped foot in a cottage? I do. It was just a few weeks after the first time I heard what a cottage even was. I was 19.

I wasn't born in Canada—I moved here from Sudan when I was 12 years old. I didn't speak English, and I spent the majority of my adolescence trying to understand what life here entailed.

So when a friend invited me and a few others to her family cottage in Ontario's Thousand Islands one summer, my first question wasn't, "What weekend were you thinking?" It was more like, "Uh...sure... What's that?"

I may have struggled with the concept that was explained to me—apparently, some Canadians have a whole second property that is dedicated almost entirely to just relaxing—but nothing could prepare me for the reality: my friend's cottage was

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a beautiful, full-sized home that sits on—are you ready for it? An island. It's the only home on that island. My friend's family owns an island. I wasn't even aware this was a thing a person could do.

Over the next decade or so, after spending memorable weeks at friends' lakeside places, I've come to love cottage time, and I've begun to think of it as a part of my identity and my aspirations. But as an immigrant, is cottaging something I can fully own?

When people talk about cottaging as a quintessential Canadian experience, they almost invariably mean the white Canadian experience. The Cottage, as an idea, is spoken about with great reverence, but rarely by non-white immigrants.

My suspicion is that it's because cottaging is, fundamentally, about leisure. Sure, it's about getting outdoors and about spending time with family and about enjoying a good bad book by the lake, but more than anything else, it's about time constructed entirely around carefree enjoyment. And what passes for leisure varies from culture to culture.

When Nadia (not her real name) and her husband bought a cottage on a Southern Ontario lake recently, it made her reflect on her parents' journey to Canada. Her family was forced to relocate from the country where she was born, first moving to Europe as refugees and then settling in Canada.

"They had uprooted themselves twice," Nadia says of her parents. "So having a cottage, that wasn't even something they could fathom." Her experience mirrors my own—my father left Sudan as a refugee and moved first to Switzerland, then to Canada. For him, success meant laying a foundation of stability: owning a home, and making sure I got into a good school.

For Nadia's family, as for mine, leisure wasn't on the brain. Or, to be more precise, being carefree—relieving the big anxieties—meant pouring all your resources into creating an environment where your children can thrive. Nadia's parents saw their primary job as establishing a steady footing for their children. This is not especially metaphorical; it means

money. Nadia says it meant providing the necessities of life: food, shelter, and clothing. "I'm the first generation that will be able to pass anything on," she says. My father approached it the same way. If there was any money left over, he sent it to family back home who needed it. That was the extent of getting "leisurely."

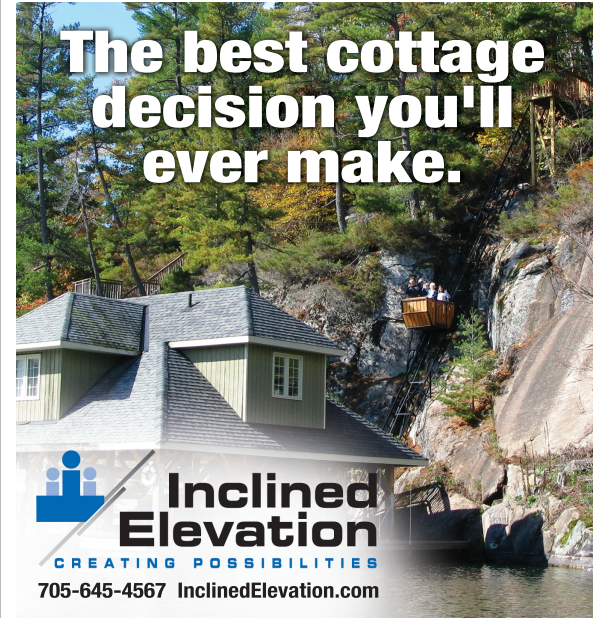
Nadia says that she and her family were inspired to look into cottage ownership after going to a family gathering at a cottage. The relative told them that she loves her cottage because it allows her and her children to set aside time to reconnect as a family. That relative was the first in the family to take the cottage leap. "We had no role models," Nadia says about growing up. "Nobody in our community, no one other than our white friends had cottages."

If the sight of non-white cottage owners is rare, that rarity can't be quite described as an accident. Jacqueline L. Scott is a Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto. Her research focusses on race and the wilderness, looking closely at the relationship between Black people and the outdoors. "Race has a huge part to play in terms of who goes to the cottage," says Scott.

"Cottaging ties into the myth of the great Canadian outdoors," Scott says. "I didn't grow up at a cottage—I was born in Jamaica and grew up in England, so going cottaging didn't make any sense. It's a very Canadian ideology and a very Canadian mythology."

That mythology she's talking about is the version of the story of Canada's history in which white settlers found an unforgiving landscape and tamed it, giving birth to a romance of triumph over terrain. It's a thin story at best—European settlers came to find a rich array of Indigenous people, but for hundreds of years, chose to craft a narrative of finding a *Terra Nova*. Still, the myth is the basis of the lure of the woods and the seduction of the wilderness. But that mythology is not shared by everyone in Canada. "It's a certain demographic that speaks to the cottage in those terms. Typically, immigrants don't," Scott says. Here's a possible reason why: for one thing, immigrants may not buy into that fiction about the story of Canada's founding. {Continued on page 98}

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Part of Scott's research is on answering how society "can make the outdoors, and by extent the cottage, a more welcoming place for Black people and other people of colour." She says that people of colour simply do not see themselves represented in the outdoor economy: "A huge part of it is that when you see advertising for cottaging products, or for outdoor life in general, do you ever see Black people in them?" The explanation that children of immigrants may not know a lot about the outdoors doesn't quite cut it either. "When you have second and third generation people of colour who are still not going outdoors and still not going to the cottage, it tells you that there are other barriers to participation in that space."

On top of a lack of representation, what barriers come to mind? Scott says that for the Black community, there may be worries about safety. "It's not so much the bears that we're worried about," she adds. We both laugh.

Racism cannot be discounted as a part of the cottaging experience for people of colour. Nadia tells me there's a gap between her experience at the cottage and her experience in town. "You almost feel like you stick out."

As Nadia talks about her trips to town, I realize I am familiar with what she's describing. We talk about "the look"—the stares that feel to me less benign than curiosity, but not quite hostile, familiar to almost any person of colour outside, oh, say, any major city. When she's in town, she says she's keenly aware of that feeling she gets from time to time of being noticed. The look, when I get it, says something in the neighbourhood of open discomfort that I am both a) not white and b) present. I know it well because I didn't grow up in a big city. The look is a frequency I am attuned to. On occasion, I can blunt its impact by wearing my Tragically Hip hat. It at least communicates that, hey, we might have a thing in common.

Nadia says she doesn't experience that discomfort when she's with her cottage neighbours—and she has a theory for why that may be. She tells me a story

from her first few weeks of cottage ownership, when a couple introduced themselves. "As soon as they realized that we are professionals and that our kids go to the same universities where they went, or where their kids go, it was, like, immediate acceptance. But I bet you that if that wasn't the case, it wouldn't have been as warm. They almost want brown people that can act white." She is strongly hinting here at the people who get to participate in the mythology of The Cottage: people of a certain class, probably white.

If The Cottage is a construct, it is underpinned by the romantic notion of finding yourself in an uncomplicated space that is yours to claim. This itself is a part of a much greater fiction that underpins the idea of Canada.

Drew Hayden Taylor, an award-winning playwright, explored this fiction in his play *Cottagers and Indians*, currently on tour across Canada. The play looks at the tensions between non-Indigenous cottagers and Indigenous people in the Kawartha Lakes, Ont., region. It's based on the true story of James Whetung, from Curve Lake First Nation, who began replanting Pigeon Lake with wild rice, sparking a dispute with local cottage owners. The dispute isn't ancient history—it's ongoing.

Taylor, himself an Ojibway from Curve Lake, tells me about Whetung's battle: "He describes the Kawartha Lakes as—if you'll pardon the pun—the breadbasket of the Anishinaabe Nation. He wanted to reintroduce the wild rice because of medical reasons. Many Native communities are suffering from diabetes incurred from a radically different diet forced upon them, so he plants the rice as a form of food sovereignty."

But anyone who has ever seen wild rice knows that it's ambitious, and that it grows and grows feet above the lake's surface. It makes the water around it look marshy. In other words, as wild rice bursts with life and utility, it disrupts the fantasy of the perfect, pristine lake.

Cottagers and Indians dives into the topic with humour, but the conflict at the heart of the story is over the proper use of the lake. Taylor tells me that "cottagers and other non-Native locals feel that this man has taken it upon himself to make life difficult for them. That wild rice limits the amount of fishing, swimming, and boating that people can do. And that it brings down property values on their houses."

As Taylor explains it, First Nations people have always been a part of the lake system. "The lakes were our highways, or we used to harvest fish or wild rice; they have always been a bountiful and productive aspect of our lives." In his view, cottagers see the lake as "an aesthetic location to sit on a deck and watch life go by." And where did this idea of a non-functional and purely idyllic lake life spring from? "Five hundred years of colonization," he says. "It's part of the psyche."

The reality is that history has written non-white people out of the story of Canada's outdoors in a deliberate and substantial way. Scott describes this as an attempt to deny the presence of others—Indigenous and immigrant alike. "For example, Black people were here from the time the first French explorers made contact. Black people were also involved in the fur trade. Some were slaves, and some were free. But they were here. They were running off into the wilderness to trap," she says. "This rattles that mythology that only white people were present."

“When you see ads for cottaging products, do you ever see Black people in them?”

When she hikes in Frontenac Provincial Park, north of Kingston, Scott is struck by the plaques about the pioneer homesteaders who used to live on that land. "They're beautifully done," she says. "But I've seen absolutely nothing about the Indigenous people who owned the land."

Prishram Jain sounds like a man at peace. When he tells me over the phone about the cottage he owns with his two brothers, you can almost hear him smiling.

Prish was three years old when his family came over to Canada from India in 1970. He describes himself as a "quintessential first-generation immigrant." The family lived close to High Park in Toronto for much of his childhood, so the kids were always mucking around by the pond and in the ravine. Eventually this developed into a love for canoeing and camping and for the outdoors. Still, the idea of a cottage was never on the table—"for our parents, it was just so foreign in terms of being able to afford it," he says.

Prish didn't actually get to experience going to a cottage until his thirties, when he became involved with a group of friends whose parents had cottages. But his interest in owning a cottage would come later. "It wasn't until we became parents that we started thinking, Wouldn't it be fabulous for our kids if they could experience nature in a better way than we did?"

Now, what the Jain cottage represents is a beautiful miracle. The cottage has room for the whole family, including nine children between the three brothers. "It can accommodate everybody without feeling cramped. Including our parents," Prish adds. "But I don't think any one of us would've been able to do it on our own."

"It's interesting," Prish continues. "Even though we weren't raised in India, there it's very common for siblings to live together in the family household, with their parents. This cottage is almost our interpretation of bringing our cultural values of residing together and living together over here—not in the city, but at the cottage." As he says this, I can hear him beaming.

The magazine you're holding is built for an imagined community of readers who have at least a few things in common. The tales of Nadia's experience with first-time cottage ownership will be familiar to many readers: learning how a septic system works, the difference between drawing well water and lake

water, and that you can call on neighbours when you have boat trouble.

"Cottage ownership is like its own language. It's a completely different language. And I speak it partially now," Nadia says. And her family's dive into cottage ownership has had an infectious effect. "My brown friends, more and more, are asking me questions about owning a cottage."

I have a daughter of my own now, born in Toronto on a beautiful spring day two years ago. She doesn't yet know that her roots reach back all the way to Sudan, because all she knows is Canada. Last summer, she crawled around my friend's cottage, and this year she will probably be running up and down the island.

As an immigrant, I can't say wanting a cottage is simple. It's not easy to see myself in the story of cottaging. It's a narrative writ in invisible ink that includes erasure of history and a high bar of entry for people who look like me. It may mean having to contend with "the look" a little more often than I'd like. It will mean progressing deeper into a problematic fiction of Canada's founding.

I am just now starting to disentangle the role that cottages will play for immigrant families like mine laying down roots. I think of the Jain cottage and the idea of having your parents and all your siblings and their children gathered under one roof. This is an incredible feat that reminds me of my upbringing in Sudan, where proximity to family was a goal emphasized above all else. I'm not fluent in the language of cottaging, but family is a code I can understand.

The fluency that Nadia and her family have found didn't take long—they pretty much got the hang of things after one season. But for immigrants and children of immigrants, and especially for people of colour, partaking in the cottage involves a leap of faith that this part of the Canadian experience has a place for them too. And that this language too can be learned. ▀

Elamin Abdelmahmoud writes about culture, media, and politics. His enjoyment of the outdoors has come relatively late in life.