

# The **QUEEN** of Baie Fine

BY JIM MOODIE  
PHOTOGRAPHY PETER BAUMGARTEN

She punches bears. Her grandkids call her “the inappropriate grandmother.” And she’s reigned over northern Georgian Bay for decades



Christina Jones (centre) holds a photo of her grandfather Newland Spreadborough, who built the family cottage nearly 100 years ago.



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**BY THE TIME HER** birthday rolls around in late August, Christina Jones has been at her island cottage since mid-June, mostly by herself, and basically marooned. There's a kayak and a row-boat, but the septuagenarian is at the end of Baie Fine—a freshwater fjord culminating in the Pool, a lake-like pocket surrounded by Killarney Provincial Park—and the nearest marina, the one that taxied her in here, is some 20 kilometres away. Cell coverage is iffy, at best, and Christina typically can't be bothered even trying. The days have bobbed along, borne on the rhythms of reading and



Christina (inset) has been coming to the island cottage in Baie Fine—one of the largest freshwater fjords in the world—since she was a one-year-old.

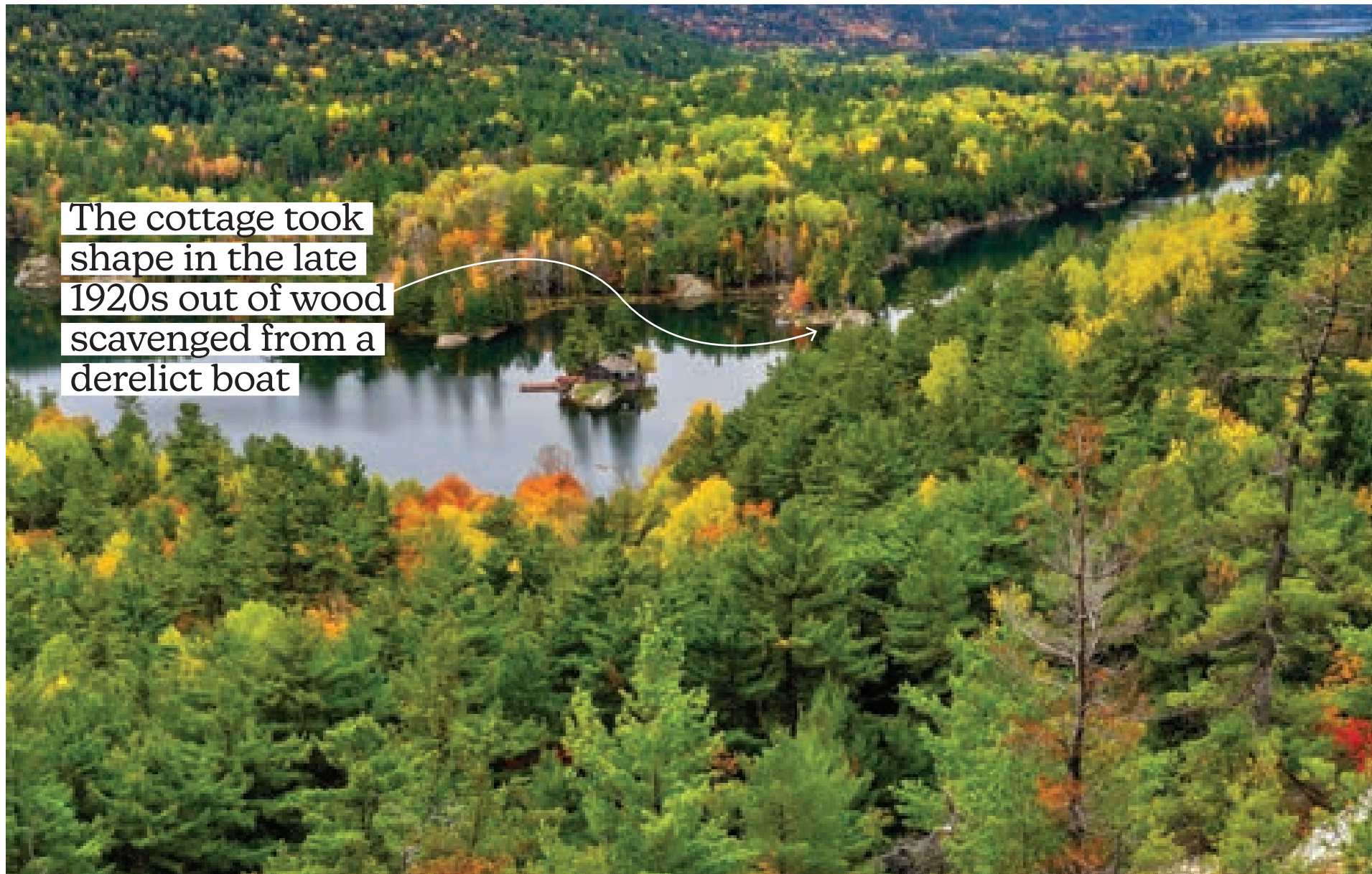
knitting, of fetching water from the lake, of visits from kingfishers and snapping turtles. Often it's enough to simply gaze at the circumvallate hills, chalky in colour but harder than marble, not to mention older than the Alps. These ancient peaks are also greener than they were a half-century ago, a forest thinned by axes and acid rain now thickening back up. Christina can see her whole life reflected in this setting, although the sequence isn't necessarily linear. One moment she's a child, the next a grandmother. The shadows of pines are more real than the hands on a clock; calendar squares cease to mean much, or at least become an afterthought. "I turned 74 yesterday," she announces when I show up, a day late. Or just in time, depending on how you look at it. "I thought," she says, "it was today."

Her daughter, Christianna, has naturally kept track, arriving with husband, Peter, and three of their grandkids to fete the matriarch on the appropriate date. Her favourite present? An artifact that great-grandson Ayden produces after a bit of treasure hunting along the shore. It's an old iron clamp that was originally used to secure log booms and later repurposed as a weight for a water line. Ayden, 11, finds it in the water but unattached to anything—except, of course, the very roots of his family's connection to this unique nook of northern Georgian Bay.

"My grandfather Newland Spreadborough came here to work as a scaler for the Spanish River Logging Company in 1904," says Christina. "He lived here year-round and loved it." The timber operation was based on the east shore of the Pool (an old company house built in 1911 is still discernible from the Jones cottage) and Newland's wife, also a Christina, would join him in the summer with the kids, travelling from the family home in Bracebridge, Ont. "My mother was six weeks old when she came here for the first time."

Christina was not much older on her inaugural jaunt. "I was just starting to walk," she says. "My aunt Ellen went

In the cabin, Christina displays her various collections, including Blue Willow dishes from Eaton's, oil lamps, and paddles. The outhouse, of course, is home to the bedpans (p. 62).



The cottage took shape in the late 1920s out of wood scavenged from a derelict boat



out to the backyard (of the Bracebridge home) and said to Grandfather, 'the baby and I are going to Baie Fine.'" At that time, reaching the inlet from Muskoka was still a circuitous, multi-stage journey by rail and water. "You switched trains in North Bay, and then we would get a boat," she says. "The first time we came in, the idea was to stay for two weeks, and my aunt said to heck with it, 'we're going to stay for the summer.'"

That was 1948, so communication was even trickier than it is now—you can get a ping from a tower in some parts of Baie Fine, though rarely in the Pool—yet her aunt was able to "get a message out" from a resort at the fjord's entrance regarding the change in plan, as well as order provisions from Little Current, on Manitoulin Island. "They checked to see if a yacht was coming in," Christina says. "And in came our groceries."

Ever since, the cottager has spent her birthday in Baie Fine, barring a few years when work or family obligations got in the way. "As long as I've been able to go, I've gone," she says. "This is my Prozac. If I can't come here, I'm going to call MAID (medical assistance in dying)."

Christina can be blunt, and also very funny. Of a Pomeranian who hops on the picnic table while we're chatting—a beloved but somewhat badass rescue she adopted a few years back—she says, "that's Tucker, but we sometimes change a syllable." Rarely, if ever, does she seem to feel the need to retract a comment or apologize for its edge. "My grandchildren call me the inappropriate grandmother," she says.

While she relaxes outside, tossing a few raspberries to finches, Ayden has been busy filing the rust off his archaeological find. "My great-grandchildren are learning skills that aren't—this business," says Christina, thumbing an invisible phone. "He's learned today what an axe file is. He's cleaning up his clamp, and then he wants it hung on the wall with the crosscut saw and the rest of the logging equipment from around here. So there you have six generations, fixing up something they've found."

The cottage is itself a kind of reclamation project, or perhaps upcycling would be the better term. The rudimentary abode, comprising roughly 1,300 square



The cottage has changed little from its earliest days and is packed with heirlooms



feet, took shape in the late 1920s out of wood scavenged from a derelict boat. “There was an old barge on the shore, a big scow they used to bring supplies to the loggers,” says Christina. “They gave my grandfather permission to take it apart. It was done in winter, with the stipulation the rest had to be burnt. So that was the start of the cottage.”

Newland Spreadborough and his wife were still staying in company quarters on the mainland at the time, but their three daughters had reached an age when they were inclined to whoop it up on occasion, so he acquired the nearby island, mostly to get a good night’s sleep. “He built this camp so the girls could come over here and not disturb them, but he also wanted to have a piece of this area that was his own,” says Christina. One room of the cottage was effectively a dance hall, and to this day a working gramophone remains, along with the same hardwood planks upon which the girls (and the young lumberjacks or sailors who served as dance partners) did the Charleston, or whatever moves were in vogue.

Christina cranks up the Victrola and drops the needle on a 78 by Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra, titled “Take Me Back to My Boots and Saddle.” *There’s a gal in Cherokee! And she’s waitin’ there for me*, he twangs, above the hiss of old vinyl. Some tunes in the collection were more direct on the subject of romance, or laden with innuendo, at least. “As a kid, I used to go around singing all these risqué songs,” Christina recalls with a laugh.

It was while staying in the Pool that she met her future husband. Christina was 16, and Lawrence Jones, an Ojibwa from Wikwemikong, had arrived to fight a wildfire. “Somebody rolled a rock down the hill,” she explains, pointing to the slope in question, which, like all of Baie Fine’s shoreline, consists of craggy quartzite. “Quartz on quartz can throw a spark.” The hill rises sharply from the water’s edge, just 100 metres or so from the island, so the family had front-row

seats for the drama. “He came down from the fire in the evening, I picked him up on the shore, and he came over for a visit. And that was it, we were off to the races.”

Sadly Lawrence predeceased her long ago, dying at 55. “He had his first heart attack at 36,” says Christina, adding with characteristic cheek: “probably from living with me.” He lives on in the kids, though, and their kids, all of who have embraced their First Nations heritage. Christina, meanwhile, kept heading for Baie Fine whenever possible, accompanied or not. Since retiring as a nurse eight years ago and stepping down as a municipal councillor, she’s made it her routine to hunker in for the entire summer.

“I get the water taxi from Birch Island and stay down here for three months,” she says. It’s a repeat of what she did as a youngster, when she would come right after school got out and stay until Labour Day—but she is okay with that arc. “You come into the world peeing your pants, and go out of the world peeing your pants,” she says.

The cottage has changed little from its earliest days and is packed with items from her grandfather’s era: cast-iron pans, deer antlers, enough oil lamps to illuminate a small castle. There’s also a map showing the timber limits her granddad oversaw, and a bureau he built using wooden crates as drawers. Pull one out, and you will see “Carnation Evaporated Milk,” among other brand names for tinned goods, stamped on the side. Coffee percolators abound, one of which has its bulb held in place with string from a potato bag. There is no hydro (unless you count a single solar panel and an ancient generator gathering dust), no landline, and no running water. There is a hand pump, however, and a wood-fired cookstove with removable rings that can bring a pot to boil.

“To fill a tub, you need five full pails of cold and three pails of hot,” says Christina. That’s for an adult, who wants a really good soak. Babies—including June, the youngest great-grandchild, who had followed family tradition by cottaging before she turned one—can be more casually dunked. “The last time we had her down here we bathed her in the cooler,” says June’s grandmother, Christianna. >>

When the grandkids are with them, Christianna (left, in blue shirt), her husband, Peter, and the rest of the family frequently build evening campfires on ‘the Big Rock’ on the east side of the island.

While the cottage is neither big nor fancy, there is much to take in



Christina says she rarely feels anxious while cottaging by herself, although she does carry a cattle prod when making trips to the outhouse at night. Originally, she had a short handle for this zapper, but her kids convinced her to use a longer one. “Their opinion is, why do I want to be that close to the bear?” she says. Luckily she’s never encountered a bruin while bound for the privy, but one did surprise her in bed one night, seemingly to its regret. “About three in the morning, I heard this zzz-ip as he ran his claw, neat as could be, through the copper screen,” she says. The bear proceeded to poke his head through the opening and even placed a paw on her chest. “I sleep in a single bed, so there wasn’t much room for the two of us,” Christina recounts. “I’d heard the tenderest part is their nose, so I...whacked him there. And he just sort of pulled back and left.”

More worrying to her is the presence of porcupines, as a grandson’s dog got “mixed up with one” in the past. “Down in the boathouse I have a big tin can for them,” she says. “I just take a board and *whump* the porcupine into it, put the lid on, and row it over to the mainland. I don’t want to kill it, but I don’t want it on the island.”

Loneliness isn’t a huge concern, as she enjoys communing with other critters, including the massive snapper who visits daily, and could be as old as the cottage itself. Plus, it’s not as if the Pool—remote as it might look on a map, and secluded as it might feel at times—is a place devoid of human activity. The sheltered anchorage has been a magnet for yachters for well over a hundred years, and canoe-trippers sometimes pass through too.

Christina will often wave or welcome them ashore, as was the case when one group from a summer camp was caught in a downpour, and with insufficient gear. “It was August, and they were hypothermic,” she says. “I brought them in and got them warmed up, fed them, and dressed them in peculiar clothes.” The supply of spare duds was limited, she explains, so one young man ended up tugging on a pink nightgown with a cat on its chest. “He wore it quite happily,” she says. “And for two or three



years after that, guiding the kids, he always stopped by to say hello.”

A mainstay for years in the Pool was *The Chanticleer*, a boat so big it dwarfed the island to which it was tethered. Both the boat and the island, located within view of the Jones cottage, belonged to Ralph Evinrude, of outboard motor fame, who married Hollywood actress Frances Langford. Neither is alive now, but Christina got to know both when she was a kid and would often catch frogs for them to use as fish bait.

Another celebrity was William Hale “Big Bill” Thompson, the portly mayor of Chicago and apparent crony of Al Capone. He had a cottage on Threenarrows Lake,

accessed by a steep trail from the Pool, and was reputedly toted over this mountain pass by four men in a modified chair. Christina wasn’t alive to see this happen, but she did see evidence of the portable throne. “The chair was still there, on the side of the hill, when I was a kid,” she says. “It finally fell apart.”

There are stories too of men with violin (a.k.a. gun) cases, as well as Capone himself, passing through Baie Fine, and Big Bill escaping via a different route when he knew the mobster was looking for him. Christina admits these episodes have only been communicated to her through family lore. More verifiable are the visits from Group of Seven artists

A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Lismer, not just to the Pool but to the Jones camp itself. Both signed a logbook the cottager keeps carefully stored in a Seal Line dry bag. Lismer, who stayed with Christina’s grandparents in 1933, along with his wife and daughter, contributes a sketch with his entry. It depicts the painter and his family gazing out from the island, below a panel of scenery and wildlife, along with the caption: “If there’s anything else in Baie Finn (*sic*), we haven’t seen it.”

Today, it’s relatively quiet in the Pool. There are a couple of sailboats but they are anchored around a corner from the Jones place, out of view, and there is no one at the Evinrude cottage. About the

only marine traffic is Christianna, who goes for a spin on a stand-up paddleboard, clad in a T-shirt that reads: “It’s camp not cottage.” Later, her husband, Peter, will also go for a paddle with Ayden, gliding around the edge of the bay in a canoe.

Christina says that she welcomed a boater ashore a few days earlier, and gave him a tour of the cottage. While neither big nor fancy—with its rectangular layout and rough-sawn planks, it feels not that far removed from the barge that spawned it—there is much to take in, including a loft that looks like something out of a children’s story and a wall full of faded, hardcover books. Among

the titles is *Lost In The Backwoods*, by Catharine Parr Traill, an old enough edition that the name on the spine reads “Mrs. Traill” and a swastika (not yet synonymous with evil) graces its cover. There’s also a 1934 novel by Caroline Miller about the antebellum south that won a Pulitzer and should be more famous than *Gone With The Wind*, but never caught on the same way, perhaps because its title—*Lamb In His Bosom*—confused even readers of the day.

If those tomes didn’t catch the interest of her visitor, there was plenty more he could peruse, including old photos from the 1920s, a pie safe, the saved skins of snakes, wineskins, cowbells, a harpoon gun, and countless representations of owls, sailboats, and loons. “He loved it,” says Christina. “His comment to me was, ‘It’s like a museum.’” The cottager, who would rather add another logging artifact to her walls than acquire indoor plumbing, and sees no reason why a 60-year-old canister of Fry’s Cocoa should be tossed, took that as a compliment.

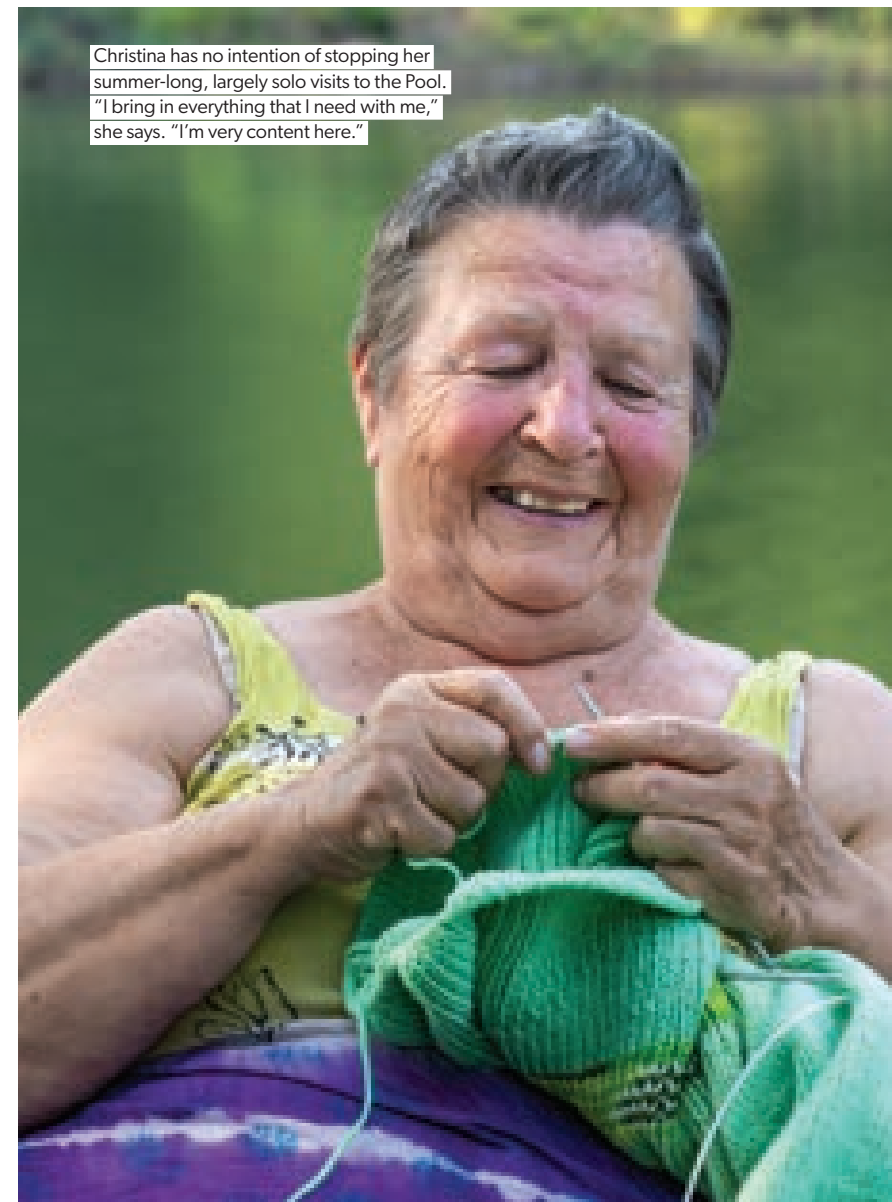
Just as we’re getting used to the idea of having the whole Pool to ourselves, we hear the sound of human voices, joined in song. The source isn’t immediately obvious. The chorus grows louder—but not obnoxiously so—and then a truly odd craft rounds the point, drifting slowly toward us. It’s a perfectly flat rectangle, like a floating carpet, but topped with four chairs. In those chairs are four people, harmonizing with one another. Each seems to have a beverage in their hand, and they are clearly enjoying themselves, while not really annoying anyone else.

“What is it?” says Ayden. “I thought they had rafted two paddleboards together, but I’ve never seen anything like that,” says Christianna. “It looks like an inflatable platform,” says Peter.

Christina just smiles.

Then, in a way that both echoes Lismer’s guestbook entry and somehow answers it, proclaims: “You’ve never seen half of what I’ve seen here.” 🐾

Regular contributor Jim Moodie’s last feature for the magazine, “Welcome to the Wunderkammer” (June/July ’20), was also about a cottage full of cool collections.



Christina has no intention of stopping her summer-long, largely solo visits to the Pool. “I bring in everything that I need with me,” she says. “I’m very content here.”