

Your A to Zen guide for blissful cottage living this summer

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(Illustrations by Vincent Moustache for The Globe and Mail)

There's nothing like a week in the woods to recharge urban spirits – until it ends in tension and tears. To help both hosts and guests get the most out of their retreats this year, Danny Sinopoli canvasses a slew of Canadian nature

buffs for the new rules (and tools) of blissful cottage life. Here, the top 26, in alphabetical order:

A is for airier lodgings

There's nothing less relaxing, says Toronto designer Karen Sealy, who owns a summer getaway on Ontario's Lake Simcoe, than spending a weekend in the wilds in cramped quarters. Her solution? "When I renovated and restored my log cabin, I took out the closets to create enough room for queen-sized beds with [built-in] storage compartments." She also built up, rather than out, to maximize her space. "The open ceiling with a high pitch allowed me to add a sleeping loft. Needless to say, the kids love it."

B is for better buzz kills

For generations now, citronella candles have been the insect repellents of choice, but citronella can be ineffective against persistent pests such as blackflies. For a truly bug-free existence, "adding a screened porch makes a huge difference to the cottage or cabin experience," say TV decorators Colin McAllister and Justin Ryan, hosts of Cottage Life TV's Cabin Pressure. Sure, a screened porch is an

investment, but it's one that's easy to incorporate into existing structures and will pay off over time, they note.

C is for custom touches

Forget mismatched linens and generic beach gear: These days, the savviest cottage owners are taking their cues from the hotel industry to impress their overnight guests. McAllister and Ryan, who always give their cottages a name (their latest one, on Drag Lake in Ontario's Haliburton County, is cheekily called Grey Gardens), embroider their towels, beach bags and slippers with a house monogram to both give visitors a sense of place and evoke "an exclusive hotel." Sealy, meanwhile, provides her youngest guests with coated metal buckets for tossing wet items into; each bears a chalkboard badge inscribed with each youngster's name.

D is for decadent grill fare

By all means pack the wieners and the chicken breasts, staples of cottage grilling. But for those extra-special dinners in the rough, writer and cottager Derek Finkle, who escapes to Christian Island in Ontario's Georgian Bay, offers three words: dry-aged beef. "It's incredible. If you've never dry-aged a rack of

rib eyes, you should ask your butcher to get started on it three weeks or so before the big weekend," he says.



E is for executive decisions

According to businessman Bobby Genovese, who has a cabin in Whistler, B.C., the best hosts and hostesses have a plan – an activities plan. “I’m a kind of camp counsellor,” the Bahamas-based venture capitalist and founder of BG Signature Properties says, noting that he offers his more active-minded guests a range

of diversions, from hiking treks to water skiing. Of course, those who want to curl up with the latest summer potboiler are free to do so, but, Genovese says, “physical exercise” is paramount.

F is for fire(pit) power

Leave the campfires to, well, campers, who are distinct from cottagers. In the view of McAllister and Ryan, “building a dedicated fire pit or outdoor fireplace” is almost a must, enabling endless summer evenings with minimum fuss and “even use into fall.” These days, a number of chic portable options, especially handy for renters, are also at cottagers’ disposal; the handspun-copper Turkish Grill offered by Lee Valley (\$319 through leevalley.com) is just one handsome example.

G is for grill hygiene

If you’re still scraping crud off your barbecue grills with a wire brush, take note: “When grilling fish or meat that tends to stick, I like using Grate Chef Grill Wipes,” says Finkle, who stocks up on them every spring. The wipes, which are American-made, “clean the grill and oil it at the same time. But never keep the sealable package outside with the barbecue.

Critters will relieve you of your supply."



His for handy host gifts

If your host or hostess has gone to the trouble of monogramming your slippers, serving you dry-aged beef and mapping out a hiking route for you, bestowing him or her with a "Kiss the Chef" apron or case of hard lemonade isn't going to cut it. So what to give the overindulgent cottage owner (who will also have to clean up after you)? "I'd recommend a

Dyson Animal handheld vacuum [\$250 at Hudson's Bay, Canadian Tire and other chains nationwide]," suggests Finkle. "With kids and pets and sand, it gets a lot of use at our cottage."

I is for instant (and unambiguous) messaging

For all of today's efforts to endow cottages with the comforts of home, guests shouldn't expect the impossible – and hosts must also be upfront about their own expectations, from the number of guests they're anticipating to who'll be doing any laundry. "If you don't have a washer/dryer, you can ask guests to bring their own towels and even their own sheets," says Sealy. "I have friends who do this and it really is a help." The key, she adds, is to communicate needs ("Our stock of good wine is low"), desires ("Please limit your party to four") and any site limitations ("Bring ice – the nearest supermarket is 10 kilometres away") clearly, unapologetically and well in advance. After all, you'll be spending days together, not a single evening.

J is for junior suites

Cottaging is typically a family affair, but that doesn't mean everyone has to shack up together. Sealy's sanity-saving fix: dedicated

bunkies – or easily erectable outbuildings (there are kits for building them) – for adults and kids alike. “I have two bunkies,” the designer says. “One is for adults; it’s fully equipped with a queen bed, a kitchenette, a powder room, a TV and a DVD player. The kids’ bunkie is well suited to older children who want their own space; it has four bunks and lots of age-appropriate games and reading material. It also has rolling storage units under each bunk for backpacks, etc.”

K is for keeping your cool (factor)

“Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful,” William Morris famously advised. The same could be said of cottages. “I swear by the Coleman Stainless Steel Belted Cooler,” says Finkle. “I have no idea how it stacks up against the boring plastic competition, but it is the only cooler my wife allows me to keep inside the cottage. All of the uglier red, white and blue jobs are put out of sight in the shed.” The takeaway: When space is at a premium, as it often is in cabins, keep the tat in check.

L is for local flavour

To give guests a real taste of their surroundings, supplement food supplies

brought in from home with a rich dose of cottage-country bounty, such as aromatic County Yum Club honey from Prince Edward County, Ont. (\$10 a bottle through countyyumclub.com) or Raspberry Point oysters in PEI (\$150 for a case of 100 through store.raspberry.com). If all that visitors feast on is potato chips and kebabs, they might as well have stayed in the city. (Bonus: Local delicacies make great last-minute hostess gifts that guests can pick up en route.)



M is for meals on wheels

On the subject of food, showing up with a big bag of groceries when staying at someone else's cottage is an appreciated and conscientious thing to do, right? Wrong. "A random mix of groceries that fill up the fridge until your host has to schlep them home or

waste them isn't that useful," says food writer Bonny Reichert, who prefers that guests drive up to her door with ready-made meals that can be consumed in short order. "Ask what your hostess would like you to bring in terms of a prepared dish or a meal and bring it ready to serve without a lot of fuss," she advises. "I love it when people do this for me."

N is for (non) glass menageries

While aesthetics are important when entertaining (see Keeping Your Cool Factor), practicality is still key when it comes to cottage living. As appealing as cut crystal may be, for instance, leave it for soirees in the city. "It's best not to use glass around a lake," says Sealy. "If it breaks on the dock and ends up in the water, it will be impossible to clean up. To avoid that, suggest to your guests that they bring beverages in cans, and have some decent non-breakable stemware on hand in case they forget. I do bend these rules on occasion, especially when a good bottle of wine is opened, but then I consider using an outdoor rug under the deck chairs."

O is for outstanding s'mores

You could put marshmallow and chocolate between two graham crackers – or you could

substitute the crackers with homemade oatmeal cookies. According to Reichert, “homemade oatmeal cookies take s’mores to a different universe. They’re soft and chewy instead of brittle and dry, and their flavour is so much more delicious, especially if you make the cookies with a pinch of salt.”

P is for personal space

To prevent guests from stinking like yesterday’s lake trout, it’s important for hosts to have some elbow room and maintain a little privacy. Sealy achieves this by giving up her cabin altogether. “When I have a family come and stay, I often give them the main cottage and I move to a bunkie,” she says. “This gives them the space to get up, deal with their little ones and get them fed before I’ve even had my first coffee.” Crises – and crankiness – averted.

Q is for quiet time

Despite all the speedboats, Sea-Doos and other noisemakers on cottage-area waterways, most people retreat to nature for a little R and R. As a guest, then, it is the height of rudeness to impose all manner of roistering distractions, from watercraft to musical instruments to boomboxes, on unsuspecting hosts. “My idea of a good time is sipping chardonnay and playing

gin rummy,” says architect and interior designer Dee Dee Taylor Eustace. You’ve been warned.

R is for rum

No one is going to turn down a bottle of Laphroaig Single Malt. But for Finkle’s money, the new summer tippie of choice is rum, a tropical staple that screams holiday. “For those smoking-hot nights by the lake,” he says, “Diplomatico Reserva [is] a beautiful sipping rum from Venezuela with the perfect touch of orange and cinnamon. For cooler nights by the fire, crack open a twine-wrapped bottle of Barbadian Grande Reserve Plantation (we love the butter-caramel twist). And for mixing with the usual suspects, go with the masterfully butterscotched Bacardi 8 Year.”

S is for signature sips

Speaking of mixed drinks, punctuating each summer with a dedicated cocktail makes cottage visits memorable for hosts and guests alike. According to Reichert, “we drink tons of rosé and cider, but we just came up with a new cocktail that I’m crazy about. We call it a St. Germain Cup: vodka, St. Germain (an elderflower liqueur from France) and soda, with lots of sliced cucumber and mint as garnish.”



T is for time limits

Some cottagers welcome guests for weeks at a time. Others can only handle them in small and prescribed doses. Taylor Eustace is in the latter camp. "For me, two nights is perfect," she says of having overnights. "[Guests] settle in on the first night, have a perfect day the next day and then, after brunch on the third, bye-bye." Hostess, know thyself – and invite accordingly.

U is for uv protection of your own

As with most toiletries, guests shouldn't expect cottage owners to supply them with suntan oil, sunscreen or other skin-care products. In other words, hit the drugstore before you hit the road. "I'm partial to Neutrogena sunscreens," says beauty writer Marilisa Racco, "specifically Neutrogena Beach Defense Sunscreen Spray SPF 60 [\$14.99 at drugstores nationwide]."

V is for virgin offerings

Not everyone, of course, is a tippler, so it behooves the diligent host (not to mention any teetotaling guests themselves) to supply a few non-alcoholic options to the drink mix. A good source for such fare is premiumnearbeer.com, which offers a wide range of alcohol-free beverages (including lagers, wines and ciders) and ships across Canada. This season, President's Choice is also offering a variety of quality canned mocktails, including margaritas (\$2.99 per can at Loblaws).

W is for wash and go

Water conservation is a must at many cottages, so hair obsessives who need to wash, rinse and repeat under a long, hot shower every morning should probably stay home. For everyone else, there's Matrix Biolage's new Cleanser Conditioner, a low-lathering, fast-rinsing all-in-

one product containing no polluting parabens, sulfates or silicones (\$23.95 through biolage.matrixcanada.ca). Also handy for cottagoers is a dry shampoo that refreshes tresses between washes; Batiste makes a popular one (\$9.49 at Shoppers Drug Mart).

X is for Xbox etiquette

Yes, electronic games and gadgets can go a long way toward occupying squirmy small fry and sullen tweens on long car trips. But once they arrive at a cottage, cabin or chalet, all devices should ideally be set to Off. After all, isn't the whole point of dragging youth to such settings, especially as guests, to expose them to nature, to learn to be sociable and to instill a healthy respect for the low-tech. In short, books and other reading material, yes. Monopoly and Clue, definitely. Gears of War: Ultimate Edition, definitely not.

Y is for youthful glows

Mascara and tight-lining are hardly cottage necessities – and will run all over the place during dips in the lake. To maintain a healthy glow, all you'll really need is a single nourishing day serum – try Bioeffect Daytime, an Icelandic-made formula that restores and brightens in one fell swoop (\$140 for 50 ml;

visit thebioeffect.ca for retailers) – and lots of fresh air.

Z is for zen dispositions

True, there are a lot of dos and don'ts when it comes to contemporary cottage-going (especially if, as a guest, you want to be asked back). But for Genovese, who retreats to his cabin in B.C. in both winter and summer, one quality among visitors is key: "I only ask one rule from my guests," he says. "Come with a positive attitude – and be prepared to have fun."