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Stars over Blachford Lake: Off the grid in the Northwest Territories

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service



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YELLOWKNIFE, CANADA —

If for some unlikely reason you lose your way in Canada's Northwest Territories and happen to stumble upon Blachford Lake Lodge, a 30-minute flight southeast of Yellowknife, "five-star luxury" won't be your first reaction. Yet that's how visitors who've drunk the Kool-Aid invariably describe this deliciously inviting hilltop oasis.

"They wouldn't call it luxury in London," said international traveler Diana Pullman, an artist, on her second day at the lodge. "Or New York. This is wilderness. We're off the grid. Rustic luxury

doesn't need Persian rugs and gold-framed paintings to make you feel you belong," she said, knocking the snow off her boots and curling up on the sofa next to the wood stove where we were drying our socks and debating the issue.

"The logs inside and out, they're classic log cabin," she pointed out, gesturing at the peeled log timbers, the unfinished pine paneling and the plywood floors, painted an unobtrusive dark maroon. "Then look at the open-space design, high ceilings, big windows everywhere, light from all angles. It's almost contemporary. Get the basics right – great food and good beds – and you don't need frills."

Flying from Yellowknife and landing on the frozen lake, we were greeted not by a bell boy with a luggage trolley but a snowmobiler dragging a sled. Beyond him came the welcome committee, a handful of smiling Gen Y guides swaddled in thick jackets and wool hats, young adults who introduced themselves then checked our names off the arrivals list.

Volunteers hired from a half-dozen distant countries, each for a two-month stint, they were as eager as we were to be there, a chance to experience a true sub-Arctic winter. They weren't what I'd expected, but it was impossible to ignore their enthusiasm and energy as they escorted us up the hill, talking all the way and recommending things we shouldn't miss.

"Here, let me carry your backpack," said Adrian from Australia, pointing out the skating rink in the cove, the trails around the hilltop and the rack of Nordic skis and poles next to the front door. "It's this way to the teepee and that way to the sauna," said Maude Bergeron-Lambert from Quebec, who was waiting to lead a brief orientation.

Looking down to the lake, where our transportation – the Twin Otter – picked up speed, lifted off and vanished in the clouds, I suddenly felt alone. Or maybe it was the endless forest under the endless sky that did it. The reality is that rarely visited Northwest Territories (one of Canada's 10 provinces and three territories) is twice the size of Texas, a 520,000-square-mile giant stretching from the Arctic Ocean in the north to British Columbia and Alberta in the south.

From the Taiga Shield, where we were, to the mountains and beyond, to tundra, enormous lakes, immense canyons and towering waterfalls, wilderness was a universal feature. No wonder it didn't take long for most of us, 29 guests in all, to reach across the void that separates strangers and find a kindred spirit.

Ray, in the room down the hall, said the atmosphere reminded him of how fast he made friends when he was a kid at summer camp in Wisconsin. As for me, our four days there felt more like the classic house party of yore, the gathering you read about in novels where the wealthy (or titled) estate owner invites a dozen or so mutual friends to his country house for a long weekend of revelry, fresh air, brisk strolls, trout fishing and candlelit dinners.

Candles were thin on the ground at Blachford Lake, and that wasn't all. There were no elevators or

silk draperies, no crystal chandeliers or marble-tiled bathrooms. Minibars and television were absent, as was 24-hour room service, air conditioning and less than high-speed internet access. With no roads, cars were irrelevant. After a brief mental reboot, we realized we didn't miss any of them.

What remained were the basics: fresh air, brisk strolls and a chance to actually catch some trout. Since the lodge provided Nordic skis, snowshoes, ice skates and hockey sticks, there was no reason not to spend every sunny hour outside. Even ice fishing – through the ice – was possible.

The most popular activity were the guided snowshoe hikes on various signed trails looping away from the lodge, through the trees and around snow-covered meadows, returning past a vista point with spectacular views. Clumping around on what might have passed for homemade tennis rackets was not just the easiest but the most fun. The pace was slow enough to talk on the way, and predictably droll when you – or someone else – tipped into a snowbank.

Hockey fans put on skates and headed to the pond. And alpine (downhill) skiers who'd never tried cross country skiing – and were confident they had the right stuff – went down to the lake where the staff, using a snowmobile and roller, had laid down a series of intertwined groomed tracks.

The longest track headed straight down the lake for a mile, circled a small island and returned on the far side, an exercise in swooping strides that quickly revealed previously unknown muscles. The shorter track curved in and out of several unusual coves, a bonus for multitasking photographers.

But not everything involved aerobics. We joined the igloo building session, a chance to prove you were handy with a saw, able to cut blocks out of hard snow and add an angled edge, and pile them into a dome. Not to mention hot-tub soaking, sauna steaming and cozy campfire evenings with marshmallows-on-a-stick in the teepee.

This canvas structure, pitched around long poles, stood on a north-facing ridge where the aurora borealis was most likely to appear. This it did after midnight, a ghostly, shape-shifting ribbon of green that rose, wavered in the sky and slowly faded away. Though sightings are never guaranteed, Blachford Lake Lodge's location, close to the magnetic North Pole, makes viewing better than most.

As for basics, "off the grid" lodges such as Blachford Lake Lodge depend on simplicity, says lodge manager Sarah Van Stiphout, one of four paid employees at the lodge.

"When owner Mike Freeland bought the property in 1981, it had one small cabin – now restored and named Old Trapper's Cabin – and nothing else," she told me. "No electricity, gas, water, lights, nothing. Friends who came out to visit brought their camping gear."

And it's still off the grid. But this time, environmental sustainability has triumphed, creating an eco-smart model for living no matter where you are. At Blachford Lake Lodge you can switch on the lights in your room and read. You can charge your camera batteries, drink the water, use the

modern bathroom, take a hot shower and stay warm in your shirtsleeves. You can ask Chef Carla to mix up a blender-whipped smoothie and never notice that hidden inventions are at work.

Four sets of solar panels installed on the roof get a boost from a single wind turbine connected to five sets of batteries. With a diesel generator for backup, the system produces more power and heat than the lodge needs or uses, even in the coldest winters. The water you use to brush your teeth is drinkable, filtered on site by a plant that also turns wastewater to grey water for use in gardens and shrubbery. Meanwhile, a waterless process installed below the main floor converts solid waste to compost.

And the "contemporary" open-space architecture that Pullman admired so much not only helps to circulate warm air, but brings guests and volunteers together in the lounge, a single space that encompasses the bar, dining tables, sofas, the library corner and the open-counter kitchen room. As those who've drunk the Kool-Aid know, wilderness always deserves five stars.

THE NITTY GRITTY: The lodge is open in summer and winter, as long as the ski-float plane is able to land, on solid ice or open water. Each of the five rooms and five cabins at Blachford Lake Lodge is outfitted to sleep four or more, in king, queen and/or bunk beds. Child rates are available, depending on the season and dates. All rates include excellent cuisine served buffet-style; two chefs prepare everything on site, from breads to salads and main dishes. Summer activities include kayaking, canoeing, swimming and hiking. Plan to take a commercial flight to Yellowknife and spend your first night there. For details and suggestions, go to www.blachfordlakelodge.com.

(Anne Z. Cooke talks with readers at travelswithanne@cs.com, and on twitter at [@anneontheroad](https://twitter.com/anneontheroad).)

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