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THE AMERICAS****Canada****The rise of the log mansion**

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The simple life, at a price

THE Canadian middle classes have long considered a lakefront log cabin in the woods for summer weekends to be as much a part of their birthright as maple syrup. Suddenly this idyll is starting to move out of reach. Property prices might still be plummeting south of the border, but in the lake country around Canada's cities they are soaring.

Nowhere more so than in the Muskokas, two hours north of Toronto. The most expensive cottage there now costs C\$8m (\$7.5m), up from less than \$1m a few years ago. "Cottage" in a manner of speaking, that is. These log mansions come complete with home theatre and lakeside exercise room. It is true that Muskoka has long been a playground for the rich. Those who have summered on its necklace of deep, clear lakes have included Andrew Carnegie, an American steel tycoon, and Hollywood stars such as Goldie Hawn and Tom Hanks. But the price rise has rippled across the lakes, from British Columbia to Quebec.

There are several reasons. There is only so much prime waterfront land within easy reach of the cities, where property prices have been rising too (though they are now peaking). Ageing baby-boomers are choosing to retire to what were once summer-only residences. To live comfortably through the icy blast of a Canadian winter, they build basements, install furnaces, and upgrade kitchens and bathrooms. In the face of new demands for year-round rubbish collection and snow removal, local governments have done their bit to make cottage ownership more expensive by raising taxes.

Affluent young couples, not keen to rough it like trappers in the wilderness, want all the comforts of home, especially internet access so that they can read their e-mails while sitting on the dock drinking beer. "They want to hear the loons and look at an unspoiled view, but then they want to retreat and watch a high-definition movie on a large-screen television," says Phil Soper of Royal LePage, an estate agent that tracks holiday property.

Log cabins have come full circle, says Greg Halseth, a geographer at the University of Northern British Columbia who has studied second-home ownership. Before postwar economic expansion boosted incomes and brought both rural property and car ownership within the reach of the middle class, it was only the wealthy who could afford a country retreat. Now that is again becoming true. Is the simple cabin by the lake gone for ever? You can still find them at an affordable price, says Pauline Auger, an estate agent in the Rideau Lakes area south of Ottawa, but "just not in proximity to major cities, or any community." The Arctic beckons.

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