

CABIN FEVER  
The Boathouse,  
Lake Kora

# ON GOLDEN POND

Live like the Vanderbilts at Lake Kora, one of America's legendary Great Camps, set in the pristine wilderness of the Adirondack Mountains

By VICTORIA MATHER

Lake Kora is a time capsule of the Gilded Age, the last privately owned Great Camp in the wilderness of the Adirondacks, Upstate New York, where the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, John Pierpont Morgan and Marjorie Merriweather Post were among those social lodestars playing Marie Antoinette in coy luxury “log cabins” only equalled by the mansions they called “cottages” in Newport, Rhode Island.

They arrived in the summer on private trains with mahogany railcars, beds upholstered in lush velvets, porcelain bathrooms and on-board chefs, maids and butlers. Horses and carriages awaited them at railheads at Blue Mountain or Old Forge, then possibly “electric launch” boats and birch-bark canoes across the mirror water of the lakes. Mrs Merriweather Post required 85 staff at

Camp Topridge and would leave a note in her guests’ bedrooms saying that if there were any sporting activity known to man that she had not thought of, and that they desired to do, they had only to ask—“And if you don’t, it is entirely your own fault”. One guest remarked: “When she came into the room, everyone felt exhausted.” Sigmund Freud wrote that “Of everything I have experienced in America, this is probably the strangest.” He was much struck by the incongruous luxury in the wilderness—at Lake Kora there was even electricity and telephone (all wires buried underground) by the early 1900s; the lamp posts on the property are straight from Narnia.

The era of the Great Camps began in the 1860s and continued until the Second World War; but it was a phenomenon of the mid-19th century, when leisure became permissible in America. Wealth equalled health, time off from brainwork was regenerative, and nowhere was the air purer than in the wilderness, where the

bears roamed and the fish leapt in crystal waters purling towards the mighty Hudson or the St Lawrence Seaway. Whereas the British aristocracy drew their power and wealth from landed estates in the country and went to town for leisure and society (the London season), the new money of the New World was essentially urban and went to the country for leisure, taking society with it. The house parties in the Great Camps were epic: Mrs Merriweather Post’s dining room was 100ft long; the Great Hall at Lake Kora is modelled to Henry VIII’s scale, with the heads of moose and buffalo rushing through the walls. It is said that at one time 70 guests could be accommodated in the cabins and boathouses; today it is a playground for some 25 guests to rent, a model village—a 1930s insurance report listed a meat house, ice house, water pump house, engine house, carpenter’s workshop, blacksmith’s, tool house, chapel, wood shed, bowling alley, squash court, generator house, dairy,



hog house, greenhouse, casino and island ballroom. The stables are modelled on the mews at Buckingham Palace.

Lake Kora today inspires the same awe as it did in the American correspondent Henry Wellington Wack, who wrote in *Field & Stream* in 1903: "I doubt if there is any forest villa in Europe to compare." He also admired the neighbouring camps Sagamore (belonging to the Vanderbilts), Uncas (J.P. Morgan) and Kamp Kill Kare, as Kora was then known, which he said was "by far the most picturesque and most completely furnished—from the birch-bark writing paper to the furniture made upon the spot of cedar logs". The owner then was Lieutenant Governor Timothy Woodruff, who would have been President of the United States had not political wheel-dealing given the vice-presidency to Theodore Roosevelt, who departed

through the night from the Adirondacks idyll when President William McKinley was assassinated.

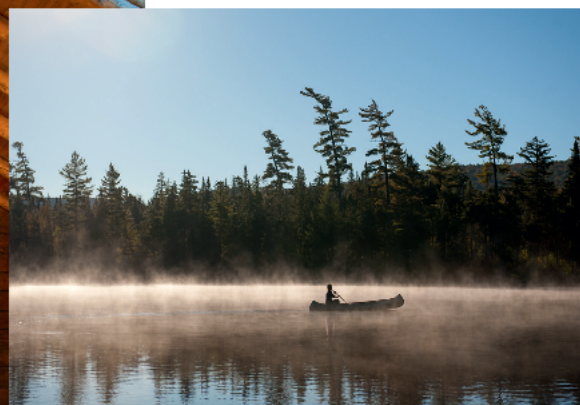
The wheel has turned full circle: the rich and powerful are once again in search of places where the world cannot find them. "We had an incredible time @ Lake Kora. We loved the many activities, excellent staff and facilities. The setting is so serene and private. Melinda and Bill" reads an entry in the visitors' book that tells the modern story of a Gates-way to paradise. Also: "Heaven on earth, and what a treat. Mick Flick".

To wake in the Tree Room, originally designed by Cora Woodruff with a vast bed made out of one tree, complete with branches supporting a stuffed osprey, is to be reborn in the sound of silence. There are few places in the world, other than the African bush, where one does not hear the

roar of the internal combustion engine. Here at Lake Kora, the silence is golden, tangible, punctuated only by the wail of the loon, that iconic bird of the East Coast wilderness. Think *On Golden Pond* and Oscar-winning Katharine Hepburn growling to Henry Fonda, "The loons! The loons! They are welcoming us back." The wail is like some ancient call of the Mohawks, who used to live in the forests: Native American guides to the frontiersmen and fur trappers who first discovered this beautiful place.

The hunters' spoils are part of the furnishings and fabric of Lake Kora. Bear rugs—black, polar and brown—and stuffed bears and birds are tended by a resident taxidermist who gives them a hair-do and polishes their nails and teeth. But today at Lake Kora there is also Wi-Fi, Apple TV and Netflix. A storyteller comes to tell his tales around the campfire, and a guitarist, to accompany a singalong with the Lake Kora songbook. The tennis pro is flown up from Miami. The casino, complete with roulette wheel and a pool table built on site, is actually the rustic drawing room, in which everyone meets for drinks round the vast fireplace built, like the other 26 in the property (there's nothing like bathing with a roaring fire in the bathroom, or going to

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REBECCA GOSSELIN/BEAUTIFUL PLACES



### SPLENDID ISOLATION

Clockwise from above: the Tree House has a bed made from a complete tree; canoeing along the misty lake in the morning; autumnal colours in the forest





## RUSTIC IDYLL

In 1903, *The New York Times* reported: "There are nearly a score of buildings at Lake Kora... each is of rustic design with the interior furnishings and fittings embodying all the comforts and luxuries of a rich man's home." Clockwise from above: the mirror-like waters of Lake Kora; the drawing room, where guests can gather for drinks, a game of roulette or pool, or to relax by the enormous fireplace; the main lodge

sleep by firelight), with the local granite boulders, smoothed by glaciers. The library includes books signed by Ulysses S. Grant.

The original design was by William West Durant, architect of many of the Great Camps. Durant sold to Lt Governor Woodruff and, when he died in 1913, his Camp Sagamore neighbour Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt bought it from the Woodruff estate. He sold to Francis and Mabel Garvan a year later, prior to dying on the *Lusitania*. Vanderbilt had booked on to the *Titanic*, then cancelled; but fate had marked him for a watery grave. He was unable to swim, but he gave his life belt to a lady. Surviving passenger Oliver P. Bernard recorded that Vanderbilt "stood there like the personification of sportsmanlike coolness... He was the figure of a gentleman waiting unconcernedly for a train." After a fire in 1915, Lake Kora was redesigned by the distinguished architect John Russell Pope, with interiors by a British naval captain, Charles C. Hiscoe.

Their halcyon rusticity has been maintained by Ann Mallinckrodt, who bought Lake Kora in 1982, and the current owner Mark Palmer, a New Zealand property magnate, who has made it available for rental. To stay there is to wander on the baseball field where the Yale and Harvard varsity teams played, to paddle in 100-year-old canoes, to see the original murals in the Indian bedroom.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oscar Wilde came to the Adirondacks to reconnect with nature. Best of all is to stand and stare at the noble trees, their leaves whispering in the breeze; to swim free in the warm shallow lake waters that freeze solid in winter, to hike, to mountain bike, even play roller hockey, for sport was, and is, an essential part of the adventure. Lake Kora is truly the Great Outdoors. □



VANITY FAIR TRAVELS TO...

## LAKE KORA

## WAY TO GO

Lake Kora is a five-hour drive from New York. The swankiest way to arrive is by helicopter, but save \$1,200 and take the Montreal train (below) from Penn Station, NYC, to Albany. It is one of the world's most glorious train rides (sit on the left), up the mighty Hudson River from the sea to its source at Lake Tear of the Clouds, near Lake Kora. At Albany, hire a car and drive past lakes and through beautiful forests: the journey, which takes about two and a half hours, is a dramatic prelude to your arrival.



**THE SKINNY** Lake Kora can accommodate up to 25 guests, in 17 bedrooms, in seven buildings, in 1,000 acres with three contiguous lakes, seven hiking trails and 20 cossetting staff. It is available July-October from \$19,980 nightly for one to 14 guests and \$660 per night for each additional guest inclusive of activities, food, snacks (you are never more than 25ft from a secret cupboard with jars of M&Ms) and Wi-Fi. Alcohol, massage, tennis coaching, fly fishing and gratuities are extra. Visit [beautiful-places.com](http://beautiful-places.com) or email [lakekora@beautiful-places.com](mailto:lakekora@beautiful-places.com)

**DO** go to the Adirondack Museum — it is an excellent record of the wilderness and the history of the Great Camps.

**DON'T** forget a waterproof. Weather in the Adirondacks is changeable, and ranges from a sunny 26°C to sudden spectacular thunderstorms.

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