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## STARS OVER BLACHFORD LAKE

*Story by Anne Z. Cooke and Photos by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld*

Ranking Blachford Lake Lodge has never been easy.

Creative, rustic, “one man’s folly,” and gold-star luxury are just a few of the adjectives that befuddled lodging associations have applied to this remarkable eco-lodge, deep in the heart of Canada’s Northwest Territories. And it’s that last adjective -- luxury – that misses the mark.



*The winter sun on the eastern horizon greets early risers at Blachford Lake Lodge, Canada's Northwest Territories.*

Yet it's just how repeat guests -- travelers who've drunk the Kool-Aid -- describe this deliciously inviting hilltop oasis. It's certainly not London luxury, according to English artist Diana Pullman, on her second day at the lodge.

"The difference is we're in the wilderness here, off the grid," she said, knocking the snow off her boots. "Log lodges don't need Persian rugs and gold-framed paintings to be special," she pointed out, curling up next to the wood stove, where we were drying our socks.

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

Flying on a ski-plane from Yellowknife and landing on the frozen lake, we were greeted by a snowmobiler hauling a sled. Beyond him came the welcome committee, a half-dozen smiling Gen Y guides swaddled in thick jackets and wool hats, young adults who bustled about, sorting the luggage and checking our names off a list.



*The lounge, plus dining room, bar, library corner, sofas and wood stoves, makes a single gathering place.*

Volunteers hired for two-month stints from a half-dozen foreign countries, they were as eager as we were to be there, experiencing a true sub-arctic winter. They weren't what I expected, but it was impossible to ignore their enthusiasm and energy, talking all the way as they escorted us up the hill.

"Here, let me carry your backpack," said Adrian Allen from Australia, pointing out the skating rink in the cove below, the circular hilltop trails and the Nordic skis and poles stacked on the rack near the front door.



*Off-the-grid lodges, like Blachford Lake Lodge need a lake, for float and ski plane deliveries, piped water and sports activities.*

"It's this way to the teepee, around the back, and that way to the sauna," said Maude Bergeron-Lambert, from Quebec who waited on the hilltop, ready with a brief orientation. "Your room is the big one upstairs, where Kate and Will, the "royals," stayed when they were here."

Looking back to the lake below, where our transportation – an uninsulated Twin Otter with fold down seats -- picked up speed, lifted off and disappeared over the endless forest, I suddenly felt alone. The fact that the rarely-visited Northwest Territories (one of Canada's three northern territories) contain 520,000 square-miles of mountains, lakes and canyons, twice the size of Texas, was sobering. It didn't take the 28 of us guests very long to introduce themselves.



*View from the hill of arriving and departing guests and their plane, a Twin Otter, connecting in Yellowknife.*

Ray, in the room down the hall, compared it to the speed with which he made friends as a twelve year old at summer camp. As for me, this four-day getaway felt like a country house party of yore – think *Downton Abbey* – with the duke’s good friends gathering for fresh air, bird shooting, trout fishing and candlelit dinners.

There were differences, of course. Candles were thin on the ground and there were no silk draperies, crystal chandeliers or marble-tiled bathrooms. Also absent were minibars and television along with 24-hour room service, air conditioning and intermittent internet access.

With no roads, no cars and no traffic, the only sound was the wind; the only essentials, the fresh air, the trees and the lake. With stacks of equipment available at no charge -- Nordic skis, snowshoes, ice skates and hockey sticks – and a hole in the ice for fishing, there was no reason not to be outdoors.

The most popular sport were snowshoe hikes on a series of signed trails. These began at the lodge and looped away over the hilltop, through the trees, beside the meadows and back. Clumping around at a moderate pace on what look like homemade tennis rackets was both the easiest and the most fun. It also added comic relief each time one of us toppled over into a snowbank.

Hockey fans put on skates and headed to the pond (a small bay where kayaks dock in the summer). 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 circular and looped 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 unknown muscles. A shorter track curved in and out of the adjacent coves, a bonus for multi-tasking photographers.

Not everything depended on aerobics. We joined the igloo building session, a chance to prove you were handy with a saw, cutting blocks from hard snow and angled the edges fit into a dome shape. Not to mention escapes to the hot-tub, the sauna, and the teepee, where we gathered roast marshmallows over a campfire.

The teepee, canvas with traditional poles, a smoke-vent and a flap-style door, stood on a north-facing ridge with a view of the nightly aurora borealis. A ghostly ribbon of green it rose in the sky, shape-shifted as the minutes passed then slowly faded. Though sightings are never guaranteed, Blachford Lake Lodge's unique location under the magnetic north pole, makes viewing chances better than most.

For "off the grid" lodges like Blachford Lake Lodge, the biggest challenge are the essentials: electric power, water and heat, according to General Manager Sarah Van Stiphout, one of four paid employees on hand (others are based in Yellowknife).

"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."

Thirty-odd years later, environmental sustainability has created an eco-smart model that would work anywhere. 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



*Power from solar panels, a wind turbine, five sets of batteries and a generator makes the lodge self-sufficient.*



*It's warmer than usual; five degrees Fahrenheit and sunny, says Maude. Perfect for a snowshoe hike.*

shower and stay warm in your shirtsleeves. You can ask Chef Carla to make a blender-whipped smoothie and never notice that hidden machinery is 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 backup diesel generator, 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 waste water to grey water for use in gardens and shrubbery. Meanwhile, a waterless process installed below the main floor converts solid waste to compost.

The “contemporary” open spaces that Pullman admired circulate warm air and bring guests and volunteers together on the ground floor, a single space that encompasses the bar, dining tables, sofas, the library corner and the open-counter kitchen room. Before you know it you’ll be drinking the Kool-Aid too, proof that wilderness and luxury can go hand in hand.



*The library corner, a quiet spot beside a wood stove, in a popular retreat.*

## THE NITTY GRITTY

The lodge is open in summer and winter, whenever the plane can land (on solid ice or open water). Five rooms and five cabins are outfitted to sleep four or more, in king, queen and/or bunk beds. Child rates depend on the season and date. All meals are included, and are served buffet style; two chefs prepare everything on site, from breads to salads and main dishes. Summer activities include kayaking, canoeing, swimming and hiking. Fly a commercial plane to Yellowknife and spend the first night there, with a lodge pick-up the next day. For more see [www.blachfordlakelodge.com](http://www.blachfordlakelodge.com).

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

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