



Exploring Malibu of the North

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Trailer Boating in Muskoka, Ontario

Own a runabout or personal watercraft enables boaters to do unique explorations not possible with larger cruisers. The only additional equipment needed is a good tow vehicle and trailer. This way, you can launch wherever there's a handy ramp to embark on new trailer boating adventures.

One of the most enjoyable and memorable is touring in Muskoka, Ontario. Dubbed "the Malibu of the North" by the New York Times, Muskoka has attracted the rich and famous since the latter 1800's. Its cottaging celebrities include Martin Short, Steven Spielberg, Goldie Hawn, Kurt Russell, Tom Hanks, Harry Hamlin, Cindy Crawford, Ted Rogers, Kenny G, Bill Murray, Kevin O'Leary, along with many sports and business luminaries. During the summer, the Muskoka population swells as tens of thousands of pretty well heeled cottagers take advantage of fun in the sun on its clear and sparkling waters.

THE BIG THREE

Situated in the granite terrain of Central Ontario's Canadian Shield, Muskoka is about two hours north of the Greater Toronto Area. It's easily accessible by tow vehicle from the four-lane Highways 11 and 400. This most renown of Canada's numerous summer playgrounds counts over 1,600 lakes, the big three being Lakes Muskoka, Rosseau and Joseph. These popular bodies of water feature deep, clear waters and rocky shores. They make an ideal and picturesque trailer boating destination, as I've discovered on several Sea-Doo watercraft expeditions.



Fancy boathouses dot Muskoka shores.

Most lakes in Muskoka are land-bound, but navigable waters connect the big three, plus two smaller ones, Little Lake Joseph and Portage Lake. Lakes Muskoka, Rosseau and Joseph are also dotted with many islands of various sizes and shapes, creating countless sheltered channels and quiet inlets. That's a lot of waterway to enjoy, given that the combined length (approximately, as the loon flies) of the big three is... Lake Muskoka - 25 kilometres; Lake Rosseau - 17 kilometres; and Lake Joseph - 22 kilometres. For trailer boaters, these attributes provide many choices for cruising opportunities along 100's of kilometres of scenic shoreline and placid backwaters.



Architectural eye candy.



Lake Rosseau Lighthouse.

PUBLIC LAUNCHES

There are several pre-requisites for a good trailer boating destination. One is a serviceable launch site with available docks, parking and bathroom facilities. Fortunately, the big three Muskoka lakes are well equipped in this regard. About a dozen public (free) launches are scattered around the big three, although more of them are located on Lake Muskoka than the other two. In addition, there are several marinas with gas on each lake, most with their own pay-as-you-go launch.

MUSKOKA WHARF

For most of our Muskoka Sea-Doo tours, we hit the water at Muskoka Wharf, located at the southeast end of Muskoka Bay (alternatively called "Gravenhurst Bay") in the Town of Gravenhurst. Muskoka Wharf is an ambitious development that includes restaurants, shops, condos and the Muskoka Boat & Heritage Centre. It also serves as the homeport for the cruise steamships Segwin and Wenonah II and is the convenient site of our usual staging hotel, the Residence Inn by Marriott. Not only does the Residence Inn by Marriott provide us with premier lodgings and amenities, but it's also a stone's throw away from multiple, concrete launch ramps, two double-wide and one of single width. A bonus is that Muskoka Wharf Marine is located adjacent to the ramps too. It pumps gas and offers repair service as well as boat, PWC and other watersports rentals. The launching and parking are free at these Muskoka Wharf launches, just be sure to ask at the hotel or marina where it's best to park, especially if you are staying overnight.

NAVIGABLE WATERS

Another pre-requisite for a good trailer boating destination is navigable waters. In this respect, Lakes Muskoka, Rosseau and Joseph are excellent for cruising and as already mentioned, interconnected. The main routes are well charted and designated with channel markers and buoys. Most of the water is deep with few obstructions. Local cottagers who don't want their boats damaged anymore than you do yours have installed floating markers to indicate any rocks and shoals.

Navigability also means it's easy to find your way, and once again these Muskoka Lakes deliver. Before starting and even if you rely on GPS, I recommend investing some time in studying both marine charts and road maps. Orienting yourself will provide a clear picture of the shape and position of the three big

lakes, how they connect, and where the key towns and roads are, including Gravenhurst (south end of Lake Muskoka), Port Carling (between Lake Muskoka and Lake Rosseau), Rosseau (north end of Lake Rosseau), Port Sandfield (at the southern connection of Lakes Rosseau and Joseph) and Bala (west side of Lake Muskoka). That accomplished, it's hard to get lost, especially if you're not too proud to stop at any cottage dock to ask for directions. Also, there's normally enough other boat traffic on the water that, when in doubt about where to go, it's easy to play follow the leader.

One other aspect of trouble-free navigation is crucial for trailer boats. That's being able to avoid rough water as much as possible on a windy day. Although these Muskoka Lakes are decent size, they are broken up by their irregular shorelines with plenty of points, bays and coves. These terrain features provide good windbreaks, as do the many islands, so one can always avoid the more open parts of the lakes by hugging the shore and cruising protected channels. Also, the directional orientation of the lakes is northwest to southeast, so they are less affected by the predominantly west winds than are east-west configured lakes or wide open bodies of water like Georgian Bay or the Great Lakes.

RIVER ROUTES

In addition to the lakes, there are three rivers to know about. One is the Muskoka River, which runs east from the eastern shore of Lake Muskoka. It runs about eight kilometres or so to The Town of Bracebridge. The Lake Muskoka end is clearly marked with buoys, but be advised that the river is a slow speed zone the entire way to town so the round trip takes some time to complete.

The other two rivers are connectors between the big three. One is the Indian River, running from the northern end of Lake Muskoka through Port Carling to Lake Rosseau. It too is a slow speed zone for about six kilometres, but that journey is broken up by the town itself and the Port Carling locks (There are two of them side by side - the larger one is staff operated; the smaller self-operated. You lock through one or the other to get from lake to lake). The other watercourse is the Joe River, which connects Lakes Rosseau and Joseph and has only two brief slow zones in its almost four kilometres.



Steamship Segwin in Gravenhurst Narrows.

EYE CANDY

A third pre-requisite for a good trailer boating destination is unique sights to see. The big three Muskoka lakes offer a plethora of natural and man-made eye grabbers. Their shores are a picturesque mix of granite cliffs, dense forests, sparkling waterfalls and Group of Seven scenery. There are two iconic lighthouses that can be seen from miles away. One is at the south end of Lake Muskoka, marking the entrance to Gravenhurst Narrows (also known as “Lighthouse Narrows”). The other is on Lake Rosseau, marking a shoal just south of the Village of Rosseau.

For first timers, it's these and other man-made structures that garner the most attention. My first impression was that there must be more square footage of boathouse here than most lakes have of cottage. And ‘house’ is the descriptive part of that boathouse word. No mere marine garages, these. I'm talking double storey, two to eight slip structures built right on the water. One especially tall boathouse even accommodates a sailboat, mast up and all!

Most often, these boathouses replicate the adjacent ‘cottage’ – itself a misnomer if there ever was one, judging by the size and substance of these lakeside mansions. Muskoka cottages are of every conceivable style, configuration and size (some of 10,000 or more square feet). This eye candy is as spectacular as it gets – like cruising through the pages of an architecture magazine. Each of the big three lakes boast its share of this primo real estate, but the most impressive edifices tend to be found on the more recently settled northern shores of Lakes Rosseau and Joseph.

Yet, despite the number of cottages on the big three lakes, plenty of natural shoreline remains. In part, that's because many cottages are nestled into the midst of oversized and otherwise unspoiled lots. Surprisingly, there's also a fair amount of privately owned but undeveloped waterfront. At the end of Lake

Who to Contact

Ontario Tourism - www.gorideontario.ca
Muskoka Tourism - www.discovermuskoka.ca

My Favourite Restaurants with Docks

Boston Pizza, Gravenhurst (Lake Muskoka)
Farmer's Market, Rosseau (Lake Rosseau)
– Friday only, July & August
Gordon Bay Marina, Portage Bay (Lake Joseph)
– homemade burger stand
Crossroads Pub & Grill, Rosseau (Lake Rosseau)
– top of hill ½ km north of municipal docks
Turtle Jacks, Port Carling (Indian River)
– on west side of locks

Where We Stay

Residence Inn by Marriott, Gravenhurst. (705) 687-6600 or www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/yqari-residence-inn-gravenhurst-muskoka-wharf/. This premium hotel with a kitchen in every suite also offers hot & cold complimentary breakfast, fitness centre, indoor pool, whirlpool and free parking for trucks and trailers.

Muskoka's East Bay, there's even a huge tract of wilderness shoreline that's part of Hardy Lake Provincial Park. So as busy and populated as these Muskoka Lakes can be, they still have oodles of natural appeal.

CHOOSE YOUR CRUISE

Speaking of busy, I've found the best time to explore the Muskoka Lakes is during the week, when launch and boat traffic is lighter. On prime summer weekends, you really have to keep a sharp eye out a full 360° as countless boats of all sizes criss-cross the waterways. But extra vigilance is a small price to pay for a trailer boat ride that will have you exclaiming to your friends: “Boy oh boy, you shoulda seen these Muskoka mansions...talk about outta this world!”

I've explored Lakes Muskoka, Rosseau and Joseph in various ways. By Sea-doo watercraft, I've embarked from Muskoka Wharf for a day ride of 200 kilometres or more, taking in the highlights of all three. I've also done multi day rides consisting of more leisurely reconnoitres of each lake on its own, trailering from my lodgings at The Residence Inn by Marriott to a different public launch to put in for each day. And I've trailered to Muskoka for shorter afternoon and evening outings on part of one of lake or another.

Whatever your choice, you'll have a memorable excursion on Muskoka waters. Trailer boating gives you the flexibility to visit many places you can't get to or see as effectively except by water. So why not trailer beyond your usual comfort zone and visit the Malibu of the North! •

Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Sea-Doo), Gateway Powersport & Marine, and Triton Trailers. For more Sea-Doo tours, visit Craig's web site: www.intrepidcottager.com.