



# Renting Responsibly in Cottage Country

A Guide for Cottage Owners



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Renting out the cottage has always been a great alternative to having the place sit empty while not in use. And now that ownership comes with a much heftier cost in terms of property taxes and maintenance, for many it is the only way to continue to enjoy the cottage while taking care of the upkeep and inevitable renovations and repairs.

It has never been easier to rent out. Platforms such as Home Away, Canada Stays, Trip Advisor and Airbnb make it a simple process to list a cottage, post some photos and enticing text, then sit back and wait for the income to roll in.

However, before you even start to think about the new dock, deck or Bunkie you could build with the revenue, stop for a moment and consider what it means to get into this business.

Yes, it is a business, because the moment you accept money in exchange for accommodation, you become part of the travel and tourism industry and accept the responsibilities that come with it.

This short guide explains some of those responsibilities.



## The nature of rental guests

The rental demographic has changed markedly in the past ten years. Although there are certainly guests who are experienced in cottage country living, many have never had the pleasure of hearing a loon, or a water pump running in the night, or been exposed to the way sound carries across the water, or the speed with which a mouse can cross a threshold if a screen door is left open.

They often have a romantic notion of sitting on a dock as the sun goes down, wine glass in hand, enjoying the serenity of an evening – then complain because of passing seadoos or wakeboats that disturb the peace. Or they freak out because there are ants, mosquitoes and bats, and then a child sees a water snake or even worse, comes out of the water with a leech firmly attached to a thigh.

What to us is part of the fabric of cottage country and makes it the place we yearn for in the depths of winter, can become a scary and inhospitable place for some city dwellers who are ill-prepared for their stay.

Whereas rental guests in the past were generally self-reliant and tolerant of the shortfalls of a cottage, today's demographic are much more demanding with higher expectations than ever before. They need more hand-holding, more instructions and more education on what to expect from their stay in cottage country.

The responsibility for paving the way to a great vacation, for keeping neighbours happy and for ensuring guests have realistic expectations lies with the cottage owners/hosts. Those who are not willing to work at making the experience a good one for themselves, their guests and their lake community should think twice about entering the cottage rental industry.



## Neighbour Relations

How do your neighbours feel about your rental plans? Have you told them you are renting out? Are they likely to be welcoming to your guests or create friction?

These are some of the questions you need to consider when you start your rental business, because keeping quiet about it is not an option. As soon as your first guests roll up with their excited kids, barking dogs and in general happy-clappy-we-are-on-vacation mode, they are going to know. Rather than surprise them, take some time to talk to them, hear their concerns and let them know how responsibly you plan on renting the place.

These are the most common concerns your neighbours may have, so addressing them upfront will help enormously to allay their fears. Show them you have thought of everything that might occur and offer reassurance that you have systems in place to avoid

- **Overcrowding**

The #1 fear expressed by neighbours of rental cottages is that the home will be rented to large groups of young people intent on partying. It is a valid concern as the press love to unearth stories about these events happening. In fact it's a rare occurrence but it is still important that you screen your rental guests and know who will be at your property at any time. Tell your neighbours your occupancy limits and how you plan on avoiding overcrowding.

- **Noise issues**

People are on vacation and it's understandable they will be excited, exuberant and often pretty noisy. Year-round residents in lakefront locations are often retired and the peace and tranquility is important to them so just share that you will make your guests aware of any local night-time noise restrictions and to request that outdoor music is kept to a minimum.



- **Straying and barking dogs**

Introducing new dogs into an established neighbourhood where the resident pooches might wander at will, may be a challenge. This could be a bigger issue if your neighbours have a small pet that is used to its territory, and strange (and much larger) dog or dogs arrive next door on a frequent basis. You will need to be sensitive to this and possibly rethink your pet-friendly policy if there are likely to be issues.

Dogs in unfamiliar surroundings will mark their territory as well as checking out the new terrain. Neighbours will lose patience quickly if visiting dogs leave their lasting mark that doesn't get picked up, bark incessantly or go on digging expeditions.

- **Property Lines**

For permanent residents, property boundaries are usually known and respected. However, if guests are not shown where those boundaries are, problems can arise. Think about ways of making sure they know where they can go, what outdoor items they can use, and where they can park their cars. Blocking the neighbours' access, even inadvertently, can create friction.

- **Attracting the Wildlife**

In country areas where bears and raccoons are in more abundance, it's important that you have clear instructions on what your guests should do with their garbage. It's not uncommon for visitors to deliberately leave garbage outside in order to attract the wildlife so they get a viewing opportunity. Until they have had a bear on the deck pawing at a screen door they won't know how dangerous this can be so make sure you educate them well.

- **Issues of Respect**

When happy guests arrive on vacation they often want to integrate themselves into the community and make friends with all the neighbours. However, the transient



nature of the rental population can have the opposite effect as permanent residents are not always open to overtures of friendship from the guests next door.

It could take as little as a children's ball game getting out of hand, or a radio being played too loudly, for the neighbours to make a complaint. Add in a campfire being lit in the daytime and the dog being washed in the lake, and you have a recipe for a major neighbor issue.

## Safety & Security

One of the first things to take care of when starting with cottage rental is to insure the property for short-term rental activity. This is not the same as residential rental (long term) so if you are not sure, contact your broker.

Please do not even think of renting out without being adequately insured. All it may take is a guest to slip on a protruding tree root or dive off the dock into shallow water, or take out a canoe that is leaking, for a liability claim to be lodged. Regardless of whether you think you are at fault or not, the resulting legal fees could be life altering.

Look at all aspects of the property and assess for safety. Decks and docks are often the most at-risk areas with the potential of rotting deck boards to cause injury. All deck railings should meet building code, indoor and outdoor furniture should be of a good standard, and non-motorised boats in good order. Smoke and CO alarms must be in working order – and not expired, and up-to-date fire extinguishers in place.

Look at what you have stored under the deck or around the property. Piles of lumber, old boats and garden furniture and unlocked sheds, are all areas of concern.

These are just a few of the safety issues to consider before renting.

On the security front, think about the items you would not want guests to use and make sure they are securely stored, boat keys are kept out of sight, and codes to lock boxes changed frequently.



## Set Your Guest Criteria

Not every guest is right for every cottage, and although it's tempting to accept every booking that comes your way, getting a good match of guest and cottage is more important.

Decide who your ideal guests are and market to them. For most owners it's family groups, and for larger properties, multi-generation families seems to be the best to attract.

While you've probably had a family party at some time and had 30 people to stay, it is never advisable to suggest that any group larger than can be accommodated in bedrooms, is accepted. This will not limit your potential to rent and it's much easier to manage if you state occupancy as say a maximum of 6 adults + 2 additional children than suggesting the place 'sleeps 12'.

Remember this: Two is romance; four is companionable; six is a get-together and more than 8 could indicate a party.

## Screening Guests

Platforms such as Airbnb allow you to see the reviews potential guests have had from other hosts, which is helpful. However if you advertise on free sites such as Kijiji, you don't have that same opportunity.

The best way to ensure you are getting the right match of guest to your cottage is to talk directly to them, ask exactly what they are looking for in a cottage vacation and discuss the relative merits of your place in terms of their expectations.

If you decide to use an agency to manage your rentals, they are expert at bringing you the guests you want to have, and it's part of the service they provide for the commission you pay. They have experienced every ruse that potential parties use and use a range of methods to screen out the guests that could cause a problem.



## Guest Education

Rental guests are often blamed for all manner of poor behaviour. Late night noise, operating watercraft in an unsafe and irresponsible manner, and general rowdiness are a few of the complaints that have been levelled at rental groups. It is easy to lay the blame on the transient rental population but this generalisation seems unfair since without the benefit of enough statistics it's impossible to discriminate behavior between casual visitors and newer residents.

We may not be able to change the views our fellow cottage owners have about renters in general. However, we can help educate those who stay in our properties in the values of cottage life and cottage living. Teaching them the etiquette of life on the lake may be the key and this can be done sensitively in pre-arrival information as well as the cottage manual.

Don't expect your guests to know anything. Let them know everything they should about this very unique way of living, because it is very different from their day-to-day routines. As owners, we become so familiar with the differences it's as simple as exchanging winter clothes for shorts and sandals on the first day of spring weather. For newcomers to cottage country, it can be a complete culture change

Create a Guest Guide with a section called Life on the Lake - a Primer. This should cover the etiquette of cottage living and include sections on:

- noise levels and restrictions on outdoor music;
- safe and responsible operation of boats;
- pet management - not allowing straying or barking;
- respect for neighbours and their property and a description of the property boundaries;
- campfire instructions, including the use of fireworks;
- driving responsibly in cottage country - particularly on narrow cottage roads;
- the mysteries of cottage plumbing;
- garbage management and disposal.





Here's an example:

**Noise levels:** Sound travels across water in ways it never does in the city. On a quiet morning or sultry dusk, normal voices can be heard a kilometre or more away. Take a moment after you are settled in to sit quietly on the dock, and hear the sounds of lakefront living. The call of a loon, slap of a beaver tail, hum of a water pump and laughter of children. The thrum of a motor as the sunset fisherman brings his boat into a dock. As you listen, bear in mind that the noises you make will be equally well heard across the water.

Shouting, dogs barking, loud arguments and loud music will all be shared with neighbours. Please respect they are all on vacation too and have a right to a peaceful time.

Please keep noise levels down particularly when playing music outside. Outdoor noise must cease or be kept to an absolute minimum after 11pm.

When educating guests, avoid the temptation to write a list of rules, and just offer friendly advice instead. They are more likely to respect what you are saying.

Being a responsible owner means you have to do quite a bit of work, but this will be to your benefit. You will have happier guests, your neighbours will be more welcoming and accepting, and you will feel more confident in your decision to rent the cottage.