

TRAVEL + LEISURE

THE HOTELS ISSUE

61

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PLACES TO STAY**

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THE MOST OUT OF
YOUR HOTEL**

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summer classics

The all-American lakefront lodge, reinvented for the 21st century: **BRUCE SCHOENFELD** rediscovers the timeless appeal of lazy afternoons on the water.



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here were no spa treatments at the lake resorts of my 1970's childhood, no sashimi on dinner menus or split-level suites with marble bathrooms. The lakefront hotels we'd visit during driving trips from our New England home felt comfortable, but in retrospect they were far from luxurious. If our room had a television, it was black-and-white. Kids slept on rollaways. Meals were unmemorable.

I didn't care. I loved those stays. I'd wolf down a shrimp cocktail and a burger, then run off to play ball or tag while the grown-ups on the terrace talked and smoked and drank.

What I really loved were the lakes. We lived near the sea, and its endless vista troubled me in some existential way that I was a decade too young to confront. But lakes are framed by shorelines. Their boundaries made me feel secure. I could swim without fearing an undertow, row to an island, and spend hours exploring.

Time at the ocean is informed by the roar and rhythm of the tide, a ceaseless percussion that engenders quiet reflection. Lakes are easier. They're about families and fun and togetherness, easy mornings segueing into afternoons by way of lunch from the grill and a lemonade. I couldn't get enough of it.

Those lakefront hotels felt fundamentally different from the seaside resorts we'd travel to over winter holidays. There was no sense of glitz or glamour at the lakes, I understand now; no celebrity quotient or ambitious décor. They were owned by families and were outfitted like somebody's summer home. Most didn't even have a lobby. They opened for the summer on Memorial Day, catered to families by the week or even the month, then shut their doors before the first frost.

All of that came back to me recently as my wife and I paddled a kayak over a sparkling lake ringed by redwood-size pines in Whitefish, Montana. I live in the middle of the country now, but travel to the coasts, and beyond, frequently. We all do. My sons have been to St.-Tropez and St. John, but they haven't heard the serial slamming of a screen door as the end of breakfast launches a succession of preteens toward the water. They've eaten oceanfront dinners, but haven't felt the sense of expectation as they waited for Saturday movie night under the pines. This summer would be different.

In addition to Montana, we visited properties in Wisconsin, Maine, and Texas. We paddled kayaks over shimmering water and I watched 12-year-old facsimiles of me, circa 1973, hesitate on the far end of a rope swing, gobble up cheeseburgers, and absentmindedly scratch mosquito bites in the twilight because they were having too much fun to go inside. I also had an exceptional alfresco massage and discovered several ways in which a flat-screen

TV can fit neatly into a decorative scheme appropriate for a summer cottage. Time moves in different increments when you're at the lake, so the bike ride I took in rural Wisconsin seemed to stretch into eternity, while an afternoon spent reading in a hammock perched above Lake Austin in Texas came and went in what seemed like the span of a single lemonade.

One moment in particular will stay with me. At Migis Lodge, on Maine's Lake Sebago, I set out alone to explore, just as I did as a boy. I took a boat to a nearby island, a mile or so offshore, then hiked through the woods until I found an ideal spot. As far as I could tell at that moment, I was the only person alive on earth. It was so quiet, my breathing sounded like a waterfall. When I closed my eyes, I was a kid again.

Below: A pier at Wandawega Lake Resort. Opposite: One of the secluded cabins at Migis Lodge.





Above: The living room at Lake Austin Spa Resort. Below: The lodge's covered boat dock.

I sat under a tree for maybe 20 minutes before I began to have the adult sensation that I should be heading back, in case my family was looking for me or a work e-mail was waiting in my inbox. I stood and brushed the detritus of the forest floor off my swimsuit, then started back toward the boat. As I did, it almost seemed that I could hear a ringing bell announcing dinnertime in some dimly remembered lodge, and my mother's voice calling to me through the years.

Here are four modern-day versions of the classic American lakefront hotel, each with a distinct personality, where the days are as carefree, and the nights as wonderfully ritualized, as when I was a kid.

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Lake Austin Spa Resort

Most guests here come for the 25,000-square-foot spa, which is renowned for its treatments. They take classes in meditation, mind-body balance, and restorative yoga; attend lectures by authors or former Olympians; release months of accumulated stress with water treatments or early morning hikes. The spa would be worth visiting in the Gobi desert, but the presence of the lake informs the entire resort. All 40 of the rooms are strung along a bluff that overlooks it, and the public spaces of the main building—which is laid out along the shore like an extended ranch house—are oriented toward it.

A former college athletic trainer with a master's in exercise physiology who worked in hospitality for Four Seasons and Rosewood, general manager Tracy York has run the property as an amalgam of those two disciplines since shortly after the resort opened 16 years and several expansions ago. She's ubiquitous on the grounds, greeting every guest by first name, spreading a sense of preternatural serenity with her Texan-inflected chatter, acting as equal parts



concierge and life coach. "It's not having to worry about your makeup and hair, not having to be who you have to be in the real world," she says of the ambience she tries to create. "Like visiting your best friend's lake house." It works. The open-plan eating area is so casual, some guests arrive in their robes. lakeaustin.com. \$\$\$\$