



# Riverbank spectacular

*Bellini goes camping — double-wide*

**A** FEW YEARS AGO, the ruffians who camped at the Hidden Valley campground near Tweed, Ontario, painted old cars to look like OPP vehicles, then blew them up just for fun. Now, you're more likely to see naked bears frolicking poolside with their predator-sized Thermoses at the newly renamed Riverside RV Campground. Things sure have changed.

Credit for that goes directly to new owners Clint St Germain and Derek Meade, two blue-eyed blonds who take pride in the amount of

work that was required to rescue this beautiful site. Established 40 years ago as a family business, the campground was slowly turned into a disgraceful shantytown by the previous owners. Meanwhile, Derek and Clint were looking for a campsite to call their own; after six years of searching, they came across the listing and “got that rush, like when you just kind of know,” Derek says. They bought it and the cleanup began. They filled tons of dumpsters with tons of garbage. They groomed, trimmed,

fixed and overhauled everything. “We’re here to stay,” Clint says.

“This area is very rural, but it’s been transitioning,” Derek says. Nearby Tweed has a population of about 1,200 people, but it tries hard. On the weekend of my visit, the second annual Elvis Festival is taking place; legend has it he was spotted here once. Tweed also boasts North America’s smallest jailhouse. Even incarceration is charming here.

It’s a three-hour drive from Toronto to Riverside, where I am put up in a two-bedroom double-wide cabin with full amenities. It’s hard not to admire the facilities in general. The trees are planted in rows. The grass is cut. The picnic tables are dusted so they’re free of cobwebs. “We’re pretty type-A when it comes to that,” Derek says. The tent sites are beautiful, and the rent-by-the-season sites along the riverbank are spectacular. The stunning deep, tall forest is almost upstaged by a gorgeous outcropping of pink soapstone. There isn’t an ugly acre anywhere.

Derek and Clint have done a lot, but they don’t do it alone. They have help, including groundskeeper Willie, who sports the tightest body I’ve ever seen on a 53-year-old, and Pooch, their wacky events coordinator. Pooch hosts a bonfire every Friday night; it is very social, and I love it when some campy camper jazzes up the fire by tossing on a packet of salts, which burn bright-blue flames.

On Saturday afternoon, I attend a clothing-optional pool party. The guys decide to serve complimentary Bellinis in my honour, which is sweet of them. I grab one and work my way through the crowd. There are about 50 guys in attendance, mostly over 30 and mostly from Toronto, Ottawa or Peterborough. I meet a guy who says, “Bellini? From *Kids in the Hall*? I used to jerk off over you.” Call me old-fashioned, but no one ever says anything that nice to me when I’m in the city.

That night Pooch hosts a Roman gladiator and toga party at the clubhouse, Granny’s, which is a riot of dollar-store chic. I consider wrapping myself in a bed sheet, but Derek and Clint deliver a toga right to my door. I put it on and look like Bluto in *Animal House*. Almost every single person at the event is in costume — this is a crowd that dives right in. The guys tell me about their next event, a *MASH* weekend, complete with helicopter rides.

Of course, I am wasted by Sunday. Luckily, the Riverside is a beautiful environment for recuperation. I sit listening to the wild turkeys clucking across the way as the sun sets on the mirrored surface of the lazy Skootamatta River. I’ll be back. After two years in operation, the Riverside already boasts 25 seasonal sites, but another 40 are still available and going fast. Why wouldn’t they? This is 100 acres of sheer natural beauty. And togas. **E**