

BACKWOODS BARE-ASSED



DREW ROWSOME BRAVES THE WILDERNESS AND DISCOVERS A SMALL TOWN EMBRACING A HOMO INVASION

Tweed, Ontario, is a small town of 1,300 people where Rob Ford and his ilk would feel right at home drinking beer and protecting their pale skin from the sun. Lately the town has been abuzz about a new adults-only gay campground, where clothing is often replaced by sunscreen. The surprising thing is how good-natured and non-homophobic the prurient speculation is. Riverside RV Campground's co-owner Derek Meade laughs before admitting that he and his partner in life and business, Clint St Germain, were nervous about their reception. The campground they purchased last year was a rundown party central that hosted mud-drags, impromptu fireworks and the annual gleeful torching of a car painted to look like an official OPP vehicle.

"I'm not exaggerating," says Meade. "It was a wild place." So wild that neighbours who complained about the noise were threatened with having their homes torched — while they were in them. Even the OPP was reluctant to venture into the melee. "For that first summer, if we had to go into the camp after dark, we went in a car with the doors locked and cellphones in our laps," says Meade. "But we didn't take any crap, didn't hesitate to call the OPP and have them evicted. At the end of the season we ended all seasonal contracts and closed for renovations."

The renovations were extensive; more than seven tons of scrap metal had to be removed and most of the infrastructure needed a lot of work. Fortunately, St Germain is a contractor by trade. "When the workers — and we made a point of hiring local — arrived with their backhoes and trucks, I think they were expecting tutus and us flitting around," Meade says. Instead, the men earned grudging respect when they proved as butch and hardworking as any other contractor.

"We opened June 3, 2011, as a gay camp



The pool awaits.



Socializing on The Strip.

ground," Meade says proudly. "We have large sites that are well treed — it's a 40-year-old-growth forest. The sites average 35 by 70 feet and we have 100 acres to work with, so we don't have to cram people in like sardines. People don't realize that we're only two hours out of the city, but it's wilderness. Very rural and pristine. The stars are unbelievable. It's a real camping experience — but a gay one."

There are other unbelievable sights: large sections of the park, including the pool, are clothing optional. "We're not trying to set up David Balfour Park in our backyard," laughs Meade. "It's not a bathhouse in the woods. Guys do hook up on the trails, but as long as they're not disturbing anyone else. We don't have specific play areas, but when gay men are naked..." Meade himself is somewhat shy and wears a suit in the pool when guests are around. "There's no pressure. It's a comfortable environment, not a sexual one. Those who do take their clothes off are appreciative that they can." And they probably wish that

Meade would as well.

There is a section of the clothing optional area nicknamed The Strip — not for the nudity but because the sites back up against a ridge of soapstone deposits and natural granite. "We had two Frenchmen from Ottawa, and they set tea lights all over the rock and strung patio lanterns around their site," remembers Meade. "The whole site just twinkled. I got goose flesh seeing it. That's what gay men do; they go in and make it even better than it was."

It turns out that the campground's nearest neighbours also believe that gay men make things better. The fear of seeing a willy is worth the tranquility and the removal of their fear of arson. And Tweed, like any other rural town, is starving for tourist dollars, so pink ones are just fine. Outreach to local businesses has gone well, and spotting vacationing homos on the small town's main street is almost commonplace. Meade marvels at the neighbour who showed up bearing a welcoming jar of homemade pickles (surely no double entendre intended) instead of brandishing a threatening pitchfork. "Last year the campers lit a fire to burn everything down," says St Germain. "Now they're setting up tea lights." Redecorating nature and reclaiming redneck central in the process.

Drew Rowsome is an associate editor at fab, and while tea lights and naked men appeal, he is more intrigued by the luxury rental cabin available.



Riverside RV Campground
Open Victoria Day weekend through Thanksgiving
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