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# How 'Heated Rivalry' captured the queer need for travel sanctuaries

**Chris Dong** Special to USA TODAY
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**Members of LGBTQ community face many challenges while traveling**
"Don't just think about your own personal needs when you travel," Bani Amor said discussing the challenges faced by the LGBTQ community while traveling. *Damien Henderson, USA TODAY*

What role does the cottage play in 'Heated Rivalry's' finale?
Why do LGBTQ+ travelers seek secluded destinations historically?
How might 'Heated Rivalry' affect Canadian cottage rentals?
DeeperDive BETA

*Editor's note: This article contains spoilers from "Heated Rivalry" episode 5, "I'll Believe In Anything," and episode 6, "The Cottage."*

For generations, LGBTQ+ people have relied on distance to feel safe. In "Heated Rivalry," the breakout queer hockey series, that distance takes the form of a cottage.

In the final seconds of episode five of Heated Rivalry, the music fades, and the camera tightens around Ilya Rosanov (Connor Storrie) and Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams).

"I'm coming to the cottage," proclaims Rosanov, a brash Russian hockey star. Those five words held the hope that maybe — just maybe — the two could emerge from the shadows of a decade-long secret relationship.

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The series, based on romance novels written by Rachel Reid, has sparked a social media frenzy since its premiere in late November. It's been the little Canadian show that could, permeating popular culture and becoming the most unlikely hit of 2025. In fact, the series' fifth installment, "I'll Believe In Anything," is currently listed as the tenth highest-rated episode in television history on IMDB.

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In the season finale, now streaming on Crave in Canada and HBO Max in the U.S., Rosanov and Hollander retreat for two weeks to a remote cottage in Muskoka, one of Canada's most sought-after waterfront regions – about two hours north of Toronto. The couple embodies an all-too-familiar queer impulse: to seek out temporary sanctuaries. It's a haven to hold hands, exhale, flirt, and even fall in love.

Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander, left, and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in "Heated Rivalry." *Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max*

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At the cottage, our protagonists replace the furtive glances and locker-room tension from earlier episodes with quiet intimacy and words of affirmation. They plan for the future. They express their feelings fully. There is no need to perform.

For the queer community, a gay hotel, a rented beach house, or a seasonal timeshare have all been popular settings that naturally create a buffer from public judgment. These spaces are often located in gay travel destinations, ones that emerged at society's margins in the mid-twentieth century.

Geography played a major role with secluded areas taking hold, such as Provincetown at the edge of Cape Cod, Fire Island's Pines and Cherry Grove, the redwood-lined Russian River, or the desert heat of Palm Springs. The locations were discreet enough, yet still within a few hours' drive of metropolitan areas.

As Michael Waters wrote for The Baffler, "Queer geography is fragile and ever-changing, an invisible landscape that shifts by the decade, as rents rise or as police surveillance increases."

That premise sits at the heart of the Heated Rivalry finale. Outside the cottage, the characters remain hyper-aware of who might be watching. Inside it, they're simply two people who cook, rest, make love, and exist as themselves. The temporary refuge is far removed from public scrutiny.

Rosanov and Hollander—two charismatic, occasionally chaotic leading men — arrive at the cottage eager but apprehensive. That's the beauty of traveling as LGBTQ+ people. Away from home, with no overlapping social circles or professional consequences, two people can live their truth for a little while. Travel can be a rehearsal for the future.

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LGBTQ+ travelers today can rely on queer-led companies to remove the guesswork from planning a safe retreat. A booming ecosystem of specialist advisors and niche tour operators is helping specific segments of the queer community find the perfect trip. For instance, Brand g Vacations focuses on bespoke itineraries primarily for gay men, while Olivia has coordinated cruises and retreats for queer women since 1990. Travelers can also opt for the self-service option by booking a private retreat on Vrbo, Airbnb or a gay-friendly accommodation on Expedia.

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And yes, don't be surprised if cottage rentals across rural Canada spike in the year ahead.

As the first season of Heated Rivalry concludes, the cultural conversation will move on. However, the cottage metaphor will continue, as it has for decades. For Hollander and Rosanov, and thousands of other LGBTQ+ travelers, it's more than an idyllic destination. The cottage is a preview of what might be possible, and a setting for imagining a different life.

*Chris Dong is a freelance reporter who covers travel, specializing in aviation, hotels, credit card rewards, and trends. When he's not on the road, Chris calls Los Angeles home. You can subscribe to his newsletter "Checking in" by clicking here.*

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