



MuskokaTODAY.com

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MAY 29, 2026

MUSKOKA TOURISM SCORING BIG THIS SUMMER WITH POPULARITY OF HIP, HOT AND STEAMY HOCKEY SERIES 'HEATED RIVALRY'

Mark Clairmont | [MuskokaTODAY.com](https://muskokatoday.com)

MUSKOKA — Muskoka's "Heated Rivalry" this summer isn't with Haliburton, but a cottage industry rocket-launched by hockey's hottest international hit love story on Lake Muskoka.

And a \$25,000 a week waterfront rental.

"You can't underscore the importance of the tourism season here in Muskoka," says Val Hamilton, executive director of the 300-member Muskoka Tourism Association. "The summer season is everything for tourism in our region. We do our best to market the summer, because we want to ensure Muskoka stays *the* summer destination."

That it already is.

It's Ontario's third most popular tourism destination behind Toronto and Niagara Falls, according to Tourism Minister Stan Cho who toured Lake Muskoka last week aboard the Wenonah II on its maiden seasonal voyage.



MTA executive director Val Hamilton says Muskoka Tourism's 300 business operators are banking on a big summer with the international popularity of Shane and Illya. PHOTOS Mark Clairmont MuskokaTODAY.com

"The temperatures are starting to kick off and you can kind of feel the season ramp up. Muskoka is nothing without our tourism operators," she said.

"So it's a chance to come together with our municipal leaders, our community champions and our operators who work day in and day out. And for them to have a chance to enjoy a day on the water before Muskoka gets very, very busy. There's nothing better than this."

Hamilton said Muskoka Tourism puts about 25 to 30 per cent of its budget behind summer marketing — adding "we also want to ensure we're driving lots of fall, winter, and spring visitation as well."

I asked her about the shape of tourism generally in Muskoka?

"Our numbers are very strong so far for 2026. Our occupancy is up 3 per cent so far year over year.

"And our booking, our operators are seeing strong pace for the summer as well. So we're anticipating our summer occupancy will hit somewhere around 90 to 92 per cent.

"We have over 100 accommodators in Muskoka — hotels, lodges, hotels, cottage resorts. So when we see them at that 85 per cent plus, we know their visitation is quite high."

And how does this compare with COVID?

“Well, with COVID, actually it was very interesting for Muskoka because we did very well. Everyone was fleeing the city and wanting to come up here, so we had really good numbers at hotels and accommodators.

“While our downtown and our restaurants did suffer significantly during that time, accommodators did quite well.”

‘Heated Rivalry’ hot, hot, hot

But then, Hamilton told members, “we closed (last) year with a little show called ‘Heated Rivalry,’ which took over pop culture” with its hot and steamy Dec. 26 “Cottage” episode filmed in Muskoka.

“And we moved quickly to try and take advantage of that. Just 10 days after the finale, we launched our ‘Come to the Cottage’ campaign across the GTA. With billboards plastered all over with an ice skater on the Arrowhead Park ice skating trail. It was picked up by the CBC, different TikTok creators. And it was even featured on the BBC.

“That momentum created was an incredible opportunity to introduce Muskoka to entirely new audiences” — many of them who want to score a sleep in the same bed star characters Shane and Ilya shared.

“So far this year we’ve had 30,000 visitors to our website from Singapore. Last year, we had 127.”



“That momentum created was an incredible opportunity to introduce Muskoka to entirely new audiences” — many of them who want to score a sleep in the same bed star characters Shane and Ilya shared. PHOTO Heated Rivalry promo

‘Will You Come to My Cottage’

And “this summer we will have our ‘Will You Come to My Cottage’ campaign, showcasing many different ways for visitors to experience cottaging in Muskoka — from glamping in a cosy tent cabin to a luxury cottage rental and family resorts.”

Efforts are already paying off as in past with cottage rental websites listing waterfront properties at staggering prices, including the Barlochan “Heated Rivalry” cottage at the end of Walker’s Point in Muskoka Lakes Township, which reportedly is expected to rent for up to \$25,000 a week at this summer’s peak the next three months, says Jayne’s Cottage rental service.

While mind-boggling money to many Muskokans and summer rental dreamers it’s not unheard of.

A nearby cottage on Old Woman’s Island — where Justin Bieber vacations — was the setting of Edmonton Oilers captain Connor McDavid’s wedding not long ago. Its 14 bedrooms that sleeps 32 goes lists for \$11,500 to \$20,815 CDN PER NIGHT, according to Jayne’s. McDavid has a smaller place nearby — as does ex-Leaf star Mitch Marner of the Las Vegas Golden Knights star and Stanley Cup finalist.

International marketing soaring

“And we’re not slowing down,” Hamilton told the 150 people representing about half of the MTA’s membership.

“We’re already working on an expanded UK marketing effort, following a 27 per cent increase in visitor spending in our region from the UK in 2025 — compared to 2024.

“Last summer we launched our first ‘Muskoka Where Summer feels Canadian’ campaign with billboards across Ontario making Muskoka he iconic summer destination.



Tourism Minister Stan Cho said Muskoka was Ontario's third most popular tourism destination, before accepting a Muskoka gift from Hamilton last week aboard the Wanda II.

The MTA ED that said last year, “we leveraged the district’s \$400,000 contribution into an additional \$208,000 through partnerships, particularly through collaborations with municipalities and their Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT), a mandatory 4 per cent tax on short-term stays under 28-30 days charged on the room portion of your bill before HST.

They also secured an additional \$236,000 in marketing support through grants and strategic partnerships with organizations like Destination Ontario.

“One of our biggest priorities this past year,” said Hamilton, “was growing with Muskoka international presence through travel trade and media relations. We joined a sales mission in the UK and Germany alongside Destination Ontario. We attended Rendezvous Canada, where we met with more than 75 travel trade partners from around the world. These conversations are already paying off. Muskoka’s appearing more frequently in international itineraries and tour operator packages, which is critical because these international visitors are overwhelmingly looking for a travel trade partner.

“We’re also thrilled to be welcoming the executive team next week from Destination Canada, along with representatives from all nine of their key international markets ahead of RVC 2026 (Rendezvous Canada trade fair).”

Following that, MTA will host 20 international delegates, experiencing Muskoka firsthand.

She said the private tourism business organization significantly expanded public relations efforts this year, attending TMac in Vancouver, Go Media Jasper, and IMM in New York City, which Muskoka

Tourism more than 60 meetings with some in North America's top travel journalists.

"And we're seeing real results. Muskoka recently had a full feature in the National Geographic, in the Seattle Times and with upcoming coverage in House and Home magazine."

This week seven international journalists are here, along with another major UK media group arriving later in summer.



Muskoka Chautauqua's Gail Dempsey brought along three of her team, including summer interns Oliva Smith, Meghan Tayloer and staffer Leah Leslie.

"When I meet with media, of course I talk about iconic attractions, places like Santa's Village, the Muskoka Steamships, our world class golf courses and the fact that Muskoka has more than 100 places to stay.

"But what truly makes this special are the stories behind the destination. It's discovering the best roadside food trucks on a summer road trip, and hidden gems like Georgia Bay Island's National Park. These are the stories that people remember."

Hamilton went on to say that through MTA's "invaluable partnership with Destination Ontario we delivered \$175,000 last year in digital campaigns across Ontario and U.S. drive markets, along with broadcast partnerships, photography, video production and social amplification.

“And we’re not slowing down. We’re already working on an expanded UK marketing effort following a 27 per cent increase in visitor spending in our region from the UK in 2025 — compared to 2024.

“While also growing our U.S. presence.”

Hamilton said the MTA works with a “very lean team” of herself and Rebecca Hockin as paid staff “because we are deeply committed to ensuring that as many dollars as possible go directly into marketing and promoting our beautiful region.”

They also launched “Birding in Muskoka” in partnership with all six municipalities. In April alone, a very tough month for tourism, we sold 315 tickets.”

As well as continuing their “Muskoka Home of the Stars campaign,” bringing hundreds of visitors to the district for guided star-gazing experiences in November.



Media and marketing go hand-in-hand as tourism operators mixed and networked while enjoying a break before the high season.

All of this work resulted in more than 110 million marketing impressions in 2025 — scoring “more than five times what we achieved in 2022.

These campaigns drove over 1.3 million website visitors and more than 380,000 outbound referrals to our 300-plus members.

“We’re also keeping our finger on the pulse of AI to ensure we continue breaking through and showing up in AI search results, said Hamilton.

On social media they produced 97 short form videos and 185 static posts in 2025, organically reaching more than eight million people.

“Our social audience has now grown to more than 130,000 followers, making it one of the largest and most engaged DMO (Destination Marketing/Management Organization) audiences in Ontario.”

She says they regularly have other DMOs calling asking how they’re achieving these engagement levels.

“I’m incredibly proud that this won Muskoka Tourism the tourism digital marketing award at the Ontario Tourism Summit past fall.

“And I will not stop until I find every person I speak to and ask: ‘Have you ever heard of Muskoka?’ The answer has to be ‘yes, I’ve been there; or no, it’s on my bucket list.’”

Hamilton added that a new Martin Short documentary just released on Netflix perfectly said that to him “Muskoka was heaven.”

“I think that’s just so perfectly sums up what Muskoka means to everyone.”

“But at the end of the day, scope of tourism is only successful because of the people on this boat. We’re still a very small DMO in terms of budget, but we’re proud to be at the table of destinations like Toronto, Ottawa and Niagara Falls.”

WHAT'S AHEAD? 2026 ANNUAL PLAN

AUDIENCE

73%

Domestic: (GTA focus, plus Ontario)

17%

US Drive Markets: (Up-State New York, Michigan & Ohio)

10%

International: (United Kingdom, Germany, France, California, New York City, Chicago)



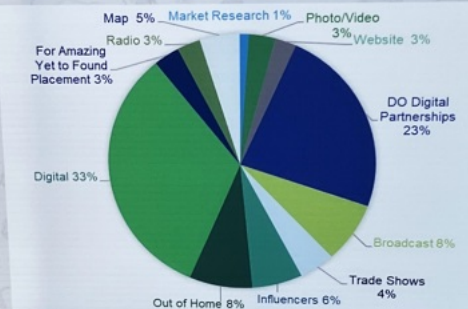
SEASONAL SPLIT & MEDIA BUY

27% WINTER

18% SPRING

22% SUMMER

33% FALL



VISITOR SERVICES & BRAND INTEGRATION

• FOLDABLE GUIDE WITH MAP

- 30,000 copies printed and distributed across Muskoka and key locations in Ontario.

• LOCAL RADIO & TV PARTNERSHIPS

- Continue our partnership with Moose FM for the Cottage Country To-Do List and Muskoka Must-Do's on Cogeco.

• SOCIAL MEDIA EVENT GUIDE

- Share weekly "What's On" event guides through @DiscoverMuskoka, tagging tourism partners to boost visibility and engagement. These posts reach over 3,000 people per week.

• BRANDING PRESENCE

- Integrate Discover Muskoka across the region.



CONTINUING TO GROW OUR IN-MARKET PRESENCE



Marketing impact in 2026 - \$552,859

In 2026 we continue to optimize year over year growth in "working dollars," ensuring more of our revenue directly fuel in-market advertising and media relations. Our focus remains on spending dollars away from "non-working dollars" such as overhead, subscriptions, and salaries, and to initiatives that drive measurable results. Building on last year's milestone where working dollars surpassed non-working dollars, we are doubling down on this momentum in 2026.

Hamilton says "we're not slowing down. We're already working on an expanded UK marketing effort following a 27 per cent increase in visitor spending in our region from the UK in 2025 — compared to 2024."

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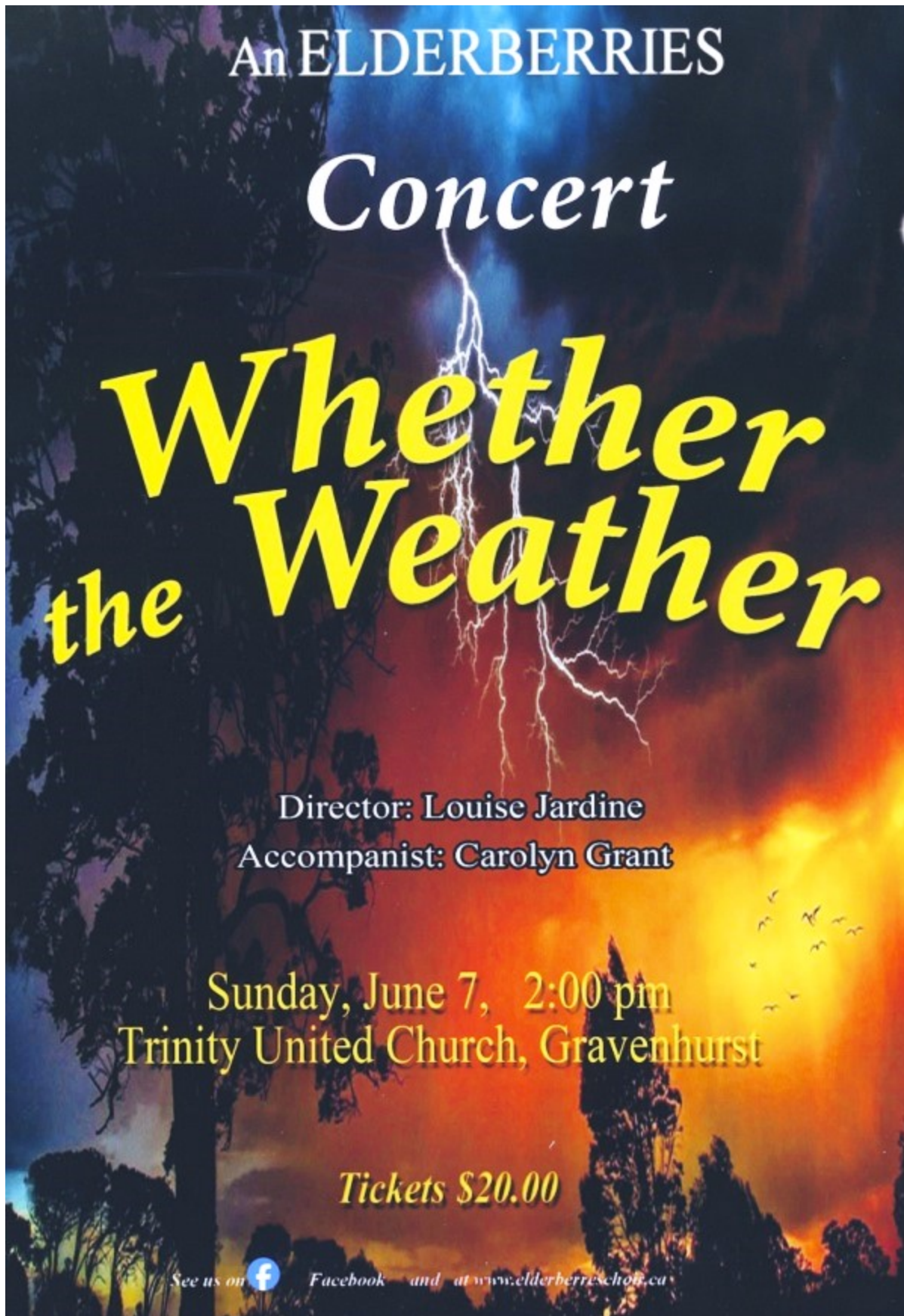
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A multi-million overall on the Segwun is well underway to make her ship shape and ready for the fall sailing and colour tour season by Labour Day. PHOTO Mark Clairmont MuskokaTODAY.com

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