



Elegant affair

shows off

Muskoka

Blair and Alison McRobie enjoyed a cruise on the *S.S. Bigwin* as part of their Bigwin Island Golf Club wedding.

BY MELISSA KOSOWAN /
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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When Toronto residents Blair and Allison McRobie got engaged, they set out to create a memorable weekend celebration on Lake of Bays that captured all the things they love about Muskoka. They succeeded, leaving guests from around the world with a lasting impression of the beauty, culture and history of the area.

"There was no other place that we would have it," says Allison (nee Brough), who has been coming to her family's cottage on Lake of Bays since she was five years old. "It's really special to us because ever since Blair and I got together, we have been going up to the cottage almost every weekend in the summer and in the winter."

Not surprisingly, they chose the Bigwin Island Golf Club to host their Sept. 19, 2015 wedding. To give guests from out of town and beyond that full Muskoka experience, Allison and Blair rented lodges around Lake of Bays and even stocked them with welcome baskets.

"Guests began arriving early on Friday so they got to enjoy the lake," Blair says. "It's that whole feeling and all the components of being up there were part of the wedding. It wasn't just a one-night affair."

And rather than the usual shuttle bus to the wedding reception, guests got to cruise the waters of Lake of Bays as they made their way to Bigwin Island.

"We wanted to have something lakeside where people could go back to a campfire at the end of the night and take a boat over to the island for the wedding," Blair says.

While Allison's family and friends have cottages around the lake, many members of Blair's family were coming from other parts of Canada, the United States and even Holland, so he was particularly eager to show them Muskoka.

"They were very impressed about being on the lake and you just don't have that sort of thing in Holland or a lot of places in Europe," he says of his guests from overseas.

When the big day arrived, Allison and Blair had their "first look" at a friend's cottage where the bride and her bridesmaids had stayed the night before. Dressed in a slate grey suit with an orange flower on the lapel – a nod to his Dutch heritage – Blair waited outside the cottage to see his



The couple joined guests in a clear tent that allowed the beauty of Muskoka to shine through.

bride-to-be. He says he will never forget the moment he turned around and saw her standing there in her flowing gown, her blond locks falling loosely over her shoulders.

"I had my eyes closed and there was this breath of fresh air as I turned around and saw this gorgeous woman," Blair recalls.

As they waited for the *S.S. Bigwin* to arrive to take the wedding party to the island, Allison and Blair spent a few minutes fishing off the dock to ease jittery nerves.

"I was just trying to have some fun between all the tense moments," says Blair, "and seeing if we were going to get a bite, but we didn't."

It's not every day that a century-old steamship docks at your cottage, but the *S.S. Bigwin* was only fitting for Allison and Blair's classic wedding on Lake of Bays. Built in 1910, the elegant 66-foot steamship transported passengers to Bigwin Island for 45 years before falling into a state of disrepair. It was restored in 2012

and now sails the lake once again.

"Sailing on the boat was so magical. The skies cleared as we poured Champagne and toasted the day," says Allison. "Our guests were all coming in on the boats around us so we were waving as they sped by. I ran into the hull of the boat so no one saw my dress."

She adds, "It all felt surreal, like we went back in time – very glamorous."

When the ship arrived at Bigwin Island, over 200 guests awaited, eager to steal a glimpse the guests of honour. While dark clouds threatened rain, the mood was light as friends and family sat lakeside to witness the union.

"My biggest highlight was watching Ali walk down the aisle with her dad by the lake," says Blair. "The ominous dark clouds seemed to part right as the ceremony happened. It just came together. That was my favourite moment."

Dinner, which was held under a clear big-top style tent, left guests star struck as they gazed up at the night sky. Rather than try to add pizzazz to a traditional white tent, Allison wanted Muskoka's natural beauty to take the place of elaborate décor. With white candles, simple floral arrangements and strands of lights running overhead, Mother Nature set the tone at dinner.

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"We just wanted it to be simple," Allison says. "I love white flowers and greenery; it's really natural. Then the pop of colour was orange because Blair is Dutch."

After dinner, a musician playing the saxophone ushered guests from the tent into the famous octagonal-shaped Indian Head room that has become synonymous with Bigwin Island. Not one to let a wedding gown get in the way of a good dance, Allison changed out of her princess gown into a shorter cocktail length dress to dance the night away to the live band.

When guests weren't out on the dance floor, the couple had plenty of fun ways to

keep them entertained, including a Scotch and cigar station. There was also no shortage of food. Instead of offering their guests dessert immediately following the last course at dinner, Allison and Blair opted to have a dessert table in the dance hall.

"We just thought, let's just get our favourite fall desserts. We had pumpkin pie, apple pie, brownies, cookies, butter tarts," says Allison.


The hit of the evening though, was the Canadiana themed photo booth, which featured stereotypical Canuck props, including toques, plaid shirts, paddles, life jackets, fake axes and more.

"It was fun because there were so many people from out of town, so we really wanted to play on the Canadian feel," says Allison, who says the theme was inspired by the iconic Hudson's Bay striped blanket.

Their wedding, she concludes, was a dream come true – a dream made possible thanks to the local vendors they worked with, and her father, who made her every wish a reality.

"It was like we had carved out the most perfect place in the world for one weekend and got to share it with everyone we love," says Allison. "Everything was perfect." MW





BIGWIN ISLAND GOLF CLUB

As the Clubhouse Manager/ Director of Food and Beverage at Bigwin Island Golf Club one would think I had seen it all – with 400 plus weddings under my belt over a 35 year span of working in the hospitality/club industry.

Well, my message today is I haven't seen it all. Weddings are more sophisticated and complicated with destination venues more popular than ever. Now capturing your guests for a wedding weekend experience is the norm!

Between the website of Pinterest and the speed and visual (Instagram/ YouTube/Twitter) of seeing, experiencing and enjoying what other couples plan for their guests for their special day, there are truly no boundaries for being creative, inspirational and personally engaged to host an event your family, guests and you will remember for a lifetime.

The history of Bigwin and its presence on Lake of Bays as a destination venue continues to fascinate guests of the once grand resort and holds a special meaning for those selecting it as the place to host one of the most important days of your life.

This past season the club hosted a few weddings that I call extraordinary because they were masterful in organization and execution and still embraced the importance of traditional presence of time and talent from friends and helpers.

These weddings captured all the wonderful features of the lake and golf course views as backdrops, the mystique of Muskoka, the majestic historic buildings and covered walkways, vintage boats and the introduction of new image transparent tents, beautiful and unique flower

arrangement and landscaping, vintage photo booths, artist painting station (to capture the day), magical lighting to create that absolutely perfect, wow atmosphere.

To plan these events you need to have a good operator (request testimonials and references) and augment, depending on the size of function and sophistication, with wedding planners that provide a graduated scale of services which meets your budget and personal timelines.

I had the opportunity of working with five different wedding planners at Bigwin in 2015 and one was for my own son's wedding. Based on your needs and budget, I endorse this extra assistance especially for the main events including rehearsal run through, rehearsal dinner / meet and greet night, make-up and dressing morning of, bridal party photo shots, ceremony procedures, set up of the special favourites and seating plan for dinner arrangements and so on. Being in the business my family and I really appreciated putting someone else in charge of certain details of the day and who provided that calm professionalism in managing positive stress that invariably arises. My last thoughts are to pick your venue carefully and make certain it can truly fulfil your needs for providing friendly and knowledgeable service staff, excellent food, beverage services and the ambiance and surroundings that meet your personalities and desired budget.

Cheers to that special day...
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