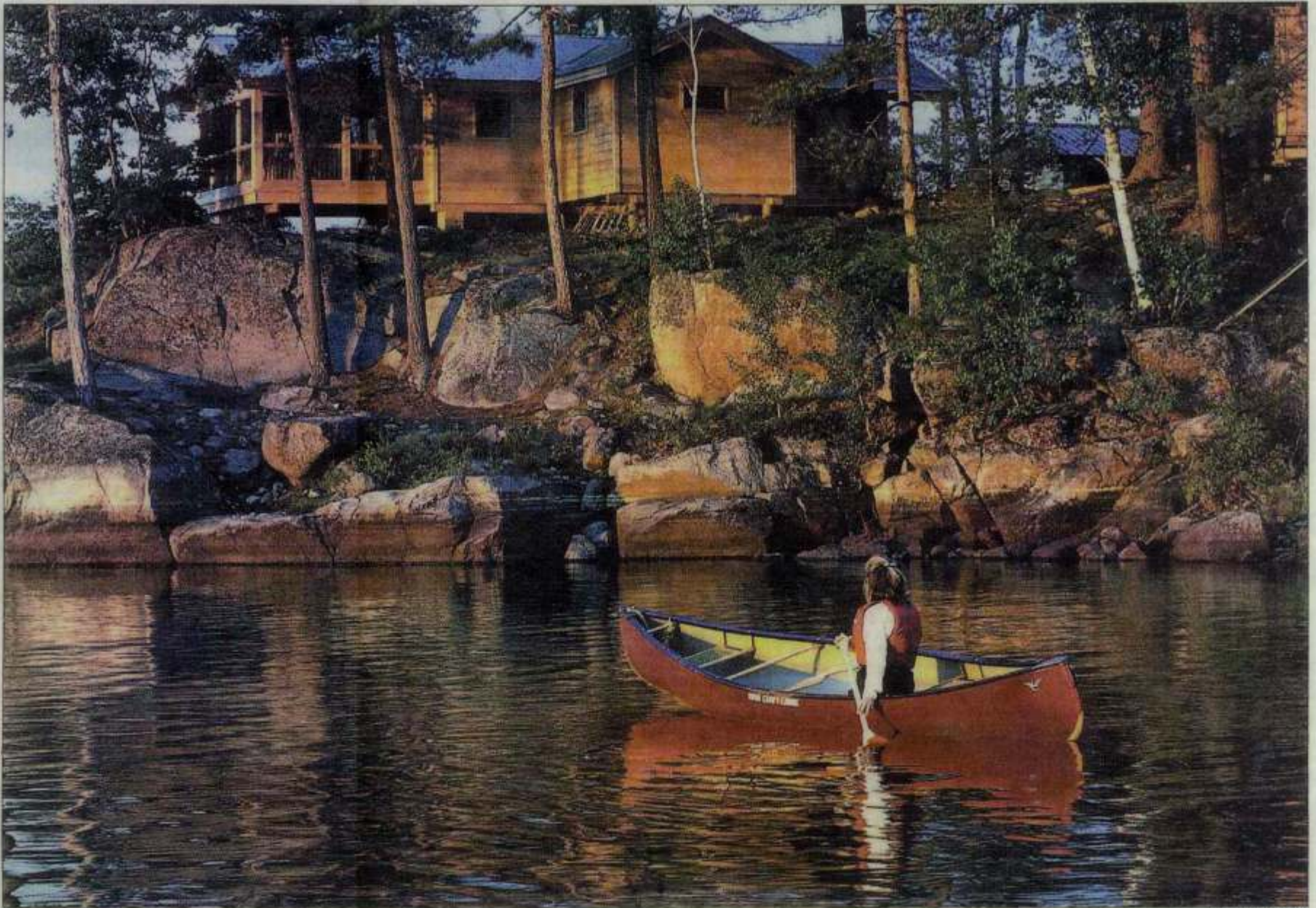


'Most lodges are set up for fishermen and while we offer great fly fishing here, we wanted to do something that would appeal to women as well.'



ROB STIMPSON PHOTO

The Cabins at The Lodge at Pine Cove are all new and while they may look rustic to complement their surroundings, they are crammed with all the creature comforts travellers expect.

The Lodge at Pine Cove

A French evolution

Alex Strachan dropped out of the business world a few years ago and decided to do something different with his life.

So, he started a business — a hospitality business, to be exact.

The former Royal LePage executive, who spent 14 years with the real estate giant working on some of the company's biggest real estate deals, is now the proud owner of The Lodge at Pine Cove, located in the tiny near-north Ontario community of Noelville, a 1½-hour drive north of Parry Sound and about three hours from Toronto.

Strachan, 66, and an active outdoorsman, moved to Canada from his native England as a youth and discovered the area where his luxury lodge now sits a few years ago while on a canoe trip with his son.

"I was tipped off about this area by a friend and when we arrived to paddle the French River my son and I discovered an old fishing lodge (built around 1935) with some cabins.

"The main lodge had been damaged by (a 1965) fire and the cabins had been allowed to decay. But the area was just gorgeous," said Strachan.

A short time later, Strachan left his senior-vice president's job with Royal LePage, put together a design team and began planning out the lodge that now sits amidst the breathtakingly beautiful white pine and pink granite backdrop for which this area of the province is so famous.

In the short time The Lodge at Pine Cove has been open (about 3½ years now) it has become one of the province's most

The beautiful Lodge at Pine Cove offers travellers wilderness elegance in a Group of Seven setting. Former real-estate executive builds a new career on the banks of French River, writes Marc Atchison



ROB STIMPSON PHOTO

The Lodge at Pine Cove rests on the shores of the French River, not far from the small near-north hamlet of Noelville. The lodge offers one of the province's most peaceful and beautiful settings.

sought-after resorts — especially by business people looking for a peaceful retreat from the everyday hassles of the corporate world.

"The feedback we get from people who have stayed with us has been just tremendous," said Strachan, who compares this area of Ontario to "what Muskoka used to be."

The thing that impresses people the most about The Lodge at Pine Cove, besides its rustic beauty, is the peace and quiet.

"We offer simple elegance in a peaceful setting," said Strachan of his property that features a 557-square-metre main lodge (no rooms) and 14 private cabins that offer single, one- and two-bedroom options.

"You can be super active (canoe for hours along a 116-km stretch of the French River in semi-wilderness; go fly fishing; hike . . .) or do nothing at all except enjoy the beautiful surroundings," said Strachan. One of Strachan's biggest aims

when he opened The Lodge at Pine Cove was to create an environment that would lure female travellers to the great outdoors. He achieved that by introducing an arts program at the lodge that wouldn't look out of place in a Group of Seven painting.

"Most lodges are set up for fishermen, and while we offer great fly fishing here, we wanted to do something that would appeal more to women. So, we introduced an arts program (headed by Greg Hindle and



James McLaughlin throughout the year) and the response from women has just been fantastic."

Each year, Strachan's lodge evolves and this year will give travellers even more food for thought with the introduction of the fine-dining creations of Chef Craig Young, who was a member of the kitchen staff at British Columbia's famed Wickaninnish Inn in Tofino. Part of the nightly rate at The Lodge at Pine Cove includes three meals.

For now, Strachan is resisting adding a spa to the resort ("because our guests haven't demanded it") but does not rule it out entirely in the future.

The lodge's wilderness surroundings are the only thing rustic about the resort. The spacious new private pine cabins are crammed with all the creature comforts and highlighted

with finely crafted furniture and custom-made beds. The cabins are wrapped in netting so you can enjoy the gorgeous scenery from the comfort of your screened porch.

Dinner is served in the main lodge on a veranda overlooking the French River and its rocky shoreline where artists sit for hours capturing on canvas an area of the world first explored by the Voyageurs.

Companies have booked time at Strachan's wilderness retreat for corporate team-building sessions but they do so at their own risk — because, like Strachan, some of their executives may not want to leave.

★ Rates at The Lodge at Pine Cove start at \$190 per person (the rate includes three meals a day) in high season and drops to \$150 in the early autumn. Right now The Lodge at Pine Cove is offering a special of between \$120 and \$130 per person, which runs to the end of June. The resort is open from May to just after Thanksgiving. To make reservations, call 705-898-2500 or email the resort at info@frenchriver.com or go to its Web site: frenchriver.com Toronto-based Cloud Air offers transportation to The Lodge at Pine Cove. Call 1-800-990-1199 or go to cloudair.com for more details.

Marc Atchison is the Star's Travel Editor.