

Life on the ‘Big Lake’

Wolfeboro, N.H., offers old-school family living and leisurely afternoons by the water

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 7, 2013



Wolfeboro, N.H. as seen from Lake Winnepesaukee.

Photograph by: Bob Ness Images LLC

Once I could pronounce Lake Winnepesaukee, I felt right at home in Wolfeboro, a genteel resort town in the Lakes District of mid- New Hampshire. Wolfeboro’s year-round population of about 6,000 triples in summer, mostly because of the huge, clear lake with its woodsy backdrop of forests and mountains.

It’s a pretty, prosperous little town, built around a main street of vintage cottages turned into shops and bistros and lots of docks housing dinghies, sailboats and power craft. Grand summer manors and their equally luxurious boathouses ring the shore. Everything is tidy and well-preserved here – the lawns and gardens, the whitewashed clapboard houses, the boats and the cool, retro cars and motorcycles.

A leisurely life for visitors revolves around Lake Winn, aka the Big Lake — water-skiing, jet-skiing, boating, swimming, fishing and paddling. On land, Wolfeboro is also home to several small museums and the Cotton Valley Trail, a picturesque walking and cycling path that runs for 17 kilometres along causeways and shorelines. The very busy summer calendar includes Moonlight Madness, June 24, a family evening with clowns and Scottish dancers; the colourful Independence Day Parade, July 4; and the Great Waters Music Festival, June 28-Aug. 30.

When I arrived in Wolfeboro, I had dinner with Kathy Eaton — crab cakes, baked haddock and asparagus fries at Wolfe's Tavern – and I caught up on what's been happening since 1759. Eaton runs the Wolfeboro Trolley with her husband, Dick, and she is a one-woman grapevine. First I learned about the Quebec connection. Before the U.S. War of Independence, the town was named by British colonists in honour of Gen. Wolfe, who was the hero of the day when he died in 1759 during his victorious battle against French Gen. Montcalm at the Plains of Abraham.

Eaton dished that Wolfeboro had been a destination back in the day for VIPs such as Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco, author Kurt Vonnegut and Madame Chiang Kai-shek (who graduated from Wellesley College in Massachusetts).

Today, Wolfeboro is the summer residence of several CEOs and former U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney who rode in last year's Independence Day parade. Hollywood's Drew Barrymore and Tonight Show host Jimmy Fallon visit family and friends. The town also piqued interest when French president Nicolas Sarkozy visited a few years ago, renting a \$10 million waterfront estate.

"Just folks" who want to come for a few days or a few weeks have appealing options, too. Here are some of Wolfeboro's best stops:

SLEEP: The Sunset Lodges are a cluster of seven lakefront cabins on a quiet bay a few kilometres from downtown. Built in the 1950s, the Sunset chalets have pine-panelled walls, simple furniture, wood-burning fireplaces, and modernized bathrooms and kitchens, but no televisions. This is old-school family living with a swimming dock and sandboxes outdoors. Mondays in summer are communal barbecues, but the rest of the time guests are on their own for meals.

The comfortable Wolfeboro Inn is the No. 1 gem in town with a scenic lakefront location, 44 attractive rooms and the lively Wolfe's Tavern.

THE WATER: Lake Winn is Wolfeboro's lifeblood and there are so many ways to experience it. A visit to the New Hampshire Boat Museum goes hand-in-hand with a ride on its vintage runabout, the Millie B. The M/S Mount Washington and the Winnepesaukee Belle do large-scale cruises. The Goodhue & Hawkins Navy Yard charters pontoons and powerboats.

Dive Winnepesaukee rents paddleboards, kayaks, canoes and scuba gear, Wolfeboro Bay Water Sports can set you up for water skiing or wakeboarding and Woods-N-Water organizes fly-fishing excursions.

CULTURE: I wanted to spend all of my Wolfeboro time outdoors, but I am so happy I made time for the entertaining and educational Wright Museum which portrays life in the U.S. during the Second World War. The Wright's Time Tunnel has a display for each of the war years with LIFE magazine covers and exhibits on the music, dress and prices of everyday life. At the war's outset in 1939, a loaf of bread cost eight cents and Judy Garland played Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. In victorious 1945, the Dow Jones Average was 169 and Betty Grable was the pin-up girl. For children, the Wright's Family Day, July 14, will feature costumed animators, a cookout and rides on authentic military vehicles.

The annual Great Waters Music Festival, June 28 to Aug. 30, will be the season's biggest cultural event, showcasing pop, Broadway, jazz, folk, choral and symphonic acts including the rock group America, songstress Lorrie Morgan, and the rock 'n' roll musical Smokey Joe's Café.

EAT: Arriving on land with a robust appetite after a morning on the lake is pure comfort and joy. Garwoods Restaurant & Pub serves casual food with the all-important water view from the terrace. It's a New England menu all the way with clam chowder, oysters, lobster bisque, fish 'n' chips, scallops and steaks. The Yum Yum Shop has irresistibly rich ice cream, cream puffs and gingerbread cookies. And the Downtown Grille Café, another breezy waterfront bistro, does delicious lunches of pesto chicken salad, sweet potato fries, 10 kinds of burgers including the non-meat portobello and lobster rolls in season.

IF YOU GO

Wolfeboro, N.H. is a four-hour, 15-minute drive from Montreal via Highway 10, Route 55 south to the U.S. border and Routes 91 and 93 to exit 25 for Plymouth.

Tourism info: 800-516-5324, www.wolfeborochamber.com; New Hampshire Lakes Region: 800-605-2537, www.lakesregion.org.

Wolfeboro Trolley; 603-569-1080, www.wolfeborotrolley.com; dinner theatre available.

Wright Museum: 603-569-1212, www.wrightmuseum.org.

Garwoods Restaurant & Pub: 603-569-7788, www.garwoodsrestaurant.com.

Sunset Lodges: 603- 569-2636, www.sunsetlodges.com; 17 Tuftonboro Neck Rd., Mirror Lake, N.H. One-to-three-bedroom cabins, \$200-\$300 U.S. per night; two-night and seven night-minimum sometimes apply. Wireless Internet, volleyball, canoes and a rowboat are free.

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Wolfeboro, N.H. as seen from Lake Winnepesaukee.

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