

# The island

# OF CHAN



*The historic boathouses are a Lake Rosseau landmark, but few in the area realize the island is a destination for global think-tanks.*

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Photograph by Ed Boutilier

## WASAN ISLAND

— Article by Andrew Wagner-Chazalon

**T**he former president of Costa Rica sat here and explained how he had demilitarized his country. The heir to the BMW empire lay on the floor and said he had never felt as relaxed as he did on this island. A future Nobel peace prize laureate has walked here; and so, too, have young activists who may one day win the prize themselves.

There are places in the world that just seem to draw and inspire remarkable people. Wasan Island on Lake Rosseau is one of them.

The island to the west of Tobin is well-known to cottagers – its block-like green boathouse with the undersized roof overhang has been a landmark for generations. But few know just how big an impact this place is having on leading thinkers and activists from around the world.

Some accounts say the island once belonged to the first president of the Muskoka Steamship company; certainly the deep-water dock and the massive steel bollards indicate that the large steamers once stopped here regularly. Others say that Clark Gable and Carole

## THE ISLAND OF CHANGE



Lombard stayed in “The Love Cabin” on their honeymoon. But all that was long in the past when Helga Breuninger bought the six acre island in the early 1980s.

The heir to a large department store chain, Breuninger came to the island as a vacation home, after being introduced to Muskoka by a colleague. The wonderful views to the south and east attracted her to Wasan and its old-

integrative learning. In 1968, father and daughter founded the Breuninger Foundation, and began funding university research. Their interests were – and remain – wide-ranging: recent projects include looking at how western psychology can be used in Chinese culture; how communities can take responsibility for the success of their local primary schools; how leaders can use their emotional intelligence; how a sense of place affects our decisions.

It wasn't long before these interests became part of the life on Wasan Island. “We were doing conferences in hotels in Germany,” says Hann. “And we said ‘what if we brought people here, to Wasan?’”

The idea was risky. At the time, Wasan only had six bedrooms and a couple of bathrooms, so conference participants would be sharing rooms, or even sleeping in tents. “We worried that people might not like it, being stuck on a small island,” said Hann.

But it wasn't long before Wasan – and Muskoka – began to work their magic. “What usually happens at a conference is that you meet in hotels, and outside the meetings people go off to restaurants or hide in their rooms,” says Hann. “Here, there's nowhere to hide.”

Conference participants began having spontaneous conversations outside of the meetings and breakout sessions, chatting on the dock or perched on the side of a fallen tree, laughing as they tried to share a canoe or playing pool on the ancient table in the boathouse. They started opening up about themselves, getting to know each other, and exploring a much bigger range of ideas than they had originally intended to. “The agenda is important,” says Hann, “but what really matters are the in-between spaces. People need to share those spaces with each other.”

The facilities at Wasan have grown over the years. There's now a dormitory building as well as a meeting centre, but space is still limited, and 22 guests is about all the island can comfortably hold. Sharing bedrooms is still expected, Hann says, which makes for some interesting conversations when making arrangements for the more high profile guests. “Their secretaries are usually more



Photograph by Volker Hann

*New facilities have been added at Wasan, including a bright and modern pavilion, but changes are only made after long and careful consideration.*

fashioned cottage and boathouses. “Helga is a morning person,” explains Volker Hann, the island's caretaker and manager. “She wants sunrises rather than sunsets.”

Like her father, Heinz, Helga Breuninger has always been more interested in ideas than in business, earning a doctorate in psychology and pursuing research into



worried about it than they are,” he says with a chuckle. “They’ll say ‘what about room service?’” Hann explains that they don’t have room service, but will offer to make the boss’s bed if he doesn’t want to make his own.

The conferences themselves run a wide gamut. This summer’s schedule includes researchers and community leaders studying how sports can be better used for development; a session on using art to build resilient communities; architects and urban planners considering how to repurpose under-valued civic assets, and so on. Most conferences last a week – any less than four days, and the island doesn’t have time to work its magic, Hann explains.

And it really is magic, says Michael Jones. A speaker, writer, and Juno-nominated musician, Jones heads up The Wasan Dialogues on Creative Place Making, an annual conference designed to explore why and how some places have such a profound effect on lives. Wasan is the perfect place to have these discussions, he says. “The environment becomes part of the conversation,” he says. “The place shapes how you speak.”

As Wasan’s influence has grown, so too has its reach. The space is now shared by other foundations, including the Community Foundations of Canada, the McConnell Foundation, and the BMW Foundation. And the experience of Wasan is being used elsewhere. The Banff Centre is looking at the work being done on the island; the Breuninger Foundation is involved in building a centre in Paretz, a village located just outside Berlin



Photograph by Volker Hann

*Conversations at Wasan go far beyond the usual conference chit-chat. Sharing meals and living quarters, watching the sunrise and sitting by the fire all change the nature of the dialogue.*

which draws on many of the lessons learned at Wasan.

Paretz isn’t the same as Wasan, and neither is Banff. And that’s part of the point: it’s a different place, and a different experience, so conversations there will be different.

“It’s wonderful to provide these spaces and see what happens as a result,” says Hann.

“What I really enjoy is seeing people’s eyes and faces open up when they’re here. To be part of that transformation is beautiful.” **LS**



Photograph by Volker Hann