



Loni Beach

Thankfully, some things never change

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TED WYMAN

Pick a warm summer's evening and take the familiar, comforting stroll around Loni Beach and surely the old adage "the more things change, the more they stay the same" will come to mind.

A young girl combs the sand for sea glass and lucky stones, boys use nets to catch and release frogs from the creek, a cottager fills his pail at the free-flowing well to make sure his morning coffee will taste just right.

Here, tucked away at the north end of the town of Gimli on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, this pocket of paradise is the picture of progression mixed with a kind of nostalgia that can only come from the people who have maintained a certain sense of community for the last century.

For all the changes that have occurred in this quiet, mostly seasonal Manitoba community of 242 properties, as the aging buildings with their ramshackle outhouses are replaced by opulent beach homes, some things never differ and you might have seen the previously described scenes on a stroll through the streets at any point in the last 50 years.

"For me, it's the long-standing friends and the associations you've made over the years," Loni Beach Residents Association president Ron Hahlweg says.

"It's a generational thing. I came here as a kid and hung around with a bunch of people and now those people all have cottages here and it just continues and our kids play together. That's, for me, very unique."

Certainly, things have changed from the days when Loni Beach had nine free-flowing artesian wells (continuously spouting the very water used to make Crown Royal whiskey) and residents had to haul their iron-flavoured water in rusty buckets to their rustic cabins that had no such luxuries as running taps or bathrooms.

A typical vista looking south from Loni Beach toward Gimli.

Today, with the arrival of a dozen or so permanent residences and several beach homes that could be featured on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, Loni Beach has modernized considerably, with a new sewer system and individual wells on every property.

Among the residents today are former Manitoba premier Gary Filmon, acclaimed filmmaker Guy Maddin and Wellington West executive Charlie Spiring, but they are just a few of the devoted cottagers who make the trek to Loni Beach from as near as Winnipeg and as far as Alberta, Ontario, Alaska and California each and every year.

“It’s a unique area, everything from turn-of-the-century, early 1900s cottages to brand new places being put up now that are year-round residences,” Hahlweg says. “So, it’s the right mix of old and new.”

While there are some impressive new structures dotting the loop that makes up Loni Beach (pronounced low-knee), there are also a handful of cottages which have been deemed heritage sites for being more than a century old. And there’s still one free-flowing well that reminds all who pass by of a simpler time and brings smiles to their faces.

“A lot has changed since I first started coming out here,” says lifelong seasonal resident Salin Guttormsson, one of many in Loni Beach who still maintain Icelandic heritage. “We had no running water or heat or television and we had an out-house, but we never went back to the city. You spent your summer out here.

“We try to maintain that to the extent that we can today.”

Part of the beauty of the area is it offers both seclusion and all the comforts of being a short walk, bike ride or drive from the hub of Gimli, with its grocery and hardware stores, restaurants and movie theatre.

“People don’t realize how close we are to Gimli,” Hahlweg says. “It’s so close, but it’s still far enough away to feel like you are away from it all. People don’t even really know we’re here unless they are visiting someone in Loni Beach.

“You have that nice seclusion and yet everything you need is all right there.”

It’s also about an hour’s drive, door-to-door, from just about anywhere in Winnipeg, which allows for easy weekend getaways without an immense amount of hassle.

Throw in acres of semi-private beach, proximity to Links at the Lake golf course, a central tennis court, special events such as the



Top: Lifelong seasonal cottager Salin Guttormsson has wonderful memories spending summers at the cabin with no running water, heat or TV.



Right: Loni Beach Residents Association president Ron Hahlweg fills a bucket with water from the last of the free-flowing artesian wells in Loni Beach.

Loni Beach properties range from century-old cottages such as the one belonging to acclaimed film director Guy Maddin, to Wellington West executive Charlie Spiring’s modern structure.



Islendingadagurinn (Icelandic Festival) and Gimli Film Festival, boating, fishing at the famed Gimli pier, endless stars and northern lights at night, achingly beautiful sunrises in the morning and you have a location that is hard to top.

“I couldn’t dream of being anywhere else,” Guttormsson says.

Many people share that sentiment, but with the additional cost of mandatory sewer installation (about \$17,000 per cottage) and sharply rising property values, there has been more turnover than ever in recent years.

“The demand for the area is always fairly strong as there are generations of families that have history here, and are interested in staying within the area,” says realtor Kim Giesbrecht of Interlake Real Estate.


“Of course, then there are the lakefront properties. This is some of the most desirable beach in the area and has always been in high demand. For that reason, lakefront property rarely even comes to the market.”

While those lakefront properties would easily sell for more than \$250,000, Giesbrecht says a property in the area, away from the lake, sold for as little as \$50,000 in 2012, another for \$64,500 in 2013. A seasonal, lakeview cottage (not beachfront) sold for \$130,000 in 2013.

Even when cottages do sell, it’s often the offspring of longtime residents, branching out on their own, who make the purchase. As a result, it’s easy to see the same people on the roads or the beaches or the tennis courts, or at the many community bonfires, today as you may have encountered 30 years ago.

“Once you’re a Loni Beacher, you’re a Loni Beacher for life,” Guttormsson says.

“It’s a very social community and that’s what’s great about it,” Hahlweg adds. “Seeing these people year after year, the kids you grew up with, and they are still there, still hanging around, it’s very special.”

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Salin Guttormsson embraces the community spirit of Loni Beach by having a ‘Free Stump’ in her yard, where she leaves old games, comics, dishes and the like to get recycled regularly by passersby.

Whether it’s sunny or cloudy, cottagers such as Michael and Wendy Erlanger enjoy the long, wide stretch of sandy beach.



There’s plenty of room for Albert and Shayna Wilhelmer to take in some fun and games on the beach.

