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Reflective retreat

Changing the world from Muskoka



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WHERE THE *world gathers* BY THE LAKE



Photograph: Scott Turnbull

Volker Hann, director of Wasan Island and International Projects for the Breuninger Foundation, reads on his waterside veranda at Wasan Island. He lives in this incredible place all summer long and meets interesting people from around the world.

Article by Scott Turnbull

On an historic island in Lake Rosseau, people are changing the world.

Sitting in a circle in a beautifully airy studio space, surrounded by towering white pines, they're discussing big ideas like social justice, ecology, consciousness and spirituality. During a break, they retreat to the water's edge, having more intimate conversations about the themes they've been discussing for the day.

Owned by the non-profit German-based Breuninger Foundation, Wasan Island is a retreat that hosts international conferences and symposiums designed to bring together leaders in society, culture, science and business to develop their skills and share ideas.

"We really believe that in times when so much communication has become virtual, it really matters to connect people eye-to-eye in special places," says Volker Hann, the director of Wasan Island and International Projects for the Breuninger Foundation. "Places and connections and bonding trans-



Photograph: Volker Hann

A Wasan Island guest practises calligraphy. The island retreat is owned by a non-profit foundation that hosts international conferences and symposiums.



Photograph: Volker Hann

The intimate, informal nature of a conference at Wasan Island is memorable, especially when guests gather by the lake.



Photographs: Scott Turnbull



An antique map hangs on the wall at Wasan Island. The island's location has been worn thin by decades of pointing out the spot (left). Guests leave behind mementoes of their stay (above).



At Wasan Island, many places are set up to initiate conversation, like this lakeside spot (above). The Wasan Island boathouse is a Lake Rosseau landmark (below).



form people. When we provide this place and host other foundations here, they can make a better difference in the work they are doing because we help them make connections and have conversations that would not happen elsewhere.”

Since the year 2000, the Breuninger Foundation has been hosting about 10 week-long conferences or symposia per summer. Conferences have titles like Spirituality in Healthcare, Earth Security Initiatives, Emotion Focused Leadership and Good Governance in Local Water Management, to name a few.

“People from around the world of all faiths, cultures and orientations come here to learn and share,” says Hann. “The peaceful landscape offers a spectacular setting for transformative experiences.”

Wasan Island has been a landmark on Lake Rosseau for close to a century. Nestled into the south side of the Venetia group of islands, and visible from the much-travelled waterway between Port Carling and Port Sandfield, Wasan is recognizable from its boathouse – a green-roofed, gray structure with white dormers and a distinctive roofline. Designed by Toronto architect Mackenzie Waters, who subsequently designed Maple Leaf Gardens, the boathouse has been featured in many books and publications.

In 1985, Helga Breuninger, the head of the foundation, purchased the six-acre island as a private cottage, restoring the original landmark boathouse. In 1999, Helga opened up the island to the first Breuninger Foundation conference, a meeting of historians discussing the idea of why modernization revolutions happened first in Europe rather than Asia and the Middle East. As of 2006, the foundation took over ownership of the island.

“One of the many things I really love about Helga is that she could afford to have this place only for herself and do anything she wants but she is really committed to giving something back,” says Hann.

The great-granddaughter of the founder of the Breuninger Department Stores in Germany – similar to what Eaton’s was to Canada – Helga holds a doctorate in psychology and is the head of the Breuninger Foundation. Founded in 1968 by her father, the foundation offers programs in Germany and around the world, with a mission of facilitating connections to solve large social problems.

On Wasan Island, the setting is meant to inspire conference and symposia participants and give them ample opportunity to connect with the landscape and each other. A mix of historic and contemporary buildings, the island’s built structures offer 14 guest rooms, a communal kitchen and dining hall, an open-style pavilion conference room, and several docks and boathouses. All around the island are cozy spaces meant to initiate conversation and relationships between conference participants – from a large bonfire pit to a cozy, covered swim dock, to a dry boathouse with kayaks and canoes to numerous hot tubs that sit atop spacious decks, all of the spaces are designed with intimate dialogue in mind.

“At so many conferences, people fly in for a day or two, meet in a windowless hotel and fly out again,” explains Hann. “On Wasan, the people come here as guests; it creates a totally different attitude and atmosphere than if they were paying guests. We

Photographs: Scott Turnbull



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Helga Breuninger and Volker Hann recognize that Wasan Island is a special place.

share everything, including the work if people want – they can help chopping wood, they can do anything they feel like doing. It results in a transformative experience.”

Hann notes that he encourages people to come for as long as they can – a two-night stay doesn’t result in the same experience as a week on the island.

“I tell people that I want them to come for at least four days,” he says. “That way, they won’t forget about entering the place and feeling the sense and spirit of the surroundings.”

Along with a small crew of staff including a chef, groundskeeper and housekeeper, Hann takes care of the island, as well as being the director of programs.

“I really have an amazing life here,” he says, pointing towards the historic one-room cabin right next to the water where he lives for the summer months. “I live in this incredible place all summer long and I get to meet these incredible people from

all over the world.”

This summer, some of the programs include the Wasan Dialogue on Remaking Canada’s Places and Creative Place Making, Methodologies and Practices for Art and Culture in Building Resilient Communities, and International Dialogue on Professional Capital and Performance Simulation. During these week-long programs, participants will live and eat on the island, meeting as a large group in the pavilion building for sessions, then break out into smaller informal groups at the many intimate locations around the island.

The pavilion, custom-built for the Breuninger Foundation, is an impressive and inspiring meeting space. While the large room is sometimes set up in a traditional conference style with tables and chairs, more often the meetings are held in a circle on the hardwood floor, with participants sitting on cushions atop wicker mats. Musical instruments ring the

room, and the space has a definitive Eastern, meditative feel.

“It’s a great way to encourage dialogue and participation with the informal setup and people on the floor,” explains Hann. “We often practice yoga in the room, and the light in the space is captivating. People constantly remark about what a special space this is.”

On two walls of the pavilion, a series of photographs shows a decade’s worth of groups who have met at Wasan. In every photo, people are smiling broadly, arms around each other, dressed in casual summer clothes.

“For someone who has never been to Muskoka, they are blown away by the spirit and beauty of this place,” says Hann. “When people are surrounded by nature, it offers them a way to profoundly connect with others, which enables meaningful insights and empowers change for a sustainable future.” 



Photograph: Volker Hann

A group gathers to listen to a speaker in the pavilion conference room at Wasan Island.



Photograph: Scott Turnbull

A tabletop 3-D collage is made up of pieces to represent some of the spirit of the island.