EVER SINCE THE INVENTION OF THE WHEEL, THE WORLD HAS GROWN SMALLER. BUT THERE ARE SOME PLACES THAT, DEFYING THE LAWS OF PROGRESS AND TIME, HAVE ACTUALLY GROWN MORE REMOTE. ONE SUCH PLACE IS LAKE KORA, ORIGINALLY KNOWN AS KAMP KILL KARE, IN THE HEART OF THE ADIRONDACKS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK. BUT THAT WILL SOON CHANGE, AT LEAST FOR A SELECT FEW.

More than a century ago, when it stood alongside the equally baronial homes of Alfred Vanderbilt and J. P. Morgan, Kamp Kill Kare was easily accessible. Lots of people—mostly corporate chieftains and political kingpins—frequented the place, and papers like The New York Times and the New-York Tribune regularly wrote about powwows there. Reaching it was simple. Around eight o’clock at night, you’d board a private carriage at Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan. You’d make your way upstate, playing poker and swapping stories through Albany and Utica, then change trains at burgs like Herkimer and Carter. You’d probably sleep through Rondaxe and Minnowbrook.
Skensowanne and Eagle Bay. And you'd wake up the next morning at Raquette Lake, a steamboat ride followed by a horse-drawn carriage drive from your destination.

Nowadays, though, even if you fly to Syracuse or Albany, the place still feels far away, whatever your GPS tells you. You negotiate northward along pokey-countered roads, through time-forsaken towns, reminders that the Adirondacks are the tail end of the Appalachian Mountains. The moneyed families that once summered here moved on long ago to other, more fashionable resorts. Most of their elaborate "camps," as their estates are still charmingly but inappropriately called, have been either sold off, torn down, broken up or bequeathed to indifferent or impoverished institutions barely able to handle their upkeep.

But Lake Kora is different. While the world stopped caring about it long ago, its owners never did, in part because they have been so few. The first, Timothy Woodruff, who gave the place its kitschy name and system of spelling (it was he who renamed what had been Summer Lake after his wife, who was Kora with a "c"), was for a time the lieutenant governor of New York. Upon his death in 1913, the property passed to his next-door neighbor, Alfred Vanderbilt, but only briefly: Surely the world's most star-crossed plutocrat ever, Vanderbilt had canceled his booking on the Titanic, only to go down three years later with the Lusitania. A New York assistant district attorney named Francis Garvan then bought it. He died in 1937, but his widow, Mabel Brady Garvan, kept using the place for another 42 years. Since her death it's changed hands twice—each time, fortunately, to conscientious custodians.

For the last few decades, though, Lake Kora has been almost entirely off-limits. Jerry Pepper, who runs the library at the nearby Adirondack Museum, has studied the area's great camps over the past 30 years but has never set foot on what is arguably the greatest of them all. The closest the museum's assistant curator, Angela Snye, has ever come to Lake Kora is that her high school best friend's grandfather was once its landscaper. When Mabel's daughter-in-law, Bea Garvan, an emeritus curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art whose husband was born at Kamp Kill Kare in 1917, returned recently, it was her first visit since 1978. Especially at night, the long drive up the dark dirt road off Route 28—and the five "no trespassing" signs one sees in disconcertingly rapid succession as one approaches—lends it a forbidding air, even frightening air, like Xanadu after the death of Charles Foster Kane.

But Mark Palmer, a New Zealander by way of Texas who bought Lake Kora in 2005, decided not long ago to open it up. He asked BeautifulPlaces, manager of 300 villas, estates and other luxury properties in the United States, to take on the estate. As the head of the California-based agency, Liza Graves, explained to me, among the affluent it's an increasingly common arrangement: Vacation seekers desire the distinctive experiences and cachet private estates offer, while others—the folks who own such places—rent them out periodically to help pay the bills.

"Unique" is a dangerous word to throw around. But even when Kamp Kill Kare was built, at the dawn of the 20th century, there were few places like it. In Field and Stream in 1903, an Englishman named Henry Wellington Wack wrote that "in cost and comfort, in pleasurable appointments and in luxury," three Adirondack estates—Vanderbilt's Sagamore, Morgan's Camp Uncas and Kamp Kill Karel—were the "finest trio on the North American continent." Indeed, he claimed, there was nothing like them, even in Europe. And of the three, he went on, "Kamp Kill Kare is by far the most picturesque and the most completely furnished—from the birch-bark writing paper to the furniture made upon the spot of cedar logs—which give a camp the rusticity and the atmosphere of the wilderness."

By remaining astonishingly intact for the next hundred years, fending off encroachment and coarsening and commercialization and decay, Lake Kora has grown only more extraordinary. It is a destination out of a Thomas Cole painting, a picture off a pastel-colored penny postcard, a scene in sepia. Its very aloofness all these years has been its greatest source of protection.

Anyone who has read Walt Whitman knows the thrill of communing with the dead, of feeling the very things they, too, once felt. And anyone coming to Lake Kora walks along the same pristine shoreline and mountain trails as those who came before, paddles in the same canoes on the same unspoiled waters, sits on and eats off the same rough-hewn homemade furniture, bathes in the same claw-foot tubs, knocks down the same wooden bowling pins on the same old-fashioned Brunswick lanes, steps on (or around, to avoid those heads with teeth clenched in perpetuity) the same bear- (or tiger- or wolf-) skin rugs. He warms himself up alongside the same gargantuan stone fireplaces—as much a signature of the Adirondacks as the wooden deck chairs—fashioned of rocks and boulders from the nearby mountainsides. Each has a distinctive mantelpiece; carved over the fireplace in the house in the middle of the lake, a short rowboat ride away from the rest of the estate, is the original credo of the entire place: "Kare Killed A Kat. Here We Kill Kare."

And he sleeps in one of the same beds or beneath the same spruce lean-to along the lake to which Woodruff liked to retire after a night of hobnobbing and deal-making. It was one such deal that helped him, while he was charged with buying up land for a forest preserve, carve out this spectacular tract for himself at $12 an acre. The camp Woodruff built, and that his successors rebuilt, expanded and maintained, is not so much a shelter from the outdoors as an extension of it, fashioned from the spruce and birch that surround it.

In May, Dan Abrashoff, general manager of Lake Kora, whose previous stations include Keswick Hall (a hotel near Charlottesville, Virginia) and Glendorn (a 1,280-acre property in Bradford, Pennsylvania), arrived to help prepare the retreat for its first wave of guests, who will arrive in batches of 14 to 22 this summer. Lake Kora is not meant for dropping by; the minimum stay is four nights. And it will host only one group at a time.

Multigenerational travel is growing, and the prototypical guests will be collections of
grandparents, parents and children. Or they might be old friends celebrating a milestone birthday—Big Chill types who have matured by now into millionaires. For the oldest among them, the experience may offer a nostalgic taste of summer camp, though on an unimaginably grander scale; for the youngest, it will be an escape from their over-scheduled, citified lives. To everyone, it will mean a chance to bond over hiking and swimming and boating and fishing, though 1,000 acres afford lots of places to flee or hide whenever all that togetherness proves cloying.

Its season will run, at least for starters, from July 1 until October 1, long enough to showcase the fall foliage that more than a century ago led a traveler to liken the surrounding hills to a Persian rug. Assembling such far-flung and well-heeled groups takes time; a year may pass before the demand for Lake Kora becomes clear. It may be expensive—$13,875 a night for the first 14 people and another $525 for each additional person—but, insists Graves, maybe not as dear as it appears. “For someone contemplating taking 22 people to Europe or the Caribbean, this starts to look like a bargain,” she says. Already there are takers: In July three generations of a Midwestern family arrive for eight nights.

They will stay in bedrooms in seven buildings, including the main house, a boathouse and the “tree house” lodge that the widow Garvan long used, so named not because she shimmied up into it every night but because its bed was made from a single tree. (At its head is a tangle of branches.) There’s nothing refined or snobby in any of them. Once, a grateful guest sent Woodruff a fancy French clock, but the very thought of such a thing at Kamp Kill Kare, the New-York Tribune reported, “sent chills up and down Mr. Woodruff’s back.”

ally Longo, the very accommodating chef who has lived in the vicinity her entire life and runs a local catering business, is steeped in indigenous northern New York fare: My breakfast was a locavore’s grand tour, with sausage from Flying Pigs Farm in Shushan, milk from Battenkill Valley Creamery in Salem, honey from Betterbee in Greenwich and medium amber syrup from Rathsbin’s Maple Sugar House in Whitehall. One thing that needn’t be imported is the water, which has tested purer than the bottled kind.

Longo knows her heirloom meals as well as her heirloom tomatoes: During my evening she prepared—and Juanita Vandyke graciously served—what she called her “Vanderbilt Dinner”: oysters Rockefeller, roast-beef tenderloin and popovers, the sort of meal that Woodruff and his cronies might once have enjoyed after drinks in the adjacent casino. (She can also cook French, Indian or Middle Eastern.)

Shortly before her death in 1979, Mabel Brady Garvan tried unsuccessfully to donate the estate to the local museum. Her heirs then sold it to Kora Woods, an entity controlled by chemical heiress Ann Mallinckrodt. She never to be replaced. What was once the icehouse is now a spa.

Naturally, amenities include TV and WiFi. And, perhaps as a nod to more Pacific contemporary tastes, most of the muskets, spears, knives, swords, tomahawks and bows and arrows that once festooned the walls have been put away. It’s part of a general emptying out—the Garvans gave their precious American collection to Yale, and most of the tchotchkes and bric-a-brac once scattered about has also disappeared—that has left some old-timers grumbling that Lake Kora is coming to resemble the antiseptic interiors of a Pottery Barn catalogue. A universal gym and treadmill have been installed, but almost begrudgingly, as if to force people outside. No motorboats are permitted, let alone Jet Skis. The baseball bats in the closet are themselves historic, with the signatures of old-time stars like Johnny Pesky, Stan Musial and Lou Boudreau carved in the wood. They could well have been used by the Yale and Harvard baseball teams that used to visit, whose ancient cleat marks still dot the playroom floors.

On that fateful day in September 1901 when President McKinley was shot in Buffalo, it took Timothy Woodruff, who was off in the hills somewhere with visiting newspapermen, an hour and a half to hear the news. While McKinley did not survive, Woodruff did: Isolation—and escape from a world that, even then, was too much with us—was part of Lake Kora’s appeal. Far from being bothered by the spotty cell phone coverage, I considered it a blessing. But unlike so many of the place’s charms, this one proved fleeting: Before the first official guests arrive, a booster (well camouflaged, of course) designed to pull in and amplify signals off the lake will be installed on the island.

It’s a pity, but alas, there are some people who think themselves too vital to civilization to be cut off from it for very long. But if you’re always so well connected, how can you ever really Kill Kare? •

Lake Kora is located at Sagamore Road, in the hamlet of Raquette Lake, New York; 800-495-9961; lakekora.com.