



Ready,
set,

Mallory

Kick back at the cottage? Not these folks. They'd much rather do anything but

By Kate Barker Photography Sandy Nicholson

dan

Mallory stood from his vantage point above the tree canopy at dusk. Moments before, he had dinged his head on a closed top hatch when he straightened his six-foot-plus frame. Now the hatch was open and Dan, 61, surveyed his domain from one of the many Mallory-made structures on his sprawling property on and around Grey Owl Lake, near Parry Sound. We had bombed through the bush for 20 minutes on an ATV, with me riding shotgun, to get to this tree blind before dark.

“Want to come up?” He was serious.

I slapped away a buzzing cloud of mosquitoes and politely demurred. No way in hell, was what I actually thought. Dan smiled and looked around.

“Every family member has spent at least one night up here,” he said mildly, as though the blind were a bunk bed and not a few narrow platforms hanging precariously 18 metres off the forest floor, reached by a series of axe-hewn wooden rungs snaking straight up a towering white pine in the middle of the bush.

If you're among Mallorys, you must climb. There are ladders and makeshift bridges strewn everywhere, in every structure. You even have to cross a makeshift bridge, some six metres in the air and sans railing, to eat dinner on their still-under-construction deck at the front of the new cottage. It's as though the family, all much taller than average, were that much more comfortable a little bit closer to the stratosphere. Perhaps it's not surprising, given that four of them summited Mount Everest in 2008, including daughter Laura, who, then 20, was the youngest Canadian woman to stand at the top of the world. Dan Mallory has climbed all Seven Summits (the highest mountain on every continent), with

Adam Mallory looks down from a tree blind. The high perch is just one of many hand-built structures scattered across the family's extensive property near Parry Sound, including log bridges, ladders, several cabins, and a new cottage for the whole family. Previous pages: Dan Mallory watches his sister Nancy (far left), writer Kate Barker, and his wife, Barbara, leap together into Grey Owl Lake.





The cabin is a marvel, made by hand on-site with supplies hauled in on sleds

either his wife, Barbara, 60, Laura, or one or both of his sons, Adam, 29, and Alan, 27. Dan has also completed the Ironman World Championship in Hawaii, run the Boston Marathon, cycled countless century races (100 miles), skied just as far in the Canadian Ski Marathon, participated in many other triathlons and marathons, and taken part in dozens of adventure races with his family, including *Raid the North Extreme*, arguably Canada's toughest adventure race, spanning more than 500 km over six grueling days (in 2007, in BC's remote Haida Gwaii and Prince Rupert, they came in eighth). How did Dan ever find the time to train for all of these epic races with three kids and an insurance company to run? "He had a great wife and a great staff," Barbara answers for him.

This weekend, Team Mallory is prepping for yet another momentous slog—this time it's the 24- to 30-hour Wilderness Traverse adventure race to be held in the Haliburton Highlands in a few weeks' time. Not that they train, per se. "Our lifestyle is our training," Dan says. The race includes a 35-km trek through Crown land, twice that by bike, another 35 km by paddle and portage, and a 10- to 12-km trek to the finish line. No biggie, if you happen to be a Mallory.

Dan scrambles down from the tree blind. "Ready?" he asks amiably. I sincerely doubt it. But our next stop, Long Lake, is only a short, if gnarly, hop by ATV in near darkness, up and down a few stomach-lurching gullies, before we arrive at the site of a log cabin that

Dan built in the bush in the 1970s. The place seems closer to circa 1870.

"It's black spruce, from the nearby swamp," Dan explains. He needed timber that grew straight, was close by, and was relatively easy to manhandle. The logs are all roughly six inches in diameter. I run my hand along the exterior wall because it's the kind of thing you just have to touch. Dan understands. He cut down each tree himself and stripped every log of its bark in the spring—the only time you can do it, he tells me, because the sap is in the bark and it's easy to peel off. I love the *Little House on the Prairie* detail, and Dan is full of this sort of old-fashioned advice. He has his trapper's licence, can name every tree in the bush, and taps 40 to 60 sugar maples a year to make his own syrup. The cabin is the only structure on the edge of the small lake, where, Dan says, he has landed monster pike and bass; no one else comes here to fish.

Adam and his girlfriend, Marie-Pierre Schippers, wearing headlamps in the

A rare restful moment for Dan Mallory, in the Mallory Marsh cabin (opposite). Adam swings into the air above Grey Owl Lake (top). Following pages: The small Long Lake log cabin Dan built by himself in the 1970s (top left) contrasts with the much larger new cottage under construction (bottom right). The Mallorys are deft at recycling, using old missile carriers for storage (top left) and an oil tank for a hot tub.



Mallory women have to pass the cottage test; girly girls need not apply



Laura Mallory crosses one of the family's log bridges, followed by Adam's girlfriend, Marie-Pierre Schippers. The sleeping cabin (opposite) was built in the early 1980s and has electricity but no running water. Despite being only 12' by 16', the cabin was big enough to serve as the cottage for a family of five for 27 years.

now gloomy interior, are readying the cabin for the night. They silently move about, sweeping up mouse turds. I cough delicately; this is no place for asthmatics. There is a tiny relic of a woodstove tucked into a corner. Apparently, Barbara channelled Caroline Ingalls to cook a Christmas turkey on it once when the kids were small. It was also here that their son, Alan, proposed. He lit candles along the path from lake to cabin before popping the question. She said yes, but like all Mallory women, his girlfriend (and now wife), Natalie, first had to pass the cottage test. Barbara isn't exactly sure what was involved, but suffice to say girly girls need never apply. Marie-Pierre, a veteran adventure racer and a model of backwoods efficiency, has also clearly aced the test.

Earlier in the day, I tried to prove my own non-girly-girl status when Nancy Mallory (one of Dan's sisters), Barbara, and I jumped off a cliff into Grey Owl Lake near their new cottage. I was surprised when we all linked hands to make

the leap. But that's how Mallorys do things—together. That was plenty daredevil enough for me. Not so for Adam or Dan. A tall tripod hangs over the cliff. Constructed of three trees, sun-bleached to bone white, the tripod is topped by an insubstantial platform—or, for the Mallorys, a diving board. A zipline runs behind it into the forest. Now Adam tests the structural integrity of the tripod by climbing it. In seconds, his six-foot-five body is up high enough for him to hang a heavy, industrial-looking steel hook, with a long rope attached, to a loop suspended from the top. A man of few words, he shims back down and pulls hard. His verdict: The tripod will hold, but we probably shouldn't use the platform.

It doesn't take long for Adam to scale a dilapidated shed set three metres back from the cliff face. He stands on the spongy moss roof and waits for Dan to throw him the rope. There is some discussion about how high he should hoist his body to avoid hitting the ground as he comes down. Then Adam pulls back, launches, tucks, and easily clears the unforgiving rock to swing out over the lake and fly off the end of the line, letting go a good eight metres above the water. The tripod holds. And Dan can't wait to be next. "He is motivated by lead-dog syndrome," Barbara says later. "There's a lot of that in the family." Dan war-whoops and achieves remarkable loft on his first swing. Then Adam goes again. Then Dan. No one else is tempted to try, though Laura doubtless would have, had she been there. {Continued on page 110}



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Just a typical Saturday afternoon at the Mallory cottage.

Next, the guys decide to unwind in the hot tub. The contraption would blend right in on the set of *Game of Thrones*; it looks like it was designed to kill via slow boil. "It's made out of 45-gallon oil tanks," Dan tells me. While filling it, containment is briefly lost when the hose springs a leak, but it's nothing Dan can't fix with duct tape. They light the fire underneath and eventually, Dan and Adam literally walk a plank to enter the hot tub and relax with a beer—something they rarely do. Relax, that is. Or drink.

The hot tub sits just in front of the family's new cottage, the one still under construction. Barbara can be found most days slinging a reciprocating saw or a nail gun with the same confidence she displays in backwoods kitchens that lack running water and electricity. Oh, and she designed the place herself. And makes it all sound like no big deal as she casually climbs a ladder to put up a few exterior boards. The board-and-batten siding and the majority of the posts and beams are made of timber from their property. There is a stack of tongue-and-groove black cherry in a corner of the main floor. Barbara told Dan she wanted hardwood flooring, so he found the cherry on the land. Dan's father gave them the birch for the stairs. The shingles are an eco-friendly, recycled tire product.

"The whole purpose of the cottage is to keep the family together," Barbara says. "So we gave each of the kids a room to do with what they wanted." Adam's room has a loft made from a tree trunk, and a swinging bed. "Adam and I spent a weekend back in the bush so he could find a tree in the swamp," Barbara explains. "It was awful." Alan, who now lives in Chile, also has a queen-sized bed, which he made, hanging on ropes from the ceiling, and a winding staircase, which he also constructed, around a ridiculously large tree. Laura enjoys a five-metre window, overlooking the lake, in her room on the lower level, with some elevated seating. The cottage's central living area is vast—big enough to eventually seat 20. There is also a spot designed just for Dan's prize moose head. It takes me a while to

notice the absence of a TV. If one were to arrive, which would be unlikely, it would be tucked away in another room. "If we put it out here," Barbara says, "everyone will just sit around watching movies, and I don't want that."

The TV-shy family has always created its own peculiar entertainment. In winter, Dan and Barbara would pick a winding route through the bush and line it with lanterns made of tin cans punched with star and moon patterns. The local kids would follow the path, carrying candles in Mason jars decorated with coloured tissue paper. The evening traipse through the forest was magical enough on its own, but the *pièce de résistance* came at the end, when Dan lit a tree on fire. He scouted a hollowed-out tree that was still standing. "Preferably yellow birch," he says, "because they would be tinder-dry inside and go up like a Roman candle." The kids loved it, especially when the woodpecker holes shot out sap incendiaries. Everyone would stand around watching the tree burn.

Just a typical winter evening with the Mallorys.

The Mallory compound on Grey Owl Lake began as a single lodge in the 1930s. Since then, the family has added significant parcels to the property, including 100-acre lots deep in the bush that most people wouldn't even know how to access. Dan would trail-blaze, with only a compass to guide him, assessing the standing timber on the land. The structures around the lake include the new main cottage, Dan's parents' place (built in the '80s), others used by Dan's siblings, and his own family's original cottage, where I am camped out—a 12' by 16' bunkie, which the Mallorys used for 27 years. It's hard to imagine Barbara caring for little kids in the cramped cabin, with only a three-sided sleeping loft above, but then I remember that this is a woman who cheerfully cooked a Christmas turkey in the bush. Sleeping feels precarious, and must have been a worry when the kids were small. Dan took the precaution of stringing the access hatch in the middle of the loft floor with macramé. It wasn't unusual to have to fish a sleeping kid out of the netting in the morning. There is no safety net now, only a deer head on guard next to my pillow. I fall asleep

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wondering when and where Dan bagged it, and where he hunted down the black bear that is now a rug in the loft.

Early in the morning, Laura arrives from her overnight nursing shift at the Parry Sound hospital and isn't about to spend a relaxing day on the couch. By mid-morning, she and Marie-Pierre are dressed for some serious mountain biking. Both have several adventure races looming. They load bikes into a car and head off to another side road, from which they will set out through the bush to Mallory Marsh, a hunting cabin the family built by hand deep in the forest. Dan and Adam drive ATVs onto a trailer and Barbara packs a cookout lunch. Just getting there, evidently, will be an adventure.

We arrive at the side road and pull over. Laura and Marie-Pierre disappear into the bush on their bikes while I pick blackberries, which are perfectly ripe, for humans and bears. Once again, I am Dan's ATV passenger as he leads the way, with dogs Daisy and Jazper caroming ahead, four kilometres into the bush. The Mallorys forged this trail, if you can call it that. I often get out of the saddle so Dan can drive up an apparently impassable rocky cliff or gun over a fallen tree. Once, Barbara dismounts her ATV and Adam gets on to steer the vehicle up and down a steep, boulder-strewn gully: the Mallory version of valet parking. And all along the way, Dan constantly points out hidden details. An old blaze—a vertical axe notch in a tree, now healed to form a distinctive bump in the bark—becomes obvious only after he explains what it is. A scar where a bear has clawed a tree's bark away, and another where a moose has rubbed its antlers, are minutiae Dan notes automatically. "That's calf dung," he remarks, as we pass a pile of what I see as nondescript pellets, but now know as moose poo.

Laura and Marie-Pierre have beaten us to Mallory Marsh. They lounge in chairs on the deck, sipping from water bottles, their legs scratched by brambles, their bikes mud caked. They don't appear to be sweating very much. The cabin overlooks a wetland, now drier than usual owing to the recent breakup of a beaver dam. Old beaver lodges dot

the marsh. A great blue heron flies high overhead. We are clearly the only people around for miles.

The cabin is a marvel, considering that every component was handmade on-site, and all the equipment had to be hauled in on sleds during the winter. The roof is steep and overhangs the porch. An owl has taken up residence under its pitch, and the beam below is covered in its droppings. A rope—used to hang deer—coils down front and centre over the deck from that beam. Made of massive, stripped logs, the cabin is much larger than the one at Long Lake. There are propane camp stoves and two woodstoves, one an ancient specimen from the 1930s that Dan says really belts out the heat. There are chairs, a table, and a couch. Adam rigged up some solar-powered interior lights. Barbara stocked the cabin with pans, dishware, and cutlery. She immediately organizes lunch, while Dan lopes down to the shore to light a fire.

After munching on hot dogs and hamburgers in a light but pleasant drizzle, we pack the gear back up and load the ATVs. The dogs aren't slowed down any by the multiple burnt-offering treats, and bolt off ahead of us into the bush. Twenty minutes later, Dan pauses before a particularly rickety log bridge. Laura and Marie-Pierre are about to carry their bikes across, but Dan urges Laura to ride instead. "Come on, Laura!" he yells, standing in the stirrups. "It's only water!" Barbara tells him to let Laura proceed in her own time, but he eggs her on again. "Come on, Laura! You can do it!" And then, without hesitation, Laura rides her mountain bike across treacherous logs spanning a rocky creek two metres below. Then Dan exhibits some of that lead-dog quality Barbara had warned me about.

"Shall I get off?" I ask him, as we approach the highly questionable bridge.

"No," he says. And we gun across rotten logs and water and rock and air. And live. And smile.

Just another day with the Mallorys. 🐾

Kate Barker can say with certainty that she will never climb Mount Everest, but she did once swim from Alcatraz to San Francisco.

➤ Read Kate Barker's explore magazine story about the Mallory family's Mount Everest climb at cottagelife.com/mallory