

Canada has arguably the best to offer both budding and experienced canoeists for river adventures. Judy Waytiuk tells of her personal adventures in the Canadian water wilderness

Riding the river



All photographs supplied by Judy Waytiuk

It was the perfect, rugged Canadian image: canoe, wild rice bog, and a portage that could have been used 150 years ago by tough voyageurs conquering the savage northwest. The canoe snaked through the high green screen of wild rice toward the portage entry point. Plant shafts hissed along fibreglass. Seed-heads slapped our faces. Wild rice bounced onto our hat brims.

As we nudged shore, I hopped out of the bow and sank butt-deep in slime. My stern partner threw his weight sideways to counter-balance while I grabbed the gunwale and pulled myself up from the bog. Floundering soggly onto hard ground, I helped drag the canoe up, shouldered my pack load, and squished onto the narrow, stony path, grinning like a fool while my water socks dribbled goblets of muck.

I would rinse the green goo out of my shorts at the other end of the two-kilometre portage. There's plenty of fresh, clean water in northern Saskatchewan; almost half the world's supply of fresh water flows in Canada, most of it through the Canadian Shield that covers fully half this vast country's land mass. There are as many kilometres

of inland waterways in Canada as there are on the rest of the earth. Many of them, close to towns and cities, can be paddled on short day trips or week-long flat-water excursions, where a dozen or more nature-lovers, led by a couple of paddling veterans, learn basic paddling techniques. Some more distant raging, rapid-studded streams should only be attempted if two or three novices are accompanied by veteran guides, one per novice. The fiercest, most remote of Canada's rivers should be tackled only by experienced whitewater canoeists.

I am not an experienced paddler. I am accustomed to simple, dignified pre-dinner turns around peaceful bays in tame cottage country. Hence, my first extended paddle took place under the watchful veteran eyes of CanoeSki Discovery Company's



Cliff Speer, on the tamest bit of northern Saskatchewan's Churchill River system. A four-day, sixty-kilometre journey punctuated by five portages, it was the perfect beginner's jaunt through a series of glassy channels of floating, flowering fields of water-lilies framed by dark fir forests, and across lakes and bays where light summer breezes feathered up tiny, choppy waves.

There were lazy breakfasts, swims in the black, cold water of million-year-old lakes, loving icy water on sweaty, itchy skin, and long lunches followed by light naps stretched out on the sun-warmed granite of stone islands. Though mosquitoes around dusk campfires regularly tormented our group of a dozen and my long-neglected muscles ached to the bone for the first two days, the landscape worked instant magic on my tired, urban-addled mind.

Loons sang us to sleep under bright moonlight and serenaded in the mornings while we sipped coffee,

ate hot cornbread studded with wild cranberries, and breathed morning air fresh as a stack of pressed linen. We lost count of soaring bald eagles after the first morning. Beaver, otter or muskrat dunked abruptly when our canoes passed in marshy channels, and at dusk occasional moose or caribou swam, almost submerged to avoid the hungry swarms of mosquitoes, from island to island. We saw no bears; we did see their scat. Portages took us through thin, silent forests of tall pines, stepping carefully along high, narrow rock escarpments jutting out from thick carpets of pine needles. Four days later, when we pulled into tiny Stanley Mission on the Churchill River, I was hopelessly hooked on wilderness paddling. So, when the opportunity arose, I leapt at the chance to conquer northern Manitoba's remote Seal River with Wilderness Spirit Adventures guides Rob Currie and Mark Loeven and American photographer Eric Lindberg.

The allure of the Seal

I knew there would be no wild rice bogs here, no plunges into chill, sweet water. The Seal, one of Canada's wildest waterways, springs to life out of remote Shethane Lake in northern Manitoba and flows to Hudson Bay. It is one of those fierce, remote rivers that should be tackled only by experienced whitewater canoeists, for whom this jaunt is the wild ride of a lifetime. Each summer, only a few dozen paddlers tackle the Seal's 42 sets of rapids, which include savage stuff studded with jutting chunks of worn rock and liberally peppered with joltingly-high waves, nasty cross-currents, and hidden stone ledges. As the river flows north, its landscape shifts from wild Canadian Shield pine forests to boggy taiga and stark tundra, a changing vista that's one reason it was declared a Canadian Heritage River. Like many northern Canadian paddle routes, the Seal is not easy to reach. But that's part of its allure. Paddlers fly from Winnipeg to the remote mining city of Thompson, then on to the tiny, isolated Dene Cree community of Tadoule Lake on an old propeller-driven bush plane

Tour tips...

- ... The Canadian Heritage River System (www.chrs.ca) lists Canada's Heritage Rivers and paddle routes.
- ... Trips in this story were taken under the guidance of CanoeSki Discovery Company www.canoeski.com and Wilderness Spirit Adventures www.wildernessspirit.com.
- ... For more on canoeing in Canada, check the Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association (www.paddlingcanada.com) or Out There, a compendium of Canadian travel and adventure resources (www.out-there.com).



that seats perhaps a dozen passengers. A freight plane follows, carrying canoes and camping equipment. From Tadoule Lake, paddlers may take a day or more to cross Tadoule and Shethane Lakes before reaching the Seal's headwaters to take on the ten-day, 260-kilometre water trek to Hudson Bay.

As we began the trip, rapid-running seemed easy enough for even this nervous whitewater novice. The first rapids offered up a few hundred metres of impudent little waves that made for a bouncy ride but posed no real threat.

The second set, an hour later, was another story. The leading canoe, paddled by Mark and Eric, tilted, swerved, and skewed alarmingly through 'haystack' waves towering a metre above the spray-skirted bow of the canoe where I kneeled, numb with terror. Rob, my sternman, bellowed, "Paddle, Judy! Forward!"

Blankly, I obeyed. The canoe lurched and bucked, drenching me and filling my spray-skirt girdle with gallons of icy river water. We bounced down another half-kilometre of one of Mother Nature's more extravagant water tantrums and finally 'eddie'd out' into a quiet spot at the bottom.

"Deer in headlights!" Rob hooted while I spluttered and bailed gallons of icy water out of my sprayskirt. "That's what you looked like – a deer caught in headlights!"

It was the best fun I'd had in years. I wanted more.

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Did you know...

... Formed more than two billion years ago, the Canadian Shield is the oldest exposed piece of our planet, and was scoured clean ten thousand years ago by Ice Age glaciers? You can still find 'chatter marks' where glaciers skidded a little. ... The word canoe comes from the Carib word Kenu: a boat dug out of a tree? Today, canoes can be made from wood and canvas, aluminum, fibreglass, plastic, and exotic lightweight Kevlar or Royalex.



smoke. At night, we camped on sandy shelves overlooking the tempestuous river, and tried to avoid crushing ground cover of ripe wild blueberries as we moved about, scooping berry snacks on the way to and from the fire. As we left behind the hard granite and eskers (high sand ridges) of the Shield and moved into tundra, we pitched our tents on small crescents of riverside beach or in spongy spaces among willow and peat bogs where we foraged for Arctic cloudberrries.

Where the river ran quietly, we passed dignified families of Arctic swans, parents bracketing young, nervous signets. Occasionally, I wedged gloved fingers into crevice finger-holds in mid-rapid boulders, single-handedly holding our canoe in position while Rob fished for Arctic grayling for supper. On marshy river islets, agitated terns swooped overhead, protecting nests of fluff-headed chicks. Startled moose floundered to shore as we drifted by, 'rafted up' for mid-river lunches of apples, cheese, sausage and bread. As the days progressed, the river widened into a shallow, boulder-strewn channel where dozens of harbour seals slithered off sunning rocks and bobbed curiously past us. Finally, our canoes scraped the low tide stone bottom of the river's rocky tidal estuary at the edge of Hudson Bay. We slept that night in sleeping bags spread over a tarpaulin on the dirty wooden floor of a tiny fishing shack. On the next morning's high tide, we paddled out to a 40-foot launch waiting in the bay, to be plucked up and carried south to Churchill, where indoor plumbing and hot showers awaited, to be followed by massive cheeseburgers at Gypsy's Café.

Now that I know the thrill of conquering a heart-stopping 'Class V' rapid, flatwater paddling in Shield country has become a simple long-weekend pleasure. But there's plenty of room for both forms of wilderness canoeing in the wild tangle of forests, rivers and lakes that skeins the Canadian Shield's



scoured granite. Both forms offer, in their own ways, rides of a lifetime. And somehow, it seems fitting that one of the world's few remaining stretches of untouched wilderness should be explored by silent, respectful paddle blades. The native Cree people here tell legends of Wasagajack the trickster hero who, in their version of the flood myth, created the post-flood world by sending animals into the water to find a speck of dirt Wasagajack could use to re-make the land. The animals – beaver, muskrat – all failed, until the brave otter finally floated up, drowned,

its dead paws clutching the needed, precious bit of mud. The Cree ark was a giant canoe.



And I got it: two, three, four or more sets of rapids a day, some of them easy rides that rolled for seven or eight kilometres, others brief, boiling, breath-stopping furies. Undaunted by insect repellent, tiny, biting blackflies swarmed us constantly onshore, deflected only by netted 'bug-hats' or cooking fire

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