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canada's churchill river

the fix for a wilderness canoeing addict



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Photographer: Cliff Speer/Canoe Ski Discovery Co.

The Canadian wilderness is renowned for its pristine and scenic appeal. Flowing through this great tract of sparsely populated landscape are some of the finest canoeing rivers in the world. Adventure seekers in love with canoe camping are drawn to northern Canada to find undisturbed nature and tranquility far removed from the influence of civilisation. Explorers often find travelling a remote river by canoe to be the most fulfilling experience of their lives. In fact, for some it is an addiction; they have to get their fix of wilderness canoeing in order to recharge their urban-stressed psyche.

Peaceful Vehicle

What is it about paddling in canoe and camping in self-sufficient style on a wilderness waterway that has such an irresistible attraction? One clue may be found in exploring the roots of the boat itself. Today's recreational canoe is fashioned on the ancient Aboriginal birchbark craft which was the primary transport vehicle for the cultures that inhabited the boreal and tundra regions of North America for centuries. As such, the canoe provides a connection to a way of life that is inextricably a part of Canadian heritage and culture. Another clue is the capability of the canoe to transport one into another realm of reality – one that is removed from all that is distasteful about

Padding on a small lily-filled tributary of the Churchill River.



A storm lingers behind the gushing river.



Wilderness camping on the rocky shores of the Churchill River.



Canadian rock art.

modern civilisation with its noise and commotion. Several portages away from the road in many places in the Canadian wilderness you can find peace and quiet and sweet communion with nature.

There is a place in Canada's wilderness canoeing frontier that is steeped in Aboriginal culture and replete with untrammled nature. It is found in the most unlikely of places – a province well known for its prairie and endless wheat fields. The province is Saskatchewan and the waterway is the famous historic Churchill River. The Churchill is one of the most extensive and canoeable rivers in the world. In the language of the Woodland Cree whose traditional land the river flows through, the river is called Missinipi, meaning "Big Water".

The Churchill River has retained much of its pristine wilderness character because it is still relatively inaccessible except to the seasoned wilderness traveller. There are only 5 locations along its 1000 kilometre length in northern Saskatchewan where road access is possible, the remainder must be accessed by seaplane. The Churchill has so far, escaped the maw of industrial development – large mines are farther north, its forests haven't been commercially attractive and there is only one small hydro dam on its eastern extremity.

Wilderness canoeists exploring the Churchill River can set up camp anywhere

nature provides a smooth Precambrian rock beach or a clearing in the boreal forest. No reservations are required and there are no signposts indicating where to go.

The landscape is in many respects just as it was when early indigenous travellers used the river. Archaeological evidence of their passage appears at some 20 sites along the river's shoreline on Precambrian cliff faces in the form of intriguing displays of centuries-old rock paintings.

They are intriguing because nobody knows who created the art work or why. We only know a little bit about how the paintings were made and what natural materials were used to help make them so permanent.

Following indigenous travellers, European traders and explorers turned the Churchill into a "voyageur highway" for over a century in their quest for wild animal furs. Evidence of their passage up and down the river can occasionally still be found at campsites and along portage trails where archaeological artifacts like bone buttons and trade beads lie in the surface debris. Adding a touch of ancient culture and archaeology to a canoe camping trip on the Churchill River is akin to putting the icing on the cake!

Canoeing the Churchill is a fabulous wilderness experience for many reasons – clean water and warm enough for

refreshing swims; uncrowded, spacious camping; solitude and tranquility; undisturbed natural areas; and the opportunity to connect with river history and culture – more than enough to quell the cravings of the canoeing addict!

To find out more about canoeing opportunities or guided/outfitted trips, contact Tourism Saskatchewan (www.sasktourism.com) or two of Saskatchewan's most experienced canoe touring companies, Horizon's Unlimited (www.churchillrivercanoe.com) and CanoeSki Discovery Company (www.canoeski.com).

A note about the author:

Cliff Speer is a nationally certified canoeing instructor with a passion for exploring the Canadian wilderness. His adventure training and touring company, CanoeSki Discovery Co., specializes in wilderness canoeing and cross-country skiing instruction and tours. He resides in Saskatoon in the province of Saskatchewan.

Sun on the river after a thunderstorm.

