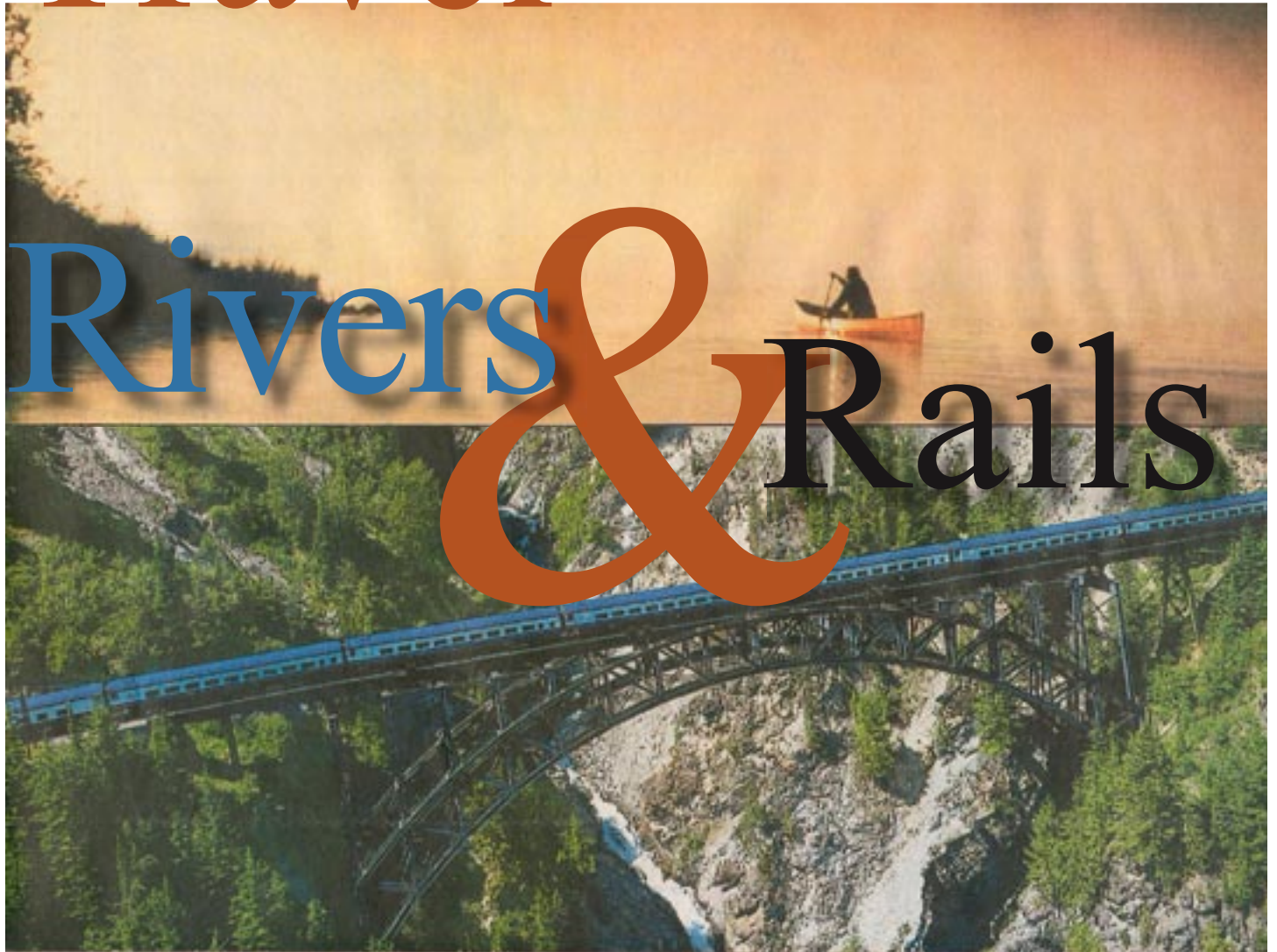


# Globe Travel



## HOW THE WEST WAS WON

Where would Alberta and Saskatchewan be without their steel highways and wild waterways? With both provinces celebrating their centennials, **LAURA ROBINSON** paddles Saskatchewan's fur-trading routes, and **JULIE OVENELL-CARTER** rides a luxury tourist train through Banff. The journeys offer close encounters with history — along with cliché-defying views and billions of mosquitoes

# Rivers

## RIVERS

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**T**here's a warm south wind, the sky is periwinkle with cotton clouds, and the sunshine is making this May day hotter than any I can remember in Toronto. At this point along the South Saskatchewan River — at the Hague ferry, 60 kilometres north of Saskatoon — the Prairie dwindles away and the birch, aspen and willow are starting to flourish along the banks. And best of all, I'm finally getting a spring tan.

Our group of six pushes off for a two-day, 42-kilometre paddle north along the South Saskatchewan River to Batoche, the historic site of the final confrontations between Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont, the Métis and the Canadian militia in 1885. The legacy of these nation-shaping events makes my journey all the more memorable, especially during Saskatchewan's centennial year.

Five hundred metres into the trip, Justin Scott, our Cree guide from the nearby Beardy's and Okemasis First Nation, points to a bald eagle circling above. Pelicans splash on the shore rocks, take flight and aim for the river. Cliff Speer, who owns CanoeSki Discovery, the Saskatoon-based guiding company I am travelling with, is our group's veteran paddler. He is working with an-

other knowledgeable Cree guide, Bonnie Hamilton, to open up the province's countless northern canoe routes to travellers seeking an intimate and cultural experience far from the crowded lakes and rivers of Banff or Algonquin Park.

I'm pretending to be a voyageur, the mainly native and Métis paddlers who stitched much of Canada together with each stroke and portage, trading furs when the Hudson's Bay Co. ruled Rupert's Land and the Northwest Territories.

"Pretend" is the operative word here. My pack is ergonomical and waterproof, my sleeping bag made of lightweight down. My lifejacket is feather-light, my sunscreen UV-30. Most important, I have an appointment with a massage therapist when I return to the Delta Bessborough hotel in Saskatoon. I am a 21st-century pretender who has wanted to paddle the rivers and lakes of central and northern Saskatchewan ever since I cross-country skied over them 13 years ago.

The real voyageurs, however, spent from the late 1600s to well into the 20th century in the North, trading for the furs that were so coveted by Europe's elite.



The South Saskatchewan carries paddlers past an old abandoned church overlooking the former town site of Fish Creek and a battlefield where a monument memorializes the militiamen killed in the 1885 Métis Uprising. **Photo credit: Henry Eng**

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An American White Pelican leads canoeists downstream towards Batoche. **Photo credit: Henry Eng**

# Goodbye to *urban angst*

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During brutal portages, furs were piled on their backs in 35-kilogram bundles. In order to save time, some piled several bundles together, balancing more than 70 kilograms over snow, muskeg or bush, all while facing harsh winds, black flies, mosquitoes, or all of the above, depending on the season.

With Speer at the helm, I'm being steered away from the culture that created Highway 401, SUVs and Botox. These waters were the first trans-Canada highways, before Canada was Canada. I paddle long and hard, and feel the urban angst drift out of my consciousness, replaced by the peace of the waters, riverbanks, coulees, meadows, and cliffs that surround me.

It's lunchtime already, so Speers heads for shore. We hike to a warm and sunny area along the grassy, tiered riverbank, and dig in. Every meal is deliciously simple — sandwiches, cookies, fresh fruit — providing us with the energy to paddle this route. If there weren't billions of mosquitoes, I would lie back and work on my tan.

Instead, Scott points out some of the indigenous plants near the shore. I have dried rosehip berries in my pocket that I collected at the Hague ferry, and find more here. He squishes one open and tiny seeds appear. "You know how native women use glass beads brought by the Europeans?" he asks. "Before they got here, these were our women's beads." He pulls the tiny things out of the pulp. How many seeds would it take to cover the top of a moccasin? How much patience?

We paddle about five more kilometres and pull onto the shore again. Speers has found the trail to the Fish Creek monument, which memorializes the militiamen killed in the second rebellion of the Métis. It's located in a meadow separated from the river by a slope of scratchy bush where hordes of mosquitoes lurk. I put my head down and run, following Speers over a barbed wire fence. And suddenly, there it is: A rectangular obelisk inscribed with the names of the 10 dead militia.

As we paddle away a few seconds later — the bugs really are bad — Speers explains that even though the Métis and native warriors were greatly outnumbered, they held the upper hand. If Métis leader Gabriel Dumont's battle plan had been followed, instead of Louis Riel's, things might have unfolded much differently, he says, echoing the feelings of many locals and historians.

The Métis were a strong presence in the Northwest Territories in the 19th century, as this part of Canada was then called. They had won the battle at Duck Lake, and had held their own with only a few men at Fish Creek. Dumont, a warrior, was all for ambushing the weakened troops, but Riel preached peace. Later, against militia re-enforcements at Batoche, from May 9 to 12, 1885, the Métis were defeated, and Sir John A. Macdonald's plan for a railway aimed at protecting Canadian sovereignty from encroaching Americans could proceed.

Speers points out the actual Fish Creek. Deep coulees would have hidden rebel snipers who picked off federal troops. Today, though, the

# Dinner is fresh fish & *bannock*

federal troops. Today, though, the waters are peaceful, and with the next 10 kilometres going by in a flash we arrive at our camp — Petite Ville — the Métis wintering grounds from 1870 to 1874. Today, it is a large, level meadow surrounded by farmland, and I search for a space devoid of cow pats. Karen Tadei, who owns the land and joins us for dinner, tells me the patties are so old I needn't worry.

Dinner is fresh fish and bannock supplied by Scott, tossed salads, lots of herbal tea, and much good-natured ribbing at my expense. Turns out the same person who can't put up a tent properly — mine somehow opens into a wild-rose patch — is also a vegetarian. And just as I think I am no longer comic relief, the tea and I go flying as I trip over a fossilized cow patty.

This far north, morning arrives at 4 a.m. with grey skies, a pitter-patter on my tent, and a chilly north wind. We have some chop on the river as the breeze meets the southern current and argues with it.

Even with the headwind, we make good time, and lunch comes sooner than I expect. But temperatures have dropped drastically to around 10 C, and even with long underwear, fleece, a vest and my lifejacket, I am the next thing to frozen when I stop paddling.

We make one more pit stop, and then paddle until we pull out at Batoche. Here, we meet our shore guide, Lee Cardinal. We walk up the historical Carlton trail — the main trade route between Fort Garry (Winnipeg) and Fort Edmonton — and even though I am familiar with

the story of Riel, Dumont and the Rebellion, my visit to this restored village takes me back to the hardships of 1885. We can still see the holes from the Gatling gun used by **the militia on the exterior of the Caron house. Inside it is cozy and inviting, and period-costumed guides explain everything in great detail, from the social significance of an intricate travelling trunk to the importance of the French family bible. Outside, the cemetery speaks of families that lost as many as five children to tuberculosis or cholera. During and after the battles, when the militia controlled Batoche, women and children hid in the wilderness. Many died.**

We spend most of the afternoon in the village, then load up the canoes and drive to the nearby Our Lady of Lourdes site, where each summer thousands make a pilgrimage to the spot where the Virgin Mary was apparently sighted several times. It is a restful and beautiful natural setting, and Lawrence Eyahpaise Jr., who has come from Beardy's First Nation to drum, sing, and talk a little about Cree **language, culture and history, meets us as we start our last dinner together.**

The skies have cleared. I close my eyes to the evening sun and hear the poplars rustling with the drum. There are nine of us now for dinner, as Scott's and Eyahpaise's wives join in. Later, I return to Saskatoon's Bessborough hotel tired and stiff, but with a smile on my face and the drum beat still in my head.

*Special to The Globe and Mail*

# Paddle the historic wilderness

## Pack your bags

### OUTFITTERS

**CanoeSki Discovery:** 1618 9th Ave. N., Saskatoon; info@canoeski.com; www.canoeski.com; 306-653-5693.

Offers a range of all-inclusive guided canoe tours, from a one-night Urban Canoe-Camping trip along the South Saskatchewan River (\$195 a person) to the 11-night Clearwater Heritage package in Clearwater River Wilderness Park (\$2,495 a person).

**Churchill River Canoe Outfitters:** La Ronge; www.churchillrivercanoe.com; 306-635-4420.

### HISTORIC SITES

**Batoche National Historic Site:** www.pc.gc.ca/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/index\_e.asp; 306-423-6227.

**Duck Lake Regional Interpretive**

**Centre:** www.dlric.org; 1-866-467-2057.

**Petite Ville Restoration Foundation:** cgermann@cyr.gov.sk.ca; 306-373-4476.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Delta Bessborough:** 601 Spadina Cres., Saskatoon; www.deltahotels.com; 1-800-268 1133. The grand dame of Saskatoon since the 1930s. Spectacular view of the South Saskatchewan and Broadway Street bridge. Feather pillows, wonderful walking trails and post-canoe massages.

### RECOMMENDED READING

*Les gens libre-Otipemisiwak: Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930*, Diane Paulette Payment, Environment Canada, 1990.

*The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Metis*, Walter Hildebrandt, Environment Canada, 1985.

*Canoeing the Churchill: A Practical Guide to the Historic Voyageur Highway*, Greg Madchildon and Sid Robinson, Canadian Plain Research Centre, University of Regina Press, 2002.

### MORE INFORMATION

For details on Saskatchewan's northern river routes, visit the website of veteran canoeist Bill Layman: www.out-there.com/BL.htm.

**Tourism Saskatchewan:** 1-877-237-2273 or 306-787-9600; www.sask-tourism.com.

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## Paddling through history

The South Saskatchewan River flows through Batoche, the site of the final confrontations between Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont, the Métis and the Canadian militia in 1885.



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