

INTO THE WILD by Liz Schaffer

Embrace the nomadic life and the joys of a canoe, for it's clear that good things happen when you go in search of adventure.

When travelling through some of the globe's more remote locations you're likely to have a moment of clarity. Miles from normality, you feel like you've found another world, a place where only your immediate reality matters. For me this happened on the Keele River in the Sahtu Region of the Northwest Territories. I'd been paddling in the bow of a canoe for ten days when, late on a sunny summer evening, the water around me became a reflected mass of rose gold clouds, the perfect mirror of the sky above. With no discernible horizon, it was as if I was travelling through a dreamscape where down was up and up was down; the surreal setting a reminder that in this world there is true, untameable beauty. And to uncover it, I'd recommend travelling north.

Along the Keele River you'll encounter the kind of landscape they envisioned when they first thought of the sublime. It's a setting that makes you feel small, dwarfed by the surroundings. There are mountains chiselled away by wind and rain, the last patches of summer snow clinging to their peaks, and marbled cliff faces seemingly painted into the scene. But rather than feeling overwhelmed, you're honoured. It is difficult to find something so majestic, so much bigger than yourself. And here it is, not all that far from the Arctic Circle, a region where many landmarks remain nameless and a canoe is the most desirable form of transportation.

Northern Soul

I was here on a 12 day Keele River trip with Canoe North Adventures, a travel company that began in 1987 because of a newsletter. Al Pace, who founded Canoe North Adventures with Lin Ward, has been making pottery for decades and, from his Ontario studio, would send newsletters to those who purchased his works. One year, after paddling through Canada's far north with friends, he decided to share his experience - and continued to do so in subsequent newsletters until people pointed out that they'd quite like to experience this wilderness for themselves.

It's not surprising to learn that Pace's words inspired wanderlust. He is after all the consummate storyteller. Around nightly campfires he'll regale you with tales of his clammers over the Golden Stairs - a near vertical part of the Chilkoot Trail forged during the Klondike Gold Rush - and a Canadian youth spent upon the country's waterways. His travels have infused his pottery, inspiring shapes, oxides and glazes that capture Canada. Look upon one of his adventure cups and you can't help but picture the surrounding mountains.

Adventure cups are part of a vital ritual on Canoe North Adventures' expeditions. These pieces of brown, blue and green stoneware are handed out each evening and filled, as the night progresses, with various forms of glorious alcoholic liquid. This is Happy Hour,

a time to come together, cast aside thoughts of aching bodies and enjoy the company. Each cup bears an animal, matched to our group's 16 trippers. These pairings seem increasingly fitting as the days unfold; a moose for the gentle giant, a wise owl for the quiet wit and for me, the foreign paddling novice, a caribou. As it turns out, this elusive animal isn't the smartest being in the Northwest Territories.

We were joined on the river by Ranger, a content creature who is part Corgi, part Husky and entirely loveable. He bounded into canoes, only stirring when a wave is rude enough to crash over the bow, was unfazed by his surroundings and was besotted with bacon. As a result, winning his affection became more important to me than developing my canoeing capability. When he started accompanying me to the latrine, presumably picking up on my unnecessary bear paranoia, I felt nothing but affection.

Down the White Water

Canoe North Adventures eased us into paddling, spending the first few days reminding us how to lean into the current, pull ourselves through the water and balance while kneeling. It's about getting a feel for the river, calming the nerves and trusting your companions. And while paddling prowess proves handy, novices have nothing to fear. Indeed, I'd arrived feeling slightly uneasy about the impending white water yet quickly realised that such apprehension was unfounded. With a guide singing behind me and Pace and Ward forging a path, I discovered just how in control of the current we were and (with a smile impossible to fight) faced waves head on, welcoming the inevitable splash as an antidote to the heat of the day.

When canoeing, every day is different. Not only does the scenery change -the textured mountains of the Keele slowly evolving into the flatlands of the mighty Mackenzie River - but there are thrills to be sought. These may be obstacles like the brilliantly named Big Wave Corner or Boat Sucking Boil, a spot of fishing, or an afternoon passed attempting to out-paddle a storm. There was the excitement of seeing the Keele turn red after a mudslide or waking one dewy morning to find moose and caribou footprints meandering between the tents. Even the humble river swim seemed daring. Inviting as the clear water may appear, you must summon up the courage to fully submerge, your chest constricting as you dive beneath the icy surface. We passed hallowed gorp breaks (sugar-loading sessions where we devoured everything from trail mix to jerky) in our own ways too. Some would consult the map while others laid out life vests and napped along the rocky shore or foraged for pebbles, pockets and packs becoming weighed down as new speckled favourites were s-elected.

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As the journey progresses distances increase and this in itself is not without its challenges. Some days hurt, your body aching as you clamber out of the canoe, driven to continue by nothing more than the promise of gorp. But you wouldn't stop, would never

consider abandoning the adventure - even when the mountain you're paddling towards, which looks a little like a dinosaur, seems impossibly far away. For two weeks you are on the river and this is where you want to remain. There's just too much to see, too many waves to tackle, too many Happy Hours still to be had. Other days are a dream; afternoons spent barging up, four or eight canoes linked together as you ride the current backwards down the river with Ranger walking between the vessels. At such times you do occasionally tune out, lost in the landscape, your movements almost mechanical. Catching yourself, you realise this must be what it's like to let go, to relax and be completely in the moment. It's little surprise that sleep here is earned and often deep.

Arriving into camp for the night you feel like you've come home, that this is your space, your tiny pocket of wilderness. As we busy ourselves each evening constructing our orange tents, the guides work away on the communal areas that we came to view as little luxuries. The kitchen is a place for gathering, the fireside your wine bar and a particularly picturesque latrine a topic of conversation - ones overlooking the water and accessorised with antlers proving most popular.

Pace and Ward paddle together so rarely that, on this occasion, we had to visit Ward's favourite campground. Found by a creek, the pebbles of the riverbed give way to a grassy terrace and a rock face acts as the kitchen wall. While you can't help but play favourites, it's a difficult game as each site comes with its own charm. There are places where the water's reflection dances against boulders, wildflowers reign supreme and the fishermen among us swear they've found Nirvana. And then there's the spot where you open your tent at 1 a.m. and see the midnight sun bathe the land in a soft, golden light. Here, where daylight is determined to linger, a watch is highly advisable.

A Little Perspective

Members of our group had joined the Canoe North Adventures journey for different reasons. Some were inspired by literature, some keen to encounter their country's remote beauty and others were drawn by the promise of a good old fashioned adventure. All were Canadian and so took it upon themselves to introduce me to Canadiana. I heard the poetry of Robert Service, sang the songs of Stan Rogers and learnt that life in Canada's south is always improved by tire d'erable, hot maple syrup that is poured onto snow, cooled and rolled up like taffy. As summer camp is such an iconic part of a Canadian childhood, it seemed that everyone came with a wealth of canoeing and camping experience. Fire pits were no problem, cooking and cleaning rosters never debated and paddling advice keenly handed out.

It's almost odd how quickly a group can come together, personalities shining through as city formalities, and cares in general, are cast aside. It could seem daunting, canoeing 400 kilometres through the Northwest Territories, but these companions mean you're never alone and never too worried - even when they're attempting to convince you that porcupines explode and ground squirrels have a fondness for warmongering.

Given such tales, I felt prepared for the inevitable animal encounters. Our first occurred when we exchanged canoes for hiking shoes and set off up a mountain, leaping over streams and scrambling over rocks when necessary. Suddenly our ascent was interrupted by a commotion in the woods to our right. Trees here may be thin and low but they grow close together and all we could make out was the sound of something large and skittish. After a few uncomfortable moments of bracing ourselves for a bear appearance, a moose emerged, clearly trying to figure out what on earth we were, and promptly made for the path below, disappearing once more into the trees.

Moose are magnificent but my favourite moment was shared with a porcupine who I watched waddle along a sandy beach at 1 a.m. while my fellow travellers sipped Scotch and baked brownies over the fire, the sun low yet ever-present. These encounters mean different things to different people. For some birdsong is a chance to practice their harmonising and for others the sight of a crane may be a message from departed loved ones.

That's what this setting does. It adds meaning. As Pace explained from the stern of the canoe one day, Ranger asleep at his feet in a position most yogis yearn for, this is the sort of trip that inspires life changes. Travelling here you gain a degree of clarity. You forget your stresses and worries - how could you entertain them in a place so immense? - and instead become lost in the moments you have on the river; the beauty, adventure and joy. You find the fun in looking for stones, in feeling the sun on your back and the flow of the water, and embracing the life of a nomad. Why wait to experience true wilderness? This is the real world, the natural world, the one that matters.