

dip, dip
and swing

PADDLING THROUGH
SASKATCHEWAN'S LAC
LA RONGE PROVINCIAL
PARK — HOME TO
LOONS, BALD EAGLES
AND THE STILL-ACTIVE
STANLEY MISSION, THE
FIRST CHURCH IN
WESTERN CANADA

WILDERNESS

WOMAN

MEETS

THE

CANADIAN

SHIELD

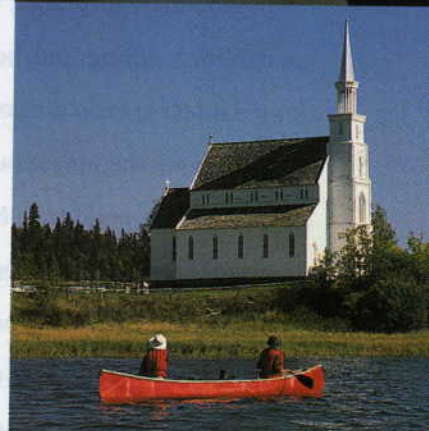
by judy waytiuk

Everyone else was gathered around the campfire, watching the sun set over the lake and sharing a pot of caribou stew. I was in a small tent, lying limp on my pool-toy air mattress. Afraid to move my aching arm and shoulder muscles, I listened gloomily to valve-hiss as my mattress deflated. It had taken 40 minutes to breathe air into the cursed thing.

I hated the Canadian Shield. I hurt all over.

I desperately wanted a taxi home.

The four-day canoe excursion from Lac la Ronge up the Churchill River system in northern Saskatchewan had sounded enthralling, back home in Winnipeg. Shield country is genuine wilderness, soaked in historic importance. La Vérendrye, Henry Kelsey, Radisson and Des Groseilliers all paddled the Shield's crazy spider web of waterways, using birchbark canoes modelled after those made by the Ojibwa and Algonquins. Those early "canots du nord," some big enough to carry a dozen men and over a tonne of cargo, hauled in trade goods and hauled out furs for the Hudson's Bay Company. By the mid-1800s, they had been phased out in favour of far sturdier, heavier wooden canoes.



The Canadian Northwest is scarcely more populated now than when the early explorers first opened it up. There is a sprinkling of cottages and fishing lodges and the occasional reserve, with a few hundred inhabitants. Some of these tiny settlements are reachable only by plane.

If skinny voyageurs, most of them shorter than your average 20th-century 12-year-old, could paddle leaky bark contraptions loaded with stinking furs along these rivers for months on end, then a city-bred, healthy, marginally post-menopausal woman like me could certainly manage a simple escorted jaunt in a feather-light Kevlar canoe — even if my canoe experience consisted of pre-dinner turns around a tiny bay at a friend's northwestern Ontario cottage.

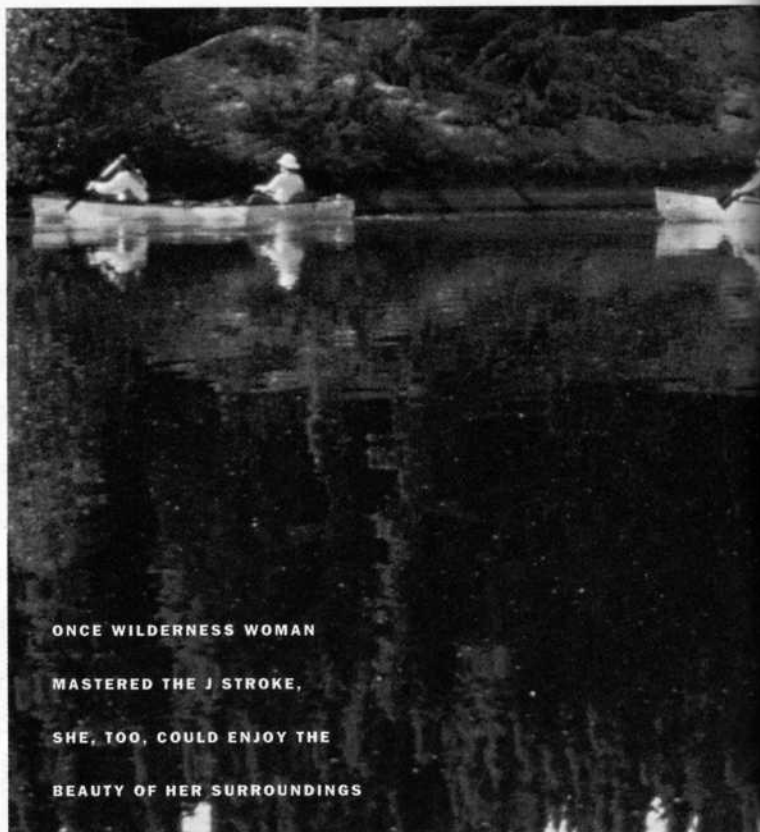
I cautiously selected the shortest trip available with CanoeSki Discovery Company. I borrowed a sleeping bag from my outdoorsy stepdaughter and bought a plaid air mattress from my local discount department store, adding to the shopping cart an appropriately sporty canvas pack, chosen from the Final Sale bin of back-to-school gear.

Wilderness Woman then hopped on a plane to Saskatoon, to be collected at the airport and whisked off by van to the vast, untamed Shield, where I and 14 other hardy Canadians would paddle forth to embrace Ma Nature.

We spent the first night at a Lac La Ronge Provincial Park campground, with privies, docks and a sand beach where we practised paddling and hoisting canoes and then gathered 'round a picnic table to survey our route map. There would be five portages, the longest a kilometre in length, and about 60 kilometres of paddling. No rapids, no whitewater; purely flatwater canoeing. We were issued compasses, route maps in sealed plastic bags and panic whistles with a list of coded signals. "Gather together" was a short toot. "I am in big, big trouble and urgently require assistance dealing with this large,

hairy bear" was one long blast. Piece of cake.

We "put out" next morning, in canoeist parlance, and would "pull in" four days later at Stanley Mission, where the first church in Western Canada was built and is still used by the local reserve. Patty, my assigned partner, and I warbled camp songs in off-key unison, sloppily poking along at the rear of the eight-canoe flotilla. "My paddle, clean and bright, flashing like silver," we howled at the sun. "Dip, dip and swing!"



Birds fled.

Periodically, we stopped paddling and carried canoes and 50-kilo packs over log-strewn, rocky portages through near-virgin northern boreal forest. Most portages require three trips after the canoes are pulled up and unloaded. A portage described as one kilometre is more like three, two of them traversed while staggering under clumsy weights. First, carry the canoe. Second, double back to the portage entry point

empty-handed. Third, haul packs — not just cute personal packsacks, but food in watertight plastic barrels and camping equipment crammed into bulky waterproof packs.

Then repack the canoe, distributing the load to preserve the exquisite balance that enables the canoe to knife efficiently through the water and to avoid roll-over. Lash the packs together with a rope, tying it to the gunwale so that, attached to the boat, packs could be retrieved even if you did roll over.

around my legs, I finally slept that night with the assistance of some non-prescription, codeine-laced muscle relaxants and painkillers. My tentmate, Tina, had helped me re-inflate the mattress after she unfurled her compact sleeping mat, which opened with a wrist flick and then inflated by itself. Tina diplomatically avoided gloating.

Breakfast was more painkillers swallowed in the privacy of the tent, followed by coffee, fruit and porridge by the fire.



PHOTO: JUDY WAYTRUK

Food, gear and tents weigh a lot. Paddling, when you're doing it wrong, strains muscles you never knew existed. At lunchtime, I skipped the group swim in favour of an exhausted but fitful nap on the rocks.

By dusk, trapped with 14 tree-hugging lunatics on a stone island in the middle of nowhere, Wilderness Woman was an unhappy camper. I hurt everywhere. Morose on the rubber mattress, sleeping bag bunched in a sloppy tangle

Cliff, the trip leader, had watched his group on Day One, and swapped people around on Day Two. He put me with Don and corrected my stroke, showing me where to grip the paddle and how to pull with my lower arm, using the upper arm solely to orient the paddle and never raising the upper arm higher than the shoulder. I had been flailing inefficiently, I learned. I was supposed to be doing the J stroke — so named because the paddle blade should trace the shape of a lower-case "j" through



the water. Dragging the paddle in a 180-degree sweep instead, as I had been doing, just wastes strength. (Don called it the “weekend cottage stroke,” but I later learned less diplomatic outdoor enthusiasts call it the “goon stroke.”) Switch from one side to the other periodically, Don added, and — since two canoeists paddling on the same side can tip the boat — warn your partner to change also by yelling “Switch!”

By lunchtime, I was stroking properly and beginning to enjoy the scenery. I even joined the noon swim, throwing myself with the others into a dark lake almost a million years old, loving the icy water on sweaty, itchy skin.

That evening, Tina, who was the tour’s official botanist, showed us how to tell wild cranberries from bearberries. Both plants are ground-huggers. But the bearberry leaf is plumply curved while the cranberry leaf is flatter and duller in colour. The bearberry is apparently so named because bears are too stupid to know the difference. So are amateur canoeists without a botanist handy. The bearberry is dry, bitter and foul-tasting.

Loons sang us to sleep that night, their tremolos pouring across the lake and tumbling through the pines around our tiny tents. They called us awake the next morning. The bird-watching veterinarian from Saskatoon sighted them through her binoculars and counted 11 clustered in a bay opposite the rock promontory on which we were all perched. Listening to loon song, we sipped coffee, ate hot cornbread studded with wild cranberries and breathed morning air fresh as a stack of pressed linen. Strangely, I no longer hurt anywhere. In fact, I was eager to hop into the canoe and get going.

That day we lost count of bald eagles. We paddled through a wild rice bog to reach a portage entry point. The green screen of stalks batted at our faces and scattered seed into the canoe. The portage took us through a thin, silent forest of tall pines, high along a narrow rock



DAYS AND NIGHTS IN
SHIELD COUNTRY,
LEARNING TO TELL
CRANBERRIES
FROM BEARBERRIES
AND SWIMMING IN A
LAKE ALMOST A
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escarpment jutting out from a thick carpet of pine needles.

After supper, we swatted mosquito swarms while Tina told us bedtime stories about Wasagajack, the trickster hero of Cree legends. In the Cree version of Noah's Ark, the trickster created the post-flood world by sending animals into the water to find a speck of dirt Wasagajack could use to start the world over. The animals all failed, until the brave otter finally floated up, drowned, its dead paws clutching the needed, precious bit of mud.

The Cree ark, appropriately, was a giant canoe.

By Day Four, I regretted not having booked the nine-day trip. We floated on glassy channels framed by shaggy, dark fir forests and coasted through floating, flowering fields of water lily pads and down marshy creeks where muskrat dunked as we passed. Don, who'd read up on the subject, told me the voyageurs kept going for months, pre-dawn to post-dusk, living on rotting pemmican, by trip's end dipping paddle blades in water that formed ice slush around their fragile boats.

We pulled into the Stanley Mission reserve just before a sudden thunderhead dumped the first rain of the trip on us. I was filthy, happy and covered with bug bites, scratches and bruises. Next summer, I'll go for a week. There are plenty of routes to paddle.

But first, I need one of those nifty, self-inflating sleep mats. ■

Judy Waytiuk, author of our Galley department, is a Winnipeg-based writer who specializes in travel. She recently relinquished her black belt in shopping, exchanging it for a backpack and basic botany book.

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www.crca.ca (Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association)

www.canoe.ca/AllAboutCanoes/home.html (All About Canoes)

homepage.oanet.com/orcatec/cnkayak.htm (Western WaterWeb's Canoe and Kayak page)

www.lights.com/waterways/index.html (Canoe Saskatchewan)