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## A Novice Paddles To Her Heritage

By SUSAN CATTO

THEORETICALLY, it is possible to travel from one end of Canada to the other by canoe, with the longest detour on land a scant 12 miles. For centuries, the canoe was a major form of transportation for native tribes and European traders. Today, the canoe remains a symbol of wilderness and adventure, as Canadian as maple syrup.

Yet somehow, I managed to grow up in Canada without learning how to canoe, an admission greeted with incredulity by all my friends who are veterans of summer camp. Last summer, I decided to rectify my unpatriotic lapse with a July canoeing trip in Algonquin Provincial Park, a pristine, preserve three hours north of Toronto. With about 1,500 lakes and 1,300 miles of interconnected canoe routes, the park attracts a million visitors a year, many of them seeking some of the finest back-country paddling in eastern North America.

I asked my mother, Helen, to join me, expecting her to decline. We are old traveling companions, but she was still bouncing back from recent cancer surgery and chemotherapy. To my surprise, she said it had been a dream of hers to canoe in Algonquin Park, and she knew better than to put off fulfilling her dreams.

So it was that we found ourselves on Kawawaymog Lake, a few miles west of the 3,000-square-mile park, on an overcast morning, embarking on a three-day guided voyage with Northern Edge Algonquin, an outfitter that runs paddling excursions most summer weekends. Joining my mother and me were Fred, an experienced canoeist from Michigan, and Donna, an animal behavior specialist from Toronto with moderate experience.

That week, a Discover Algonquin program -- suitable for beginners -- was on the schedule. Our guide, the young and preternaturally patient Rob Thomson, demonstrated the J-stroke and the forward sweep as we set off across the deserted, tree-lined lake in three canoes.

After nearly an hour on Kawawaymog Lake, I had almost learned to steer straight. Then we reached the Amable du Fond, a river with as many bends and curves as a mountain road. My mother and I ran over lily pads, crushed the sturdy white flowers floating on the water's surface and knocked wild pink roses from their bushes at the river's edge.

Marsh grasses gave way to towering forests of spruce, pine and cedar, but I stopped looking up, needing all my concentration to maneuver past logs and rocks submerged in the shallow water. Our loyal guide traveled behind us, while the other two canoeists were waiting for us at the first portage.

Portage, French for "carrying place," is a graceful word for a difficult feat. As Rob explained, we would unload all our supplies, carry them and the canoes up the steep 450-foot path, then load everything back into the boats. Along with our three canoes, we had two stoves, four tents, several large water jugs, five plastic food barrels, sleeping bags, ground mats and five sets of clothing.

It felt as if all of it was in the giant pack that Rob lashed to my back with arm straps and a wide fabric band (called a tump strap) that looped around my forehead. Doubled over, I thought my neck would snap back as I took tiny steps along the root-strewn path.

"Do experienced canoeists start to enjoy the portages?" my mother asked as we approached a second, longer crossing. Rob laughed.

"No one likes a portage for itself," he said. "But since most people would rather avoid them, every portage takes you further from civilization."

When we finished our second portage and entered North Tea Lake -- and the park itself -- I understood what Rob meant. It was high season, and the 1,350 Algonquin Park campsites accessible by car had been booked for months. Hiking trails near the main West Gate parking lot bustled with day-trippers. But we saw only two other groups, and they soon vanished behind islands dotting the lake. The sun emerged, the air was sweet and the clear water had a pleasant, slightly metallic scent.

We ate a lunch of cheeses and fruit on a tiny island carpeted with wild blueberry plants. Rob collected plum pits and cucumber peelings to bring back to the compost heap at Northern Edge. At first, I thought this was part of the company's ecological philosophy, but as we spent time in the park I realized that serious campers take out everything they bring in, which is also a park regulation (cans and bottles are not even allowed in most of the park). In three days, the only litter I saw was a spent nine-volt battery, a single cigarette butt and a three-inch strip of orange peel.

On the final leg of that day's journey, the wind threw up small waves, and my earlier feeling of achievement faded into grim determination as we struggled to cross the choppy water. We were barely moving. I tried to steer from the bow of the canoe, switching my paddle from side to side, my hand and sleeve dipping into the waves with every stroke.

In the back, my mother looked white-faced and exhausted, and I felt sick with regret. I knew the effort was too much for her. It was nearly too much for me -- but we had to keep paddling. We were in the middle of the lake, and if we didn't inch forward we would be pushed back by the wind. Near tears, I redoubled my efforts.

Finally, more than five hours after setting out, we reached our destination, a little island halfway -- about three and a half miles -- through North Tea Lake. The park has 2,000 back-country campsites, accessible only by boat and available first come, first served. The beauty of our site was some consolation for the arduous journey. A clearing just big enough for our four tents faced a stone-encircled hearth and makeshift benches nailed together by earlier visitors. A stand of trees formed a natural frame for the lake, which glistened in the late-afternoon sunlight. The outhouse was hidden down a path strewn with pine needles.

From end to end, the whole island was less than 1,000 feet. It was our home for the next two days, and we achieved a degree of comfort, even enjoyment, that I could not have imagined during our weary slog.

Rob was not only our guide, but also our chef. At mealtime, he would pull out vegetables and spices and chop, cook and stir with monklike concentration. At last, he would present us with a vegetarian feast (the norm for Northern Edge): pasta with pesto, zucchini, peppers and sun-dried tomatoes; lentil stew with ginger, garlic, vegetables and miso paste. For dessert, we ate toasted marshmallows or chocolate fondue.

At breakfast, we prepared for the day's exertions with buckwheat-pear pancakes or goat's-cheese frittata with grated vegetables. As the four guests sipped rich organic coffee, Rob would heat water from the river and wash the dishes.

At first, it felt awkward watching one person do all the work after everyone had pitched in to cross the portages. Yet I told myself having someone else prepare meals and do the washing-up was crucial in making the weekend feel like a vacation rather than an endurance test.

That first night, the ground was hard but I slept soundly, awakening to the chattering of red squirrels and water lapping our island's sandy shore. It was cold and misty again the second day, and my mother

stayed at the campsite to read. The rest of us canoed across the lake to a trail down the coast. We hiked a short way to another tranquil view of the water. Wolf and deer droppings were the only sign that other creatures had used the path.

It was warm and sunny when we returned to our island, so I brought out my biodegradable soap and prepared for a bath. A little sheepishly, Rob explained that soap breaks down faster on land than in water and suggested that I lather up and rinse off on land using buckets of water. I settled for a swim, drying off on a sparkling pink rock heated by the sun.

By our final evening, the five of us were old friends. Lacking ghost stories, we improvised. Fred read from a book of Toltec philosophy, Donna told us of a dog who could predict its owner's seizures, I recounted the plot of Samuel Richardson's lengthy novel "Clarissa."

My mother was relatively quiet. We hadn't mentioned her illness, and she told me afterward that it was simply a pleasure to shed her cancer-patient persona for a few days.

After dinner, we went for a twilight paddle on the deserted, tranquil lake. As we sat quietly, listening to the nightly calls of the loons, all the difficult paddling and portages were forgotten.

The sense of magic lasted throughout our trip back the next day. It was sunny and hot as we broke camp. After seeing so few people, it was a shock to reach the first portage and see a half-dozen canoes. There were groups from other outfitters, local people, a family from England and a couple from Switzerland, some heading out for five days, others just spending a sunny Sunday on the water.

The pleasant weather also brought out wildlife. After three days of seeing nothing but spiders, mosquitoes and red squirrels, we saw four moose within a half-hour. A mother moose stood in the river chomping waterlilies, her two calves pacing indecisively on shore like children afraid of the water. Farther upstream, a giant black moose lumbered into the forest as we drew near, then returned to peer at us as we passed.

At our second portage, I finally tried carrying a canoe. Rob showed me how to lift it onto my knees and then hoist it, inverted, over my head with the crossbar on my shoulders. The fiberglass boat wasn't that heavy -- about 65 pounds -- but it teetered back and forth as I negotiated the rough footing. When I finally put it into the water on the other side, I felt a soaring sense of accomplishment.

The satisfaction of overcoming a physical challenge remained with me, even after I returned to a desk-bound life in Toronto. My mother returned friends' phone calls, taking pleasure in explaining that she had been camping in the wilderness and paddling a lake or two.

### Little traffic on a watery highway

Algonquin Provincial Park, Post Office Box 219, Whitney, Ontario K0J 2M0, is open for camping year round; the canoeing season is from early May through October. Park permits for back-country camping cost \$5.15 a night (\$2 for ages 6 to 17), at \$1.56 Canadian to the United States dollar, and are usually included in the price of guided tours. Reservations for camping in a general area (but not a particular campsite) can be made at (888) 668-7275 or on the Web at [www.ontarioparks.com](http://www.ontarioparks.com). For other park information, call (705) 633-5572 or see [www.algonquinpark.on.ca](http://www.algonquinpark.on.ca).

### Getting There

The park is about 180 miles from either Toronto or Ottawa. Many outfitters will arrange van service between Toronto and Algonquin. One such service, Northern Airport Shuttle in Toronto, (800) 461-4219, [www.northernairport.com](http://www.northernairport.com), offers two daily shuttles from Pearson International Airport to Huntsville, just south of the park, for \$58 round trip (group discounts available).

## Outfitters

Twenty outfitters, some serving Algonquin Park, make up the Paddling Ontario Alliance, a service of the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership. Information on them is available at (800) 668-2746, [www.paddlingontario.com](http://www.paddlingontario.com). Many companies also plan trips and rent equipment for self-guided paddlers. Canoe and stove rental plus food averages about \$50 a person a day.

I chose Northern Edge Algonquin at the last minute after another outfitter canceled due to low enrollment. (Most outfitters require at least four people to run a guided trip.) It was a fortuitous choice, since besides excursions, the company runs a year-round holistic retreat center on Kawawaymog Lake just west of the park, which attracts a slightly older crowd as interested in spiritual development as in paddling. Up to 40 visitors can stay in three double rooms in the lodge, two four-person cabins and wood-floored tents sleeping two to four.

Basic three-day canoe trips, including all meals, two nights' guided camping and a night at the retreat, cost \$335 to \$385 a person, plus tax. Northern Edge Algonquin, Post Office Box 329, South River, Ontario P0A 1X0, is on the northwest side of Algonquin Park. Information: (800) 953-3343 or [www.algonquincanada.com](http://www.algonquincanada.com).

## What to See

The Canadian Canoe Museum, 910 Monaghan Road, Peterborough, Ontario, (705) 748-9153, [www.canoemuseum.net](http://www.canoemuseum.net), is two hours northeast of Toronto on the way to Algonquin Park. Its collection includes 600 watercraft. Open daily. General admission, \$4.15. SUSAN CATTO

SUSAN CATTO contributes to The Times from Toronto.