

As the whine of the floatplane receded into the distance, I began to hum a comforting, tuneless song to myself. It was not from nervousness, more from the astonishing place lag of being flung, like a stone from a sling, into this remote setting.

We were on Artery Lake, in eastern Manitoba, about 25 miles from the nearest (unsurfaced) road, though the distance was perhaps better measured in millennia than miles, so undisturbed by human hand was the landscape of rock, water and forest around me. I took comfort that I could share the sentiment, because I was not alone.

My fellow castaways — two Germans, Julian and Judith, and an Australian, Steve — had signed up with the Winnipeg-based Wild Loon Adventure Company for a trip down the Bloodvein river, a 12-day, 125-mile journey between Artery Lake and Lake Winnipeg. Leading us was Garrett Fache, the 31-year-old owner of Wild Loon, a khaki-and-canvas Crusoe: woolly-bearded, darkly tanned, an ingot of muscle — it was nothing for him to hoist a canoe on to his shoulders with an 8-stone food barrel already strapped to his back. He had river-guided for 12 years, and had a wealth of knowledge of the Manitoban back-country, its flora, culture and history.

For instance: the Bloodvein was once a major highway for the Anishinaabe and, after the arrival of Europeans, for the fur trading *voyageurs*. Still today, with only a little ingenuity, one could travel from the Bloodvein to Hudson Bay, or the Great Lakes. Atikaki Provincial Wilderness Park, through which the Bloodvein runs, is a part of the greater Pimachiowin Aki, an 11,212 square-mile block of protected, Unesco-inscribed, indigenous land. Fache takes treading lightly in this land seriously — every

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piece of refuse we carried in was carried out, and more than once I watched him cross the river to collect a piece of litter left by other paddlers. In 2024, he won a national tourism award for his work in environmental sustainability.

Fache had told us to pack light. He provided everything else, which arrived with us on the floatplane: the canoes, the safety and camping equipment, and food. We loaded our craft on the lakeshore — the Germans in one canoe, Steve and I in another, Garrett in a single-seater — and glided out on to the water. Shortly, the river turned and, behind us, the stone banks appeared to slide together, shutting us in, just as the trees ahead glided apart to let the river roll on.

From the outset, the Germans were full of questions: “What will the weather be like for the next two kilometres?” “What satellites were used in the making of your map?” “What would we learn if we tested the water quality right now?” That, at least, was known. As a wild, free-flowing river with few human intrusions, the water was as it had been for thousands of years: free of man-made pollution or chemicals.

Early on the first day, we spied a scuttling on an outcropping of rock. Atikaki is thick with black bear, moose, lynx and woodland caribou, and we were hoping to see some of these animals by the riverside. But as the distance to the rock closed, these creatures performed more humanistic behaviour: the slipping on of dresses, the pulling on of clothes, and — strangest of all — the fitting of brightly coloured wigs.

Any ideas of nymphs or naiads, or *memegwesiwag* — the “little rock people” of local Ojibwe lore that live along the river — were immediately snuffed when we went ashore. They were an American girl scout troop, midway through a month-long canoe voyage through the Canadian hinterland. Gangly, muddy and sunburned, they shrugged and giggled away any questions about the wigs, then savagely fell upon a box of Tim Hortons muffins we gave them. While they munched, we slipped away downstream, left to wonder at the mysterious ways of teenagers. They were the only people we saw over the next 12 days.

In a ritual that would become familiar, we made camp that evening on the rocky shoreline, each of us in our own



Fluid therapy

Canada | Need a break? A canoe descent of the Bloodvein river offers

12 days of phone-free wilderness immersion. By *JR Patterson*



From main: two of the group enter Namay Rapids on day 10; the floatplane dropping the group on Artery Lake; sunset over Stonehouse Rapids, one of 76 sets of rapids on the 125-mile journey; campfire cooking; the group relaxing after a day's paddle — Garrett Fache

DETAILS

JR Patterson was a guest of the Wild Loon Adventure Company (wildloonadventureco.ca). It offers a 12-day guided trip along the Bloodvein from C\$4,800 (£2,552) including floatplane from Bisset, Manitoba, to Artery Lake, all meals and camping and canoeing equipment, and a minibus back to Winnipeg at the end of the trip



ochre and sturgeon fat. Some that we spotted were further proof that not much had changed over a thousand years on the river: a figure in a canoe, bird shapes, a moose.

At our first major rapid of day two, Bruise Easy Falls, Fache and Julian, who, to our collective good fortune, turned out to be a former whitewater canoe champion, surveyed the churning cauldron. “Hold right and drop through,” Fache said. “Dark water is your friend. Oh, and watch the rock garden.” He meant the boulders whose tops showed through the surf. Despite the advice, Steve and I became pinned on a rock and spun sideways, before, caught between surges of fast and slow water, we were quickly and unceremoniously tipped into the river.

Under the power of the purling flume, the body becomes all instinct. The hands seek something to close around, the eyes hunt for sky. I was underwater only a moment but surfaced to realise I’d been carried a surprising distance downriver; Steve had gone even further. Our canoe was swamped, the barrels containing our kit floating free. With some effort we collected the flotsam and squared it away, but it laid bare the reality of the journey. Help was far away; our work was to move ahead, stay warm, stay alive; everything else was superfluous.

It wasn’t the last time we’d end up soaked, or bailing out our canoe. But after some days, there were marked improvements, which was good, because there were times when the rapids came one after another, some fun and exhilarating, some fun and terrifying, others simply impossible. Fache, otherwise a relaxed taskmaster, was serious about safety; we never ran a rapid without our helmets or life jackets, and he repeated his tenet “Don’t let go of your fucking paddle!” so often it became a serious joke. Each canoe carried only one spare oar; without them, we were sitting ducks.

The water was not all fluvial rodeo. Some days the river was sluggish and flat before us, nothing to do but paddle. There were wide, still marshes of wild rice and lakes where ducks swam among the reeds and waterlilies. But it was never boring, with each bend the river giving us a new vista of light and forest. And when we tired of the gurgle of the oar blades, could placate ourselves with conversation. What does one talk about to pass those long hours of labour? The weather, family, the works of German novelist Karl May, the films of Werner Herzog (we imagined him narrating over us “Little did zey know, zey were paddling into oblivion . . .”).

And dreams. From the very outset of the trip, we were all of us having wild night-time visions. While I wondered if those strange American girls had been *memegwesiwag* after all, Fache put it down to the ox-eye daisies that ringed our campsites; their pollen, he said, can produce a hallucinogenic effect.

On the fourth day, we came to the Stagger Inn, a trapper cabin set on a reedy embankment. It was custom to sign the “guestbook”, though one would need to be quite desperate to spend the night in that fly-blown place. It looked ransacked, with broken crockery and old magazines scattered across the floor. The book, rumpled with age and humidity, stretched from the 1990s to the most recent entry, a family of four two days ahead of us.

We breakfasted on oats and blueberries, and lunched riverside on cheese



and pepperoni. Campers are the ultimate devotees of canned and preserved goods, and each evening Fache used them to great effect, producing hearty and inventive fire-cooked meals — burritos, pad Thai, chilli con carne, potato curry, spaghetti bolognese.

The seventh day, Fache told us, is always something of a pivot. And it was true: once we passed a week on the river, the canoe began to feel homey. I was comfortable in the stern, and was developing some kind of water sense, learning to balance my nerve against competence. That day, we came to a great rapid known as Island Chutes, where the banks rose into sheer cliffs and

squeezed the river, which rolled and foamed before smashing into a wall of rock. Even to our veteran paddlers it seemed a tad dangerous and so, to avoid what Julian called “hydrological crucifixion”, we used a technique called lining, moving the emptied boats safely over the torrent by paying them out on ropes from the shoreline.

Come the last day, I was battered, scraped and bruised. My muscles ached. Even the most historically unforgiving among us must feel for the fur-trapping voyageurs, who were far from home, and did all this without the creams, slaves and sprays we used to make our journey more comfortable. It had been a bodily demanding trip at times, but one that was easy on the soul.

“We are out of control!” Judith said one evening around the fire, meaning not a wild bunch of hoodlums, but rather beyond the constraints of the wider world and the reach of cellphone service. There were no demands upon us save from what was directly before us: to guard against the weather, to feed ourselves and to watch out for one another. The smallest things which, at home, would be chores or inanities, were, here, the purest of pleasures: fetching water, skipping rocks, washing clothes, collecting firewood, scouring the underbrush for blueberries. I felt I could never tire of the soft breezes, the bird calls or sight of otters gambolling on the riverbank.

It is a good trip, not because it is easy or luxurious, but because it reminds us of what we are capable. And one day, when the muscles are not as strong as they once were, and the call of the wild is not as clear, I will be able to remember stepping barefoot on the moss, feeling the pulsing water through the gunwales of the canoe, watching the purpling sky through the wood smoke, and, remembering it, I could say, “Ah yes, and I too ran the Bloodvein.”



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Salmon River, Idaho, US The Salmon is one of the longest undammed rivers in the Lower 48, and known as the “River of No Return” because its strong current and rapids made it impossible for 19th-century loggers to get their boats back upstream. Today both the main Salmon and the faster-flowing Middle Fork are coveted by rafters and kayakers in search of whitewater and wilderness immersion. Local outfitter Canyons offers regular five- and six-day guided group trips on both, with a choice of rafts or canoes. The next trip with availability is August 4;

a six-day trip costs from \$2,600. canyonsinc.com

Ardèche, France As well as writing books and making TV shows, British survival expert Ray Mears runs



Ray Mears in the Ardèche

Woodlore, a bushcraft school that he founded in 1983. Among its courses and expeditions is “The Path of the Paddle”, a week-long canoeing trip to the Ardèche in southern France. It’s designed for novices, with three training days followed by a two-day 28km paddle, tackling rapids and bivvy-ing on the bank. The next departure is August 31; it costs £3,060 per person. raymears.com

Thames, England What it lacks in wilderness and rapids, a kayak trip down the Thames makes up for in history (you’ll float past Hampton

Court Palace, for example), the numerous riverside pubs and the chance to see the city from a new perspective. While it doesn’t offer guided trips, Henley Canoe Hire can rent canoes, kayaks and SUPs, provide advice on inns, B&Bs and campsites to stay at each night, and will collect the boats at the end of the trip. It suggests six days for the “whole of Thames challenge” from Lechlade to Teddington, or there’s a two-day taster from Henley to Windsor. Two days’ rental from £140, six days from £300. henleycanoehire.com