

SASKATCHEWAN | NORTHERN FOREST

Canoeing the Clearwater

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

It's like we're caught in some gigantic pinball machine as we rapidly zigzag across the roaring river, trying to find a route between boulders the size of cars, as our canoe bumps and grinds over barely submerged rocks. Then after a couple of kilometres of non-stop manoeuvring, the wild river suddenly turns peaceful, allowing us to enjoy the deep magnificent valley.

The legendary Clearwater River combines untamed wilderness with adrenaline pumping whitewater and jaw dropping scenery. This Canadian Heritage River changed the course of history.

When Peter Pond crossed the 20 kilometre long Methye Portage to the Clearwater in 1778, he found the long sought after land bridge linking the Hudson Bay and Arctic watersheds, opening vast areas of the north to the fur trade. Early travellers included a who's who of northern explorers, from Alexander Mackenzie to David Thompson, Sir John Franklin and others, who extolled the beauty of the Clearwater Valley in their journals.

With headwaters in northwest Saskatchewan, the Clearwater flows southeast, then makes a sharp turn west, eventually joining the Athabasca River at Fort McMurray, Alta. Over its more than 300 kilometre course, the river races through cliff lined canyons, boulder strewn rapids and waterfalls galore. The most popular section to canoe is the 105 km stretch from the Clearwater's confluence with the Virgin River (where the Clearwater turns sharply west) to Contact Rapids (north of



Lac La Loche). Both spots are accessible by float plane and in between are the most spectacular landscapes and the longest portages.

We lug our canoes and gear over a kilometre to get around Smoothrock Falls, where the river twists in an impressive s-shaped turn over a series of frothing drops.

Here we're treated to the ultimate "room with a view" at a campsite perched on a cliff edge above the falls. Another delight awaits in the overflow channel on the opposite side of the river just above the falls where we find a magical wonderland of wispy multi-layered cataracts and round pools looking like hot tubs. The smoothly worn rocks glisten in the hot sun with outrageous shades of copper, crimson and orange, tempting us to stay an extra day in this perfect summer playground.

It would be a toss-up to choose the top highlight of the Clearwater — Smoothrock Falls or our stop next day at Skull Canyon. The river divides into two turbulent channels around a large flower pot island, its 25-metre sheer cliffs clothed in bright orange lichen.

It is also called Bald Eagle Gorge for the eagle nests that cling to notches in the cliff faces.

We hike to the top of the mostly flat topped canyon rim and wander around for one breathtaking view after another. Come evening, we find the best view of all is at our campsite where we watch the orange-tinged



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Early morning fog rises around the entrance to Skull Canyon on the Clearwater River. Canoeists enter the tongue of a rapid. The view of Smoothrock Falls is breathtaking. Sunlight shows off the spectacular colours of Skull Canyon. | ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

walls take on a deep golden glow with the setting sun.

But where's the skull? The name comes from the shape of one of the cliffs, but it isn't immediately obvious

during the day. Early next morning, the skull magically appears as the rising sun burns off the fog lying like a shroud over the gorge. Suddenly, the cliffs are backlit, throwing shadows into the skull's deep eye sockets and outlining the face. The dramatic revelation somehow seems fitting for this most dramatic of rivers. Independent trips down the Clear-

water River should only be attempted by those with extensive whitewater canoeing experience. Guided excursions are also available. For more information, visit www.saskparks.net and www.churchillrivercanoe.com.

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