

Tourists can learn to be lumberjacks in rural Nova Scotia

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Lumberjack sports, especially axe-throwing, are experiencing a resurgence. Head to many communities across Canada, as well as in many other countries, and you can likely find an axe-throwing venue.

While people have been throwing axes at targets for centuries, it's only in the past 10 to 15 years that it has become a mainstream sport. It has even been dubbed the "new darts." There's no doubt that flinging a huge axe at a target is much more dramatic and satisfying than tossing a tiny dart.

Our introduction to the sport came from a guy who is as close to being a genuine traditional lumberjack as we'll find anywhere. For five generations, Darren Hudson's family harvested logs in the Nova Scotia forest and floated them down the Barrington River to the coast to be milled and used in shipbuilding and other industries. The family still operates a sawmill nearby.

Darren Hudson's mission is to keep lumberjack traditions alive. He set up Wild Axe Park in the rural community of Barrington in southern Nova Scotia, near the mouth of the Barrington River. Visitors come here to play at being a lumberjack for a day, where they can learn, or least have fun trying to learn, skills such as logrolling, crosscut and bow sawing, tree climbing, and axe throwing.

It would be an understatement to say that Hudson is a qualified teacher. He has won lumberjack competitions around the world, including becoming a seven-time world champion log roller. He has appeared on the *Rick Mercer Show* and *The Late Show with David Letterman* Show and acted as a stunt double for Steve Martin in a movie.

When not wielding axes and balancing on floating logs, Hudson runs a tree service where he specializes in tricky tree removals from confined spaces, such as where a large dead tree might fall on a nearby house. No fancy high-lift cranes for this guy. He climbs the trees and cuts them down a bit at a time.

Hudson indicated that log rolling is usually the favourite among kids visiting the park. He demonstrated the technique by casually jumping on a floating log and rolling it around at faster and faster speeds. This was an important skill for log drivers who stood atop the precarious and constantly moving logs as they floated down the river. Hudson called those early log drivers the original extreme athletes.

To take things up a notch, he jumped up and down on the floating log, and showed how competitors would splash each other and devise tricks to throw the other off balance and into the water.

Keeping the competition off balance sometimes takes an imaginative twist. Hudson related the story of attending a lumberjack competition in Europe a few years ago. On the evening before the event, he and a teammate went to a pub with competitors from the United States.



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TOP LEFT: Hudson teaches Robin and Arlene Karpan to use the crosscut saw.

LEFT: Hudson shows how log rolling is done.

TOP RIGHT: A double bit axe is often used in axe throwing.

They kept buying drinks for the Americans while being careful not to drink too much themselves. The play paid off. The Americans were still a bit hung over the next day and were easier to dump off the logs.

We tried our hands at using the crosscut saw, but we couldn't wait to get to throwing axes.

Hudson handed us hefty double-bit axes with a sharp blade on both sides of the head. He showed us how to grab the handle with both hands, bring it over your head until it almost comes to your back, then swing it forward with a lot of power while aiming at the target, releasing it when your arms are about a

45-degree angle forward.

Most of the half dozen novice axe-throwers in our group had mixed results at first, occasionally hitting the edge of the target, but more often seeing the axe fly past or glance off the target. Our aim improved with practice. When Arlene had a series of misses in a

row, Hudson corrected her stance, and on the next throw she scored the first perfect bull's eye. After that, it would indeed be hard to go back to playing darts.

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