



If you go down to the woods... publication date: Jul 12, 2009

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The world was silent save for the rhythmic slosh and drip of our paddles as they propelled us through the teal-green waters of the Yukon River. Now and then, a bald eagle soared above us, carrying in its hooked beak the bloodied bits of some unfortunate creature, in order to deposit it with hungry chicks in a high-up nest. Forests of dark-green spruce interspersed with paler aspen stretched off into the distance. At one point, a black bear stood at the water's edge, stared at us, then loped off, its great furry behind undulating as it ran. The minutes turned to hours and the hours slipped away, yet still we saw no fellow humans.

I wasn't really expecting any. This territory in Canada's far northwest is more than twice the size of the UK, but only 31,000 people live here, mostly squeezed into its capital, Whitehorse. Its jade rivers, sweeping glaciers, snow-capped mountains and rolling tundra are imprinted not by the boots of humans but by the paws and hooves of bears and moose. I'd been here before, in frozen winter, and ever since had been curious to see what lay beneath the ice: 18 months later, I found myself canoeing the 300km from Whitehorse to the village of Carmacks with the express purpose of finding out. It took eight days, but I saw nobody beyond my five companions – Betsy, a maths teacher from Boston, Sebastian and Kilian, two brothers from Austria, our guide Stefan, and his girlfriend Cynthia. And, because the Yukon has no mobile phone reception outside its little towns, I had no choice but to surrender the hurly-burly world beyond those spruce trees to unaccustomed peace.

There were relics of human activity here and there: some 100 years ago, the Yukon was busy with stampedeers on their way to the promise of gold just outside Dawson City. America was in depression, and almost 100,000 dreamers set off from Alaska, over the Coast Mountains towards Canada's alpine lakes, where they built boats and waited for cracks in the ice to show. It broke on May 29 1898, and a stream of treasure seekers stormed up the Yukon River to the gold beyond. Until a highway was built in the 1950s, the water remained the only way to get to Dawson, and the ghosts of the river's past still cling to the shores. Nobody has ever thought to clear away the dilapidated paddle steamers, which were cast aside on the sand and left to rot like giant whale carcasses, nor the tumbledown cabins of wood camps whose timber once fuelled the boats. Our canoe trip often seemed like a novelty ride through an open-air museum, with poignant reminders of all those golden dreams at every turn.

We'd been paddling for almost a day, lazily drifting along with the current, when the river widened into the

vast, turquoise expanse of Lake Laberge. As the current weakened, so did we, and Stefan suggested we build a sail to propel us across. We lashed together our three canoes, constructed a makeshift mast from driftwood, added tarpaulin for a sail, and harnessed the breeze to scoot effortlessly across the lake.

We spent our first two nights camping on its shores: the first in a well-used spot with wide clearings for tents and a firepit defined by rocks, and the second towards the lake's end on a perfect, sandy cove with wild roses for decoration and soft moss as a mattress. We cut down dead spruce for timber, and cooked our supper – steaks, then spaghetti Bolognese – over open fires. When we retired to our tents, we stashed everything with an odour – food, rubbish, soap and toothpaste – in bear-proof barrels and placed them some distance away. Both grizzly and black bears live in the Yukon and, though attacks are rare, we carried pepper spray just in case. I'd taken extra precautions and watched the bear safety video in Whitehorse's visitor centre too: Whether you should fight back or play dead, I learned, depends on whether the bear is acting offensively or defensively. 'If the bear starts to feed on you, it no longer acting defensively,' the narrator gravely advised. But bears don't really like eating people (we smell awful to them) – which is just as well, as we would have been the first meal they'd seen in ages.

On our third morning, after we'd been paddling for an hour or so, we stopped to visit the abandoned village of Lower Laberge. Paddle steamers used to pull up for winter here in the late 1800s; an eerily silent roadhouse and telegraph office still stand. Over the next few days, we saw more derelict outposts: eccentrically named Hootalinqua, with its old police look-out populated by a family of birds; and Shipyard Island, where boats were repaired in the frozen months, and where the mighty ship Evelyn slowly bends into itself on a bed of wild grass and spruce needles.

We camped that night on a tiny private island, where our picnic table sat on a narrow promontory surrounded by turquoise water on three sides. Mountains with Ice Magic toppings of snow loomed above. While the rest of us relaxed and read (squashing fat, slothful mosquitoes as we did so), Stefan fished for pike, grilling them over a makeshift barbecue to serve up the freshest fish supper possible.

Our wildlife sightings had been few and far between, so we left camp at 6am the following morning, hoping to spot some moose as they came to the water to drink. We turned off the main river – these creatures prefer to sup from smaller streams – and slid down a scrawny creek. Everyone was silent as we floated in our canoes and scanned the dense bush that flanked the water. But the moose were shy that day, and the only wildlife we saw was a Canada goose with her huddle of fluffy brown goslings, and a kingfisher that flitted alongside our boats. Still, by then the peace and beauty of the place had lulled us to such a state of bliss, it didn't seem to matter all that much.

On our fifth languid day, we came to the point where the Teslin River joins the Yukon. Here, the water ran wide and fast. It was no longer clear green as the current churned the silt, but the light glinting silver on the water's surface and the spruce trees that stretched beyond created a muted beauty out of this tremendous wilderness. Hearing only the soft coursing of water and hushed hissing of silt, I raised and dropped my paddle, then raised and dropped it again. I felt happily cocooned in a profound, meditative peace. And so I drifted away.

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