

TAKING the PLUNGE

From gentle races to daunting ledges, the Pigeon River is renowned for continuous, exciting and manageable WHITEWATER.

By Lilian Donahue

The single otter makes its shuddering ascent from a small bay off Matheson Island, and the blue expanse of Lake Winnipeg below fills our view to the north and south. We fly east over a sculptured carpet of muskeg, forest, and granite interwoven with threads of streams and beaded with lakes. The land is every shade of green from the acid yellow of the swamps to the black-green of the jackpines.



Birds eye view from the Otter

Dave shouts in my ear and points down at the Bloodvein River, the Pigeon's cousin to the south. Both rivers flow through Manitoba's Atikaki Park. It seems incredible that in just a few hours, our group of eight people and one small black dog will be able to successfully navigate through 160 kilometers of this untouched wilderness, but Dave, my guide and one of the owners of Northern Soul Wilderness Adventures out of Winnipeg, doesn't seem daunted.

I am thrilled, yet apprehensive. It has been some time since I have paddled and the Pigeon is renowned for its unequalled stretches of continuous and exciting whitewater. Will my skills be equal to the challenge of 12 days on this demanding river?

We land at the fishing camp dock on Family Lake joining the four people who made the first trip by plane. Alain and Laurent make up a father and son team. Isabelle, from Quebec, is my paddling partner. Jean and Ken will switch with our guides, Dave and Chris. Snoops our canine tripper, sporting her red and purple life jacket, will choose her paddling companions each day depending on whom she judges to be the most reliable. We slide our loaded canoes into the water and paddle to our first campsite near the entrance of the Pigeon River.

Cowboy coffee gouges new routes through my bloodstream.....

We venture onto the river after a breakfast of English muffins, dried fruit and cowboy coffee. "Cowboy coffee" is boiled in a pot without benefit of filters or percolator and Dave's version of this brew gouges new routes through my bloodstream. Soon we arrive at Shining Falls. Resignedly, I shoulder my packs for the portage. This routine will be repeated many times over the next two weeks. The Pigeon required up to 28 portages, depending on river conditions and your experience.



Pigeon River Campsite

Dave informed us earlier that the Pigeon is running more than a metre higher than normal which will cover a lot of potentially troublesome rocks but also add to the volume of water booming along the rapids.

THE HEARTBEAT OF THE RIVER

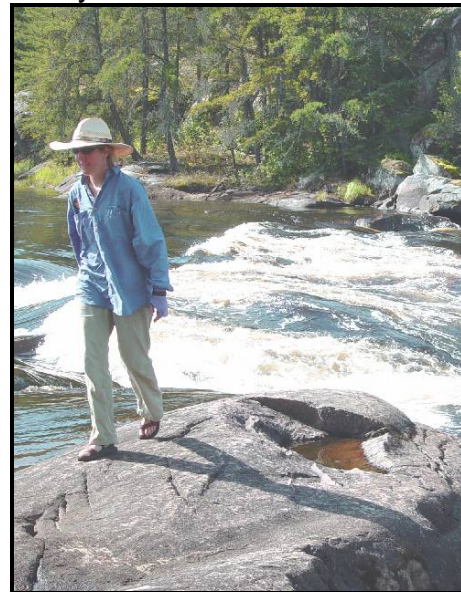
The first trip completed, I return for the second load of gear, taking time to admire the stream leaping over boulders crouched in the riverbed like prehistoric beasts. The tea-coloured water explodes into shatters of white at the base of the ledges and I can feel the pounding deep in the earth like a heartbeat.

We push off into the restless water below the falls. The Pigeon is typical of many Canadian Shield Rivers – short river sections and wider lakes connect together like string and beads spread over the land. Most of the rapids we'll encounter, explains Dave's partner and fellow guide Chris, are of the "point and shoot" variety. If we line up properly at the beginning and keep the boat parallel to the current, we are flushed down the river, usually without mishap.

I am pleased to discover that I haven't lost the knack of lining up with the V and anticipating the current that attempts to fling my canoe off line. Isabelle, in the bow,

has stopped protesting when we plow into huge standing waves. She has either succumbed entirely to terror, or she has begun to trust me.

An overcast sky looms as we launch the canoes on the second morning. Eventually, after many rapids that vary from gentle races to daunting ledges, the river widens into a bay and takes an unexpected left turn into Viking Lake. The clouds continue to build and thunder throbs all around us while lightning flares across the sky. A dark curtain detaches itself from the upper clouds. Then it forms into a black wall and races ominously towards us. Isabelle and I barely make it to the shelter of an island before the wind flattens the waves and rain drives spikes into the lake. Within fifteen minutes, the black cloud moves on and the sun shines again. Crazy weather!



The rapids are numerous on the Pigeon River

We camp on an island and at the campfire that evening, Ken dries out his cigarette papers which have become soaked. Too close to the flames and the paper instantly chars.

A dedicated smoker, he gives a surgeon's attention to the delicate task.

The next morning, we paddle the rest of Viking Lake which narrows again into the channel for the Pigeon River. We become used to the whisper of water announcing upcoming fast sections. Many rapids require scouting and fancy manoeuvring. The currents are becoming more complicated and powerful than the ones we have paddled so far.

THE WILDERNESS SPA ...and WHIRLPOOL

We camp early in the afternoon and as I stretch out on my Thermarest for a nap, Isabelle races up in her bathing suit. She has discovered this wonderful place. She instructs me to go into a small waterfall and sit on a mossy shelf. "Lean back," she says. When I do, the water pounds my back and shoulders. It's like being in a Jacuzzi. We brace our feet on a conveniently placed ledge and let the water work magic on sore muscles.



Snoops the wonder dog coaching paddlers down the rapids of the Pigeon River

Since Viking Lake two days ago, the rapids have been getting bigger and faster as if the river, impatient to get to its destination, is gathering speed.

Alain and Laurent discuss intently behind us. Laurent has taken over the stern and complains that his father puts his paddle down during the trickiest parts of the rapids to take pictures. Another rapid approaches. Laurent sight and gets ready for the next Kodak moment.

"We're going to make it," I shout to Isabelle over my shoulder.

We pull out on the portage along Whirlpool Rapids. These begin innocently enough as a section of very fast, smooth water compressed between high cliffs. Then the rapids drop into a wilder section, the river smashing into a rock wall at the base and veering sharply to the left with a large collection pool on the right. If we flip, we are in for a long swim in some very big water. However, the sun is out and adventure is thrumming through our veins. "Let's do it," I suggest. Isabelle nods.

SWIMMING IN BIG WATER

The two boats ahead of us overturn. Swimmers and canoes are swept around the bend. "We're going to make it," I shout to Isabelle over my shoulder.

On Chris's advice, I have positioned myself behind the front seat to minimize the amount of water that comes in over the bow. Good idea, except that nylon pants provide absolutely no grip against the smooth plastic hull of the boat. Isabelle and I are swept down the deceptively smooth entrance and then into enormous stacks. The boat rises to the crest of a huge wave. We look down into the deep trough as if

into the gullet of a monster. Isabelle shrieks with terror and delight.

“That’s it,” I say again, trying to contribute some paddling in our efforts to stay upright. We plunge down into the trough. I expect to be engulfed in the raging river, but no. We crest our third wave.

“We’re going to make it,” I cry exultantly. That’s when the river, with an almost casual shrug, tosses us out of our canoe.



Sunsets on the Pigeon River

Frothy water hisses in my ears as I am battered against the rock wall. I push free of the wall and the rebounding canoe and am swept downstream. I claw my way to the surface. Where is Isabelle? With relief, I spot her perched on a promontory just above the rock wall. Somehow, she has managed to clamber out of the maelstrom.

The swimmers collect floating gear and canoes and scramble to shore – but there is still one team to come. Dave and his paddling partner Jean

opt to carry their gear to the end of the portage before taking their turn in Whirlpool Rapids. Jean, after a few previous mishaps, is resigned to getting wet. He has taken to wearing a bathing suit for river travel. However, Dave and Jean manage the waves like bronco riders. There will be no bath for Jean today.

After the adventure in Whirlpool Rapids, we are ready for some quiet lake paddling – and the next day, we arrive at Round Lake. “Even the islands are round,” Isabelle comments. The islands are like cupcakes on a blue plate. Why do I keep thinking of food?

Round Lake is approximately the halfway point of our journey. After the lake, the river changes noticeably. Although its pace does not diminish, there are fewer rapids. What rapids there are, however, are huge, and we are frequently obliged to lift or line the canoes. We advance for a few arduous hours, but are rewarded by the most exquisite campsite yet.

ON THE GRANITE TERRACE

An apron of dusky-rose granite provides a terrace down to a bathing pool contained between two sets of ledges. I relax, as the breeze dries my hair and blows the insects away. The Pigeon River has worked magic, erasing fatigue and stress. With a light heart, I offer to help prepare dinner.

...just the cry of the loon falling like a ribbon into the night.

For the next two days, we are challenged with nearly continuous rapids, and treated to perfect

moments on shore. One lunch spot offers the bounty of tiny wild strawberries whose flavour defies their size. They cannot be matched by any domestic variety, either in the garden or in the stores. I have time to catch up with my writing and draw a few sketches, yet all too soon we arrive at Lake Windigo.



Great Camping on the Pigeon River

Our camp is tucked into a bay, and just before sunset, Isabelle and I paddle out on the lake and let the evening fall around us. How many places on earth can offer silence uninterrupted by a single mechanical sound – no motors, no jet skis, no cars, no ghetto blasters; just the cry of the loon falling like a ribbon into the night.

The next day is our second last, and the Pigeon is no longer the rushing river we knew. That exuberant river compressed between granite banks has given way to a broad indolent stream bordered by reed beds that shelter nesting water fowl. The last drama on the Pigeon, Sturgeon

Falls, is magnificent, with trees and rocky points artfully framing the thundering cataract. A trapper's cabin with moose antlers nailed over the door attracts our attention and we take turns posing for pictures in front of it.

We slide our canoes into a cove beneath the falls and float lazily on the current searching for a campsite. A grassy shelf is very inviting: we are used to perching our tents on solid rock. It's a pleasant change to be able to drive the pegs fully into the ground instead of working out complicated systems of bracing with dead fall and stones on top of moss and granite.

I always look forward to the evening meal and tonight I have double cause for celebration. I am finally asked for the six cans I was given at the beginning of the trip and that I have been carrying like an anvil in the bottom of my portage pack. I was beginning to suspect that Dave and Chris had played a nasty trick on me.



Pigeon River Whitewater

The full moon silvers the tent walls as I drift off to sleep that night. It's hard to believe that tomorrow will bring us to the shore of Lake Winnipeg and the end of the river.

The mosquitoes next morning are fierce and we waste no time getting onto the river. There is an unaccustomed sense of space. The banks of the river have separated

widely and are so low that we no longer feel as if we are on a river at all. We paddle past an abandoned logging camp. The canoe ahead disappears into high reeds. Isabelle and I follow a small winding channel and then an enormous expanse of navy blue, white-capped waves is before us. We drag our canoes onto a sandbar and explore the driftwood-strewn beach of Lake Winnipeg.

In the morning, the float planes will return us to Matheson Island and it is with regret that I will leave this magnificent river. For the moment, though, I am tranquil, like a pilgrim returning from a holy place. As the day subsides, we gather driftwood and build a pyre on the end of the sandbar. Ceremoniously, we ignite it and watch the sparks rise to join the stars in the night sky.