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VOYAGEUR BOB'S ULTIMATE ADVENTURE

BY GREGORY B. GALLAGHER

The magical elixir of travel often inspires a forward-looking posture, as technology evolves to help us explore the unknown wonders of our planet.

Short of being a history buff, few of us take the time to celebrate our forebears, in favour of keeping pace with the verve of our contemporary existence. The opportunities to savour the colossal achievements of early explorers are indeed rare, but when they occur, may change lives.

This is exactly what happened to Bob Abrames of Ottawa while quietly reading his daily newspaper. An advertisement posted January 5, 2005 in the *Ottawa Citizen* called for canoe enthusiasts wishing to participate in the re-enactment of one of the early *voyageur* treks from Montréal to Winnipeg. The ad "literally changed my life" says Bob. It attracted more than 900 responses from Canadians in every region, economic group and outdoor experience. After significant filtering via numerous interviews, nine applicants were accepted, three women and six men.

No-frills escapades

Bob is a motivational speaker by trade, but his new summer escapades are not the kind associated with his speaking engagements. Bob now leads canoe enthusiasts in gruelling summer canoe adventures, travelling great distances of Canada just as the early *voyageurs* did, with no frills.

This summer his group re-enacts one of Sir Alexander MacKenzie's 1793 legendary expeditions from the shores of Lake Athabasca in northern Alberta, through the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean. This rigorous escapade will take the group "at least 100 days," says Bob. Traversing 2,700 kilometres through rivers, lakes and marshland, the group will even cross the Rocky Mountains, where they will face a 400-kilometre portage carrying canoe and supplies.

Bob and his carefully screened male/female ensemble travel in a classic birchbark canoe weighing more than 315 kilograms. The combined weight of nine bodies, together with a summer's worth of supplies, adds up to several tons. They will live on peas, salt pork, parched corn and biscuits, and utilize only traditional *voyageur* implements, which have names few of us might recognize; items like *cordelle*, *arrowhead sash* or *paganoggon*. They will drink fresh water from the lakes and rivers, and there will be no



opposite page, top left: Voyageur Bob organizes and guides a different excursion by canoe every year. | opposite page, top right: Paddling a birchbark canoe, you experience Canada as the explorers did so long ago. | above: Meals are cooked over an open firepit. | top right: Finding the ideal place to set up camp is a daily challenge. | background: Weather plays an important role on a canoeing expedition. Bob Abraes and Destination Nor'West

modern comforts; no toothbrush, toilet paper, sunscreen, bug spray, matches or tent. The only concessions to contemporary invention are a GPS and satellite telephone, for use in emergencies.

Epic challenges

This unique undertaking brings nine total strangers together over 100 days of sudden intimacy and is obviously not for the weak of body, mind or spirit. While the physical prospects of such a monumental task might cause grown men to cry, Bob says it is facing the rigours using only the low-tech implements our forebears employed which makes the expedition especially trying. After 12 hours of paddling each day at a pace of approximately 50 strokes to the minute, the stark reality of setting up shelter while fighting exhaustion, hunger and the bugs makes this trip an ultimate challenge for any participant.

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Dehydration is the most insidious problem encountered along their labyrinthine trek. Because the team only stops for water when necessary, it is common to lose track of how much fluid the body requires until it is too late. Such was the case with Bob's first trip during the summer of 2005, when two of the female members had to be hospitalized on separate occasions for severe dehydration. Emergency teams swooped in to deliver the suffering canoeists to nearby hospitals, where the ladies were re-hydrated and returned to finish the expedition.

When asked what the toughest part of this long and difficult journey is, Bob pauses, then says without any uncertainty, "The bugs, definitely the bugs, especially at night, because there is nowhere to hide from them. They are attracted to us as a source of food, and even if we hide under our blankets for a few minutes, remember it's summer, so the heat drives us out from underneath within a short period, and the pestering begins anew. If we don't get a good

night's sleep out there, we suffer dramatically the next day, so bugs are the toughest thing over the long haul."

To prepare for the massive weight loss (more than 20 kilograms) during his canoeing expedition, Bob bulks up in late winter by consuming extra beer, carbohydrates and fats. The result turns his added consumption into solid muscle. Much like a championship prizefighter, Bob throws himself into numerous workout sessions of pushups, sit-ups, bike work and weight training, in preparation for the rigours of his expedition.

"The mental exercise is really the key factor though," Bob points out. "If you are not ready mentally," he adds, "you can be in the best physical shape of your life, but you will not be prepared for the level of challenge involved in this outing." He goes on to clarify, "Modern man is so accustomed to a life filled with comforts and conveniences, that when you remove these from the mix, the contemporary person does not fare so well."

Looking back over the last few years of these compelling adventures, Bob waxes emotional and reminisces, "For me, the best parts of these canoe trips are the toughest moments along the way, when things get truly thorny. That's when the connection to the Earth and my courageous *voyageur* forebears is most fulfilling."

Bob has planned a series of these epic canoe challenges scheduled through 2018, and anyone with a penchant to join him may fill out an application found on Bob's website. For those travel enthusiasts looking for a motivational kind of excursion, this may be the first step in a truly magical process of self-discovery. Just ask "Voyageur Bob" Abrames. ■

top left: A canoe trip allows you a wonderful opportunity to observe Canadian wildlife up close. | top right: Gear is protected from weather under an overturned canoe.

Gemini-nominated TV series

Voyageur Bob can be seen as one of the principle adventurers in the TVA/TFO francophone television series *Destination Nor'West*. The remarkable footage captured between Montréal and Winnipeg chronicles Bob's first canoe excursion as a novice *voyageur*. The eight-part series of one-hour documentaries is a co-production of Les Productions Charbonneau in Ottawa and Les Productions Rivard in Winnipeg (productionsrivard.com), and has already captured two Gemini award nominations. This season's expedition will be filmed as "Part Two" of these successful history re-enactments. Carrying a three-million-dollar price tag, Bob laughs to clarify, "This is due mostly to the technical expense of shooting in the deep wilderness, because the cost of our entire summer's inventory of peas probably amounts to about \$200." Those wishing to join such an epic canoe adventure may find application forms online at abrames.com.