

A wide-angle photograph of a river with rapids. The water is turbulent and white with foam as it flows over dark, wet rocks. In the background, a dense forest of tall, thin evergreen trees stretches across the horizon under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is one of a wild, natural environment.

Remote, yet accessible

Photo by Rick White

Four Connecticut Yankees persevere to find solitude and challenge on Quebec's Mistassibi River by Ed Hurley

The search for a worthwhile Canadian river began to remind me of the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. We wanted a river not so tough we'd wrap a canoe every rapid, *but not so tame* we'd later think it wasn't worth the effort. Since our group of four Americans had previously done extended trips on the Class II-rated Machias River in Maine and the Bonaventure on the Gaspé, we were looking for something a little more difficult in the Quebec wilderness.

All four of us owned our own canoes or kayaks and classified ourselves as

weekend boaters. Author Ed Hurley, along with Rick White, both from Fairfield County near New York City, had previous Class III experience with dam releases on Pennsylvania's Lehigh River and Tohickon Creek. Ed's son Brad and his friend Dave Lazuk lived in the Hartford area and kayaked regularly on the Class III Tariffville Gorge section of Connecticut's Farmington River.

Starting a Canadian canoe trip from lower Connecticut is like trying to buy a canoe paddle in the desert. Everybody has heard of them, but nobody has any

information on how to find them. Two helpful sources slowly emerged. First was the "Carte Générale des Parours Canotables du Québec." Though written in French, it was an extremely helpful map and contained difficulty rankings of Quebec's rivers coded by color. We were looking for yellow, an intermediate designation, and the Mistassibi NE branch looked promising. With Lac Machisque at its headwaters, it drops

Above: We lifted over a 2 m ledge, the only portage of the trip.

330 m over 110 km to join the main Mistassibi River just north of Lac-Saint-Jean. More importantly, we could reach the put-in in a little over two days by car, which would keep our costs down.

The second useful tool was the Internet. Googling the Mistassibi revealed outfitters with direct experience on the river. First up was Allagash Canoe Trips in Maine. Owner Chip Corcoran's father had done the Mistassibi, and Chip assured us the river could be run by experienced Class II canoeists. Unfortunately, he had scheduled a knee operation the first few days of August, which was the only week the four of us were free. Scratch one outfitter.

Next in line was Chiens-Gite in St-David-de-Farlardeau, Quebec. Owner Carl indicated he had run the river and could be our guide. Hopes faded rapidly when Chiens told us they had received a Canadian Army contract to teach soldiers canoeing fundamentals and were no longer available. Carl subsequently directed me to Eric Mance, a guide who had done the river in 2005. Eric first accepted, then bowed out for business reasons. Eliminate possibilities numbers two and three.

Undeterred, I phoned John Rousseau, a registered Maine guide living in Portland, Oregon, whom I had met while canoeing the Machias in 2002. John said he had done the Mistassibi before and would like to lead the trip. A follow-up call a week later revealed he also had a conflict. Four down.

We now had no outfitter and only eight weeks until the proposed departure date. Out of the blue, I received a phone call from Jean-Sébastien Rivest, owner of Aventure Vent et Rivière in Grandes-Piles, Quebec, 50 km north of Trois-Rivières. Jean had the canoes, the shuttle

Photo by Brad Hurley



Photo by Eric Mance



Photo by Eric Mance



Three photos, top to bottom:

Dave and Brad show nice form on a Class I on the upper Mistassibi.

Ed and Brad prepare to dive.

Ed and Rick dodge a big one on the middle Mistassibi.

and a guide, Louis, who had run the river previously. Things quickly fell into place.

On Friday, July 30, we drove in one car to White River Junction, Vermont, arriving late the next afternoon in Grandes-Piles. What a surprise to learn that our guide was not Louis, but Eric Mance, who had indicated earlier he was not available. Eric “loved the Mistassibi,” wanted to guide a group down the river, and had made other arrangements for his business. We spent the late afternoon checking our gear and loading the van. Canoes for the trip were 16-ft Esquif Présages, which handled well but also had a thwart configuration that was perfect size for our waterproof barrels. Accommodations both that night and after the trip were at Le Bôme, a lovely little French auberge and restaurant scarcely 50 m from our outfitter. Owners Matilde and Jean-Claude Mossa made us feel very much at home.

The van left for the put-in the next morning, travelling about 325 km on Route 155 to Lac-Saint-Jean. In the afternoon we drove nearly all the way to Lac Machisque on a well-graded, dirt logging road that had been built by the AbitibiBowater lumber company. Fortunately, some 600 m high mountains separated the road from the river, and aside from the first night’s camp, we didn’t hear a sound from the road the whole trip. We were to be truly isolated.

The put-in, at kilometer 158 just below the lake, was a total shock. Because of a controlled fire aimed at eradicating insects harmful to black spruce, the woods surrounding the launch were a burned out mess. Blackened tree stumps and charcoal-laden soil made our surroundings resemble a moonscape. Trying to escape this scene of devastation would not have been prudent since it was nearing dusk, the canoes were heavily-laden and we hadn’t yet had a safety and communications talk. Reluctantly, we found a small area near the river tinged with a bit of green. The tents, unfortunately, had to be set up in the nearby fire cinders.

Our first actual river experience started simply the next morning with easy Class I and II rapids. Just as we were beginning to feel confident, Rick and Ed spun broadside on a line of rocks at the bottom of a Class III. The force of

Camping on the moon our first night on the river



Photo by Brad Hurley



Photo by Rick White

Rapids on the upper Mistassibi

the water, coupled with the weight of the gear, “creased” the gunwales and changed their usual curve to an elongated diamond. Eric quickly waded upstream and cut the package loose. Barrels, waterproof bags and water bottles floated into the pool below. Chagrined, we bailed ourselves out and started afresh. Luckily,

this episode proved to be the most serious incident of the trip.

As a result of lumbering and previous fires, the landscape on the upper river was very open. The weather was warming and we began picking up a strong wind from the south. The strength of the rapids helped overcome this difficulty and

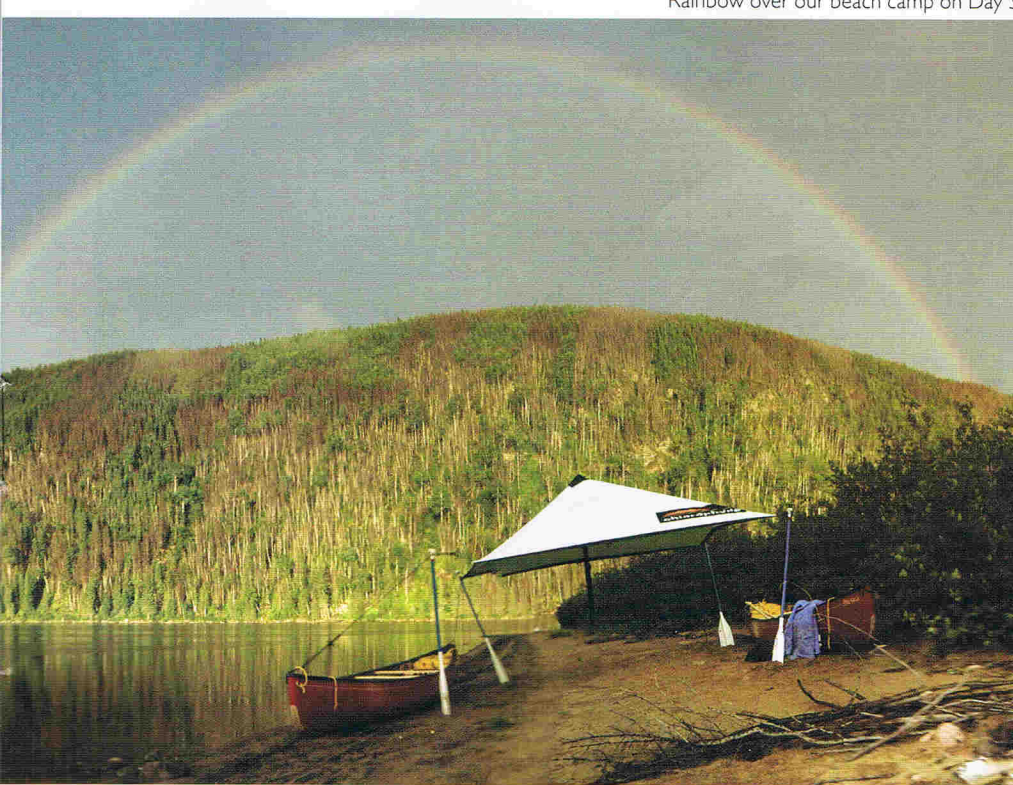


Photo by Dave Lazuk



Photo by Rick White

Campsite on the third night

gave us a pleasant ride. We scouted and worked our way through a Class III just before lunch, taking the right channel around an island to avoid a 1.5 m ledge on the left. Each team handled the rapid as they felt comfortable – Brad and Dave executing a tricky s-shaped maneuver at the top to run the entire stretch, Ed and Rick lining the top portion, then shooting through the lower section.

In mid-afternoon we approached a strong Class III, our fourth of the day. After much discussion and scouting, Dave and Rick took the rapid straight down the middle while Brad and Ed dragged their canoe around the back of an island to the half-way point, then successfully finished out the bottom. By the time we reached our second night's campsite, we had covered only 12 km and

were considerably behind our 25 km per day schedule. Eric chalked it up to our newness on the river and the time spent scouting, pointing out that the remoteness of the Mistassibi required not only a satellite phone, but also a careful consideration of if and when to run rapids. Escape from a bad situation was impossible to the east and west because of the high mountains and difficult footing. Finishing the river was the only option.

We self-provisioned the trip and estimated it saved us \$500. Cooking, cleanup and wood-gathering assignments were rotated each day with a written schedule, and food had been prepared or prepped at home in sequentially numbered bags that included everything needed for that particular meal. We purposely avoided freeze-dried foods for a gourmet experience, serving main dishes with fresh meat the first night, smoked sausages the second, and canned or dried ingredients the balance of the week.

Our second day began auspiciously with the sighting of a solitary male woodland caribou on the far side of the river. Unlike a moose, he had more of a grey underside and pranced somewhat as he skittered off into the brush. We needed to concentrate on the river that morning, however, as the Mistassibi deepened and narrowed, taking on a western-USA look as it tumbled through a series of Class II and III rapids that tested our skills. Ed joined our guide Eric in his canoe, providing Brad with the first opportunity to run solo through a Class III. About lunchtime we lifted over a 2 m ledge, the only portage of the trip, by carrying over rock ledges on river left. The afternoon's experience epitomized what makes the Mistassibi so enjoyable – 14 continuous km of seemingly unending Class Is and IIs that kept us busy, but rarely threatened. As the sun began to dip in late afternoon we realized that the water's speed and continuous nature of the rapids had allowed us to cover 33 km – the most we did on any one day.

Our third campsite on the east side of the river was my personal favorite. Not only did the river broaden to increase viewing, but a small brook cascaded down the mountainside, making for great sleeping. Hundred-foot tall black spruce clung to the hills, seemingly

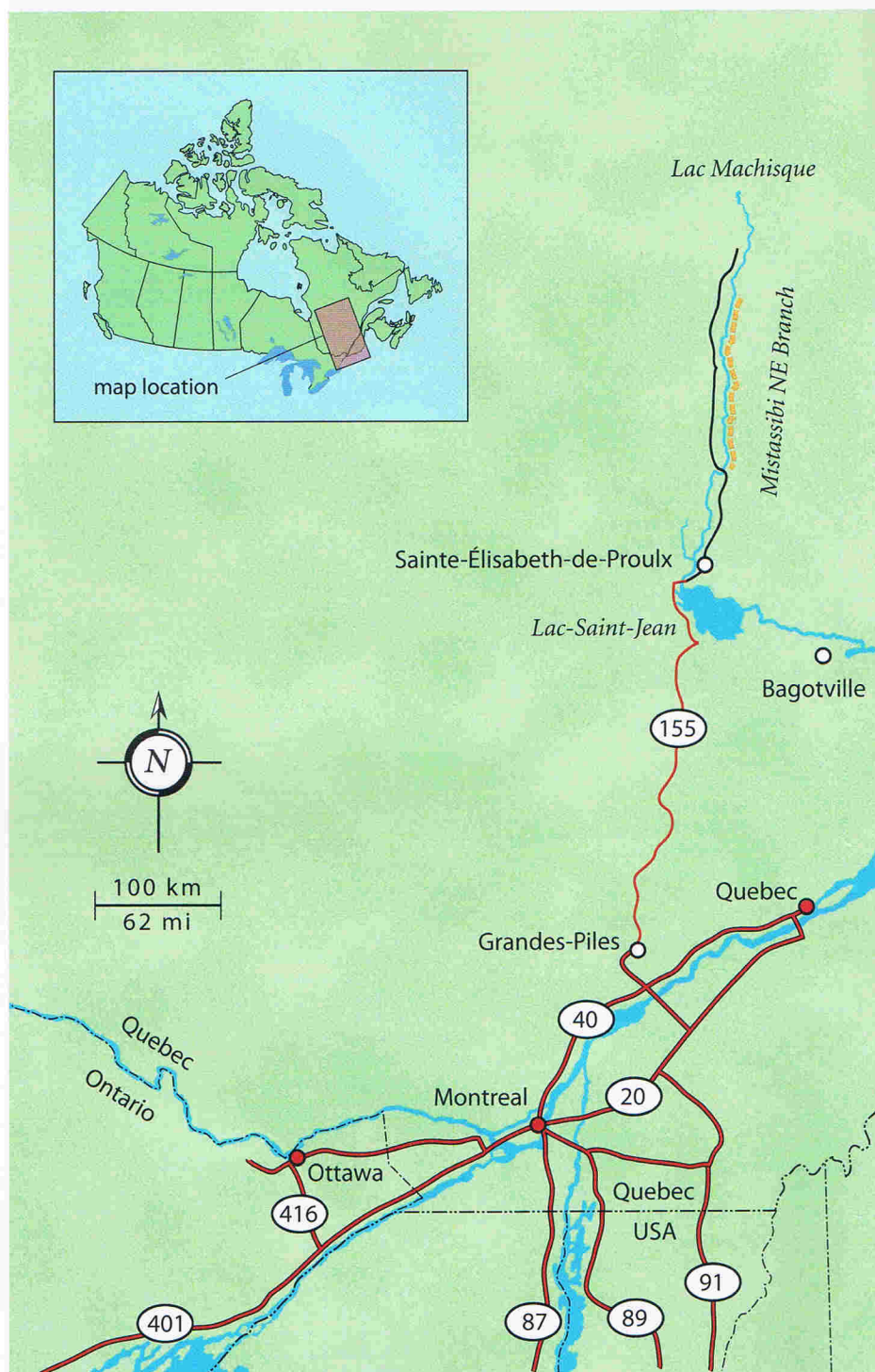
defying gravity and flowing out to every horizon by the tens of thousands. The Mistassibi often gives one the feeling of canoeing in a fjord as narrow waterfalls tumble off high mountain cliffs, then snake through the underbrush to add volume to the river.

The heat and dryness of summer 2010 in eastern North America affected our trip in several ways. The above average temperature, which fluctuated between 70F during the day to 50F at night, made our warm clothing unnecessary. More importantly, the lack of rain had lowered the water volume on the Mistassibi below the usual minimum levels. A rainy spring or summer would have upped the difficulty ratings a full notch on many of the rapids. On a positive note, bugs and insects were definitely less than anticipated, though they varied from campsite to campsite. Some of us were affected more than others. Dave wore a bug jacket both in camp and on the river. I swatted a bug only twice in five days.

We found the next day to be our easiest. Though the schedule called for 30 km, the river moved us right along through a series of Is and IIs with some pushy Class IIIs thrown in for variety. Just before lunch, Ed and Rick took on heavy water at the top of one of these IIIs and, whether by luck or Rick's always-dependable stern prys, managed to reach the pool below, still in the boat but with 500 kg of water filling their craft right up to the gunwales. Both had to endure some good-natured kidding as they emptied their bathtub.

At the junction of the small Saint-François River with the Mistassibi, we saw our only other humans in five days. Two fishermen camping on a sandbar announced in French that they had just caught 15 fish!

A late afternoon storm brewed and we hugged the shore as lightning shot all around us. Our proposed campsite was situated next to one of only two man-made structures we saw on the entire river – a small hunting cabin. As the heavens opened for the heaviest rain of the expedition, we kept dry on the porch until the thunder clouds had passed. As the mountainsides turned the beautiful yellow hue that frequently follows a summer storm, a perfect rainbow arc filled



the sky over the river. Eric continued his tireless quest for fresh trout, but despite the earlier glowing reports of the two fishermen, came up empty-handed.

The fourth and final day contained surprises of its own. In the morning, the Mistassibi entered a series of shallow, narrow passages with dense underbrush on all sides. Coming round one bend, I was startled to see our first strainer. No sooner had we gotten by it with a few deft strokes to river left when the next bend

revealed Eric holding his paddle in a horizontal position while simultaneously blasting his whistle. This second strainer was the real McCoy, extending from one river bank to the other, and requiring an immediate U-turn. We eddied out and slowly clawed our way back upstream to find an alternative channel.

Our final afternoon wound down with a series of pleasant Class Is that eased out to a drifting pace and carried us to our final take-out at kilometer 50.

Mistassibi River Planner

Trip Length and Difficulty: We spent four days and five nights on the Mistassibi River canoeing at an average pace of 27 km per day. The trip was 110 km long and can be lengthened an additional two days by flying in to Lac Machisque and/or slowing the pace. The river can be run all summer with the highest levels in June and a steady drop in volume to mid-August. We would classify this river as advanced intermediate. There were two ledge drops of 1.5 and 2 m respectively. Eight of the rapids were Class III, with Class Is and IIs too numerous to count. There was only one portage (around the 2 m drop) and it was only 10 m long. Campsites are basic on both sides of the river, with varying spaces for either small or large groups. Scenery is excellent, except at the top of the river where recent forest fires have created a burned-out experience for half a day of travel.

Access: The Mistassibi can be reached either by van or plane. For the former, take Route 155 out of Grandes-Piles to the west end of Lac-Saint-Jean. In the town of Dolbeau-Mistassini, cross to the east bank of the Mistassibi and look for an unmarked, high-quality dirt road leading directly north out of the town of Sainte-Élisabeth-de-Proulx. From that point to the put-in is 240 km.

Plane access can be achieved through Montreal. Once there, take a short, one-hour flight to Bagotville at the east end of Lac-Saint-Jean. Have your outfitter meet you at the airport. Bagotville (YBG) is not listed on the Expedia or Orbitz network. You must book your ticket through www.aircanada.com.

Costs: The total cost of the trip was \$1495 each, broken down as follows:

- Outfitter \$ 1000
- Provisioning (including wine) \$ 120
- Transportation from Conn. \$ 50
- Lodging & meals en route \$ 325

Maps: Omni Resources – www.Omnimap.com;

Canadian 1:50,000 Topographic Series Quadrangles 22-L, #13, 12, 5, 4, 22-E, #13, 12 (Allow 10 weeks for delivery)

Outfitter: Aventure Vent et Rivière

60, 2e rue, Grandes-Piles, Quebec GOX 1H0

www.ventetriviere.com, info@ventetriviere.com (819)538-3333. Owner: Jean-Sébastien Rivest. Guide: Eric Mance, (819) 275-5032 (Home), eric@a4s.ca

Other Information Sources:

www.allagashcanoetrips.com

www.chiens-gite.qc.ca

Dave Conley, Master Maine Guide, dconley@pwless.net

<http://bome-mauricie.com/>

As we gathered round our last campfire that evening, we mused about the elements that had made for so great a trip. Having as skilled a guide as Eric was a major factor, and his personality, leadership and knowledge made us totally comfortable. Eric broke down the distance that sometimes occurs between

guide and client and, as he became more confident of our group, relaxed enough to realize he wasn't going to starve with our cooking. He provided water-reading skills and paddling lessons throughout the journey and even produced some sharp Italian cheese and dried sausages he had been saving for emergencies. In

the lessons-learned category, waterproof barrels are not necessarily that. Dry clothing should be placed in waterproof bags inside of waterproof barrels for the perfect combination.

In summary, the Mistassibi River exceeded our expectations in every category. It was easy to reach, offered demanding water suitable for those with a Class II-III background, required only one short portage and had an aura of remoteness that raised our canoe-camping experience to a new, higher level of enjoyment. The Class IIIs were spread evenly over our time on the river and each day offered long, continuous stretches of whitewater that left us wishing every river were like this. We offer strong kudos to our guide, Eric Mance, who not only knew the river, but brought a focused attention to scouting and safety. Our outfitter, Aventure Vent et Rivière, provided us with well-maintained, up-to-date equipment and smartly executed logistics. Our inn, Le Bôme in Grandes-Piles, added to a perfect trip. Be sure to sample their "Grilled Salmon Trout marinated in Grapefruit Dijon and Maple Syrup" if you go.

Ed Hurley lives in Stamford, Connecticut and is a long-time lover of whitewater canoeing, skiing, mountaineering and winter camping. He anticipates even more wilderness adventures in his forthcoming retirement.

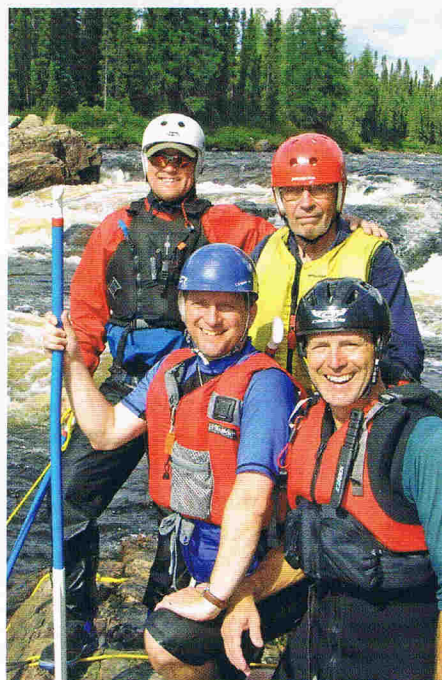


Photo by Eric Mance

The intrepid Team Mistassibi, clockwise from rear left, Dave Lazuk, Ed Hurley, Rick White and Brad Hurley