

# Keep your feet muddy

Canoeing in unknown territory takes an interesting turn in the lakes of the British Columbian province of Canada.

Text & photographs **Rishad Saam Mehta**

They say American beer is like canoeing – ‘It’s too darn close to water’. It’s true about American beer, most of which can’t stand a chance against European counterparts. But I recently found that out about canoeing too, after three days of feeling like a colonial explorer discovering the plentiful and lush lakes and lands hidden away in the British Columbian province of Canada.

Until recently I hadn’t even heard of the Thompson Okanagan region of British Columbia, nor of Wells Gray Provincial Park within. But I don’t berate myself too much, as it’s less than a 100 years ago (1913 to be precise) that surveyor Robert Lee became the first ever European to set eyes on the splendour of the Murtle River cascading 145 m down, over what was to be later named the Helmcken Falls.

▲ Paddling on the Azure Lake towards Clearwater Lake.



It's a combination of fantastic falls, see-to-the-bottom lakes and a vast wilderness of 5400 sq km that make Wells Gray a destination worth visiting, i.e., if you really want to feel like how it must have been when the Europeans first discovered the wildernesses of North America.

And there's no better way to do this than on a canoeing trip. I arrived at the little Kamloops airport that looks more like an expanded village store and found Gary, Gene and Judy waiting for me. Leading us on our five-day adventure was Andy Schwaiger, who runs an outfit called Kanata Adventure Specialists.

As we drove 128 km north from Kamloops to Clearwater in Andy's huge van packed with all the supplies, food and other camping paraphernalia including whipped cream (why? Later), Andy outlined the plan. We'd spend one night at Mike's Ranch called the Wells Gray Ranch in Clearwater. The following day we'd drive to Clearwater Lake jetty, park the van, transfer our stuff into the water taxi, strap our canoes to the roof of the same and have it drop us at one of the campsites on Azure Lake. Over the next two days, we'd paddle down Azure and Clearwater Lakes to get back to the jetty – a distance of about 30 km.

The jolly and portly Mike, who had a laugh loud enough to rattle the floorboards of his authentically named Black Horse Saloon, seemed to have an inkling of what lay ahead. That

▲ Above: Unloading the luggage, provisions, canoes and kayak from the water taxi at Lake Azure.

Below: Andy sets up the kitchen at Huckleberry Campsite on Clearwater Lake.

Facing page: Breakfast at 4 and a Half Mile on Lake Azure, one of the busiest campsites in this area.



night he fixed us a menu consisting of an authentic ranch meal. Thick juicy steaks done to your liking, baked beans, roasted potatoes, coleslaw and sautéed mushrooms with an assortment of condiments including A-1 Steak Sauce, heady mustard, and tangy Worcestershire sauce were laid out for our dining pleasure. The Wells Gray Guest Ranch was a collection of self-contained cabins that faced the fields where the ranch's horses ran and grazed. In fact, my morning alarm was the whinnying of these fine animals.

### On to the water

The 12-seater water taxi was equipped with two beastly outboard engines that made the boat quickly skim over the still waters of the lake. Raymond Jones, our 21-year old captain and guide at the helm, pointed out various points of interest of the Clearwater and Azure lakes. To give you an idea of the geography of the lakes, the Clearwater Lake runs in a south-north direction. When we reached the north end of this lake, I saw that it was fed by the Clearwater River coming in from the north. The Azure Lake joins the Clearwater Lake and runs in the west-east direction. We turned right and sailed onto the Azure Lake. If you look at the lakes on the map then they look like an 'r', with the vertical line being the Clearwater Lake.

The water taxi dropped Andy, Judy, Gene, Gary and me at a beach on Azure Lake called the 4 and a Half Mile Campground. There are 11 campgrounds altogether on the two lakes, three on the Azure Lake and the remaining on the longer Clearwater Lake. These campsites are sandy beaches with campfire pits and sand pit toilets. Basic, but that in itself is the charm. It was when the water taxi had unloaded all our provisions and was sailing away into the horizon that the whole enormity of our adventure dawned on me. Two slender canoes and a kayak is all we had as means of transport. There was no road access or cell phone network. Behind the small, sandy area of the beach was a pretty, thick forest and bear lockers. These are solid iron cupboards found on campsites.



They're meant to keep food safe from bears. Andy was very meticulous in this matter. When we retired for the night he insisted that all food stuffs including toothpaste were locked away in the bear lockers.

My other concern was the cargo of equipment that had been unloaded from the water taxi. It was lying on the beach forming a mini mountain of coolers, packets of food, tents, sleeping bags, paddles, a solitary axe, packs of beer, bottles of wine, a portable stove and our individual backpacks. How on earth was all this going to fit into two canoes and a kayak?

Andy didn't seem perturbed. "It will all work out," he said with a twinkle in his eye and a loud laugh. He busied himself with putting up the tarpaulin, under which he would set up his kitchen. The rest of us picked spots to pitch our tents and got around to doing that. I also tied a six-pack of beer and a bottle of wine to a length of cord and tossed it into the lake. The cool waters of the lake would chill them both. Soon, the smell of all that's fine and delicious permeated through the air. My biggest wonder of those three days out camping remains how Andy could whip out such classy culinary creations with a small stove on a little campsite table. Meat, fish, vegetables, they were all served on the table piping hot, perfectly done and even presented brilliantly, with the wine paired perfectly.

As was the case with breakfast next morning – I rose to the heady aroma of eggs and bacon sizzling on a pan and hot buttered toast.



After breakfast we broke camp and started loading the luggage. A squeeze here, a shove there, logical placement and efficient usage of space meant that everything, from the stove to the garbage bag found place in our boats and we set off. Andy and I were sharing a canoe with me riding up front and him behind. The luggage was stored in between. Gene and Gary shared another canoe and Judy rowed the kayak. The heavily loaded canoes were sitting really low in the water. Soon we were paddling in the vastness of the Azure Lake; both banks seemed very far away. For me, this was the heady rush. We were in a puny canoe low down and close to the water. A large swell could have easily overturned us and the only thing we had to propel us forward was muscle power as there was no current whatsoever.

Andy had his fishing rod hooked and trailing and soon a rainbow trout bit. He told me that I could dip my mug into the water and drink when I was thirsty – the park boundaries stretch beyond the source of the lake water. Therefore, it's clean and uncontaminated, which is true, for the water was sweet and tasty. We stopped at a little beach along the way to explore inland waterfalls and eat lunch, which comprised sandwiches that were created using various spreads, meats and breads.

On the lake when the wind was still, it seemed like floating on glass. I could see right to the bottom at times. The clouds and

▼ Clockwise from below: Dolls of Canadian Indian tribes who once inhabited parts of British Columbia; Lifely Falls; Wood cabins are the only luxury you will find in this part of Canada.

Facing page: Setting up camp at 4 and a Half Mile campsite on the sandy shores of Azure Lake.



green hillsides reflecting in the still water painted a perfect picture and creating ripples by paddling almost seemed like applying a careless brush stroke to this natural work of art.

After six hours on the water we camped at Huckleberry Campsite on Clearwater Lake. The weather was starting to catch up and I could see gray clouds approaching. They came, they spent and carried on leaving a rainbow in their wake. This beautiful region, the rocks and the lakes, was formed as a result of volcanic activity due to the pressure of the Pacific Ocean plate against the western seaboard of North America. In fact, the meeting point of these two seismic plates is right below Clearwater Lake. Andy explained all this while we were having our dessert for the day – hot apple pie with whipped cream.

Our next day's paddle brought us back to the jetty with a huge sense of achievement and the longing for a hot bath. And, the Alpine Meadows Resort 23 km to the south of Clearwater town was just right for that. Its spacious chalets, indulgent bathrooms and soft big beds, were just the right luxurious end to my camping trip in the Wells Gray Provincial Park.

## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways flies to Toronto daily from Brussels, Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai. There are convenient connections to Kamloops from Toronto via Vancouver.

Kamloops is the gateway to the Wells Gray National Park and one can also drive to it from either Vancouver (355km/4hrs) or Seattle (468km/5.5hrs).

### Accommodation

The two places to stay are Wells Gray Ranch (<http://www.wellsgrayranch.com>) and Alpine Meadows Resort (<http://www.alpinemeadowsresort.com>)

For customised adventure activities, get in touch with Andy at [www.kanatabc.com](http://www.kanatabc.com)

For more information Log on to [www.totabc.com](http://www.totabc.com)

