



Canoeing the Legend

CHURCHILL RIVER

Nothing says northern Saskatchewan like the Churchill River—it embodies the essence of the north with stunning landscapes, important links to the past, and popularity today. Aboriginal pictographs, or rock paintings, at 19 sites along its route through Saskatchewan attest to the waterway's centuries-old significance. The Churchill was central to the fur trade, linking Hudson Bay and eastern Canada with Athabasca country and the Arctic watershed, and providing access to fur-rich lands along the way. For Mackenzie, Franklin, Thompson, and a long list of explorers, the Churchill was their highway to the north. The river continues to be an important travel route for northerners. For canoeists seeking the magic of the wilderness, the Churchill is the most accessible of the great northern rivers.



The Churchill stretches across most of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, its watershed in Saskatchewan covering a quarter of the province. While parts of the Manitoba section have been tamed through water diversions and hydro projects, the Churchill in Saskatchewan remains largely in its natural state until we get to Sandy Bay near the Manitoba border. Here, Island Falls Dam was built in 1929 to supply power to the mine at Flin Flon.

Two faces of the Churchill River. The quiet waters on Hayman Lake contrast with the whitewater of Robertson Falls.

The Cree called the river "Missinipi", the Great Water. The Churchill is less a well-defined river than a series of lakes connected by short stretches of rapids and waterfalls—the ultimate drop-pool waterway. Rapids run the gamut from easy-going to thrilling to deadly. With well-used portage trails around all the big drops, the rapids are often less concern to canoeists than the Churchill's many expansive lakes that are subject to winds and waves.

While special places abound along the length of the Churchill, the middle section from Sandfly Lake to Otter Lake stands out as a canoeing favourite with rapids, falls, historic sites, and dynamite scenery. Sandfly Lake is filled with small rocky islands, many scattered with huge boulders. Sitting conspicuously on the northern tip of one island is the famous bear's head, first noted by Alexander Mackenzie who was through in the late 1700s. In his journal he describes, "...a very large stone, in the form of a bear, on which the natives have painted the head and snout of that animal; and here they also were formerly accustomed to offer sacrifices."

Sandfly and Kinosaskaw Lakes are linked by two sets of Needle Rapids, the tiny lake between them a favoured haunt of pelicans and cormorants. Just below, the Churchill narrows again as it thunders over the bedrock at Needle Falls. Mackenzie refers to the Portage des Epingles (or pins), named because of the sharp stones that voyageurs encountered. Over time, the French pins became English needles, but the rocks stayed just as sharp.



Needle Falls.

After the falls, we turn north on Kinosaskaw Lake, where a small set of pictographs looks down from the 10-metre high cliff face. The most distinct painting looks like a long-necked bird diving. As if on cue, a north wind comes up as soon as we turn north. We battle oncoming waves but finally the route turns east into a narrow protected passage, then swings south where, at least for a short time, we enjoy the wind at our backs. Just before the lake's outlet at Silent Rapids, we find an attractive island and set up camp out of the wind on the southern side of a rocky point. By evening, the weather is calm, clear, and chilly as we relax by the fire under a star-filled September sky.

Halfway through the night, the wind picks up again, but sounds strangely different. We wake in the morning to a blasting gale, thick fog, misty drizzle, and pounding waves. The wind turned around completely overnight and is now coming from the south. We tie extra guy ropes to the flapping tent and move our tarp and firebox to the other side of the point. Might as well get comfortable; it looks like we'll be here for a while. The drizzle turns to rain, then to sleet, then to snow. We stoke up the fire, and drink cup after cup of hot tea to keep warm. At least we don't have to worry about bugs.



Galleries of Stone

WEAVER RIVER



The lure of the Churchill goes well beyond the river itself. With a watershed covering a quarter of Saskatchewan, the Churchill has tributaries galore along with myriad nearby lakes offering a treasure-trove of paddling possibilities.

Among our favourite side trips off the Churchill is the Weaver River system that starts north of Missinipe, then flows southwest, joining the Churchill at Hayman Lake. Canoeists reach this short river by flying into one of its larger lakes or by getting dropped on Highway #102 north of Missinipe, then portaging ("slogging" is the term some use) through a series of tiny lakes and wetlands to get into the river system. We choose yet a third option—to simply paddle upstream then back down again. From Devil Lake on Highway #102, we cross the Little Devil and Great Devil portages into Hayman Lake, then head up the Weaver River through Bellows, Weaver, Forbes, Larocque, and Auld Lakes. Only three kilometres or so of the route is a well-defined river; mostly it's a series of lakes connected by picture-perfect rapids and waterfalls.



ABOVE: Weaver River; and pictographs on Larocque Lake.

OPPOSITE: Campsite and pictographs on Larocque Lake.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT: From Larocque Lake, a short portage trail leads to Auld Lake where this elaborate set of pictographs has images of people, animals, a thunderbird, and other designs. An unusual feature is a circle of yellow ochre enclosing the left panel.

Our main destination is Larocque Lake where we camp on one of the most idyllic spots in the north. From the rocky outcropping jutting into the lake, we watch the sunrise on one side, the sunset on the other side, and catch northern pike on both. The main reason we're here is to visit the amazing outdoor art gallery just across the bay—the second largest concentration of aboriginal rock paintings in Saskatchewan, and some of



the best preserved. Despite facing south into the sun, the reddish pigments of most images remain surprisingly vibrant.

We wake to an early morning fog blanketing the lake. It lifts slowly as the air warms with the rising sun, so when the first light hits the cliff, it bathes the age-old paintings in a slightly muted and warm glow, bringing them to life. Scattered for 120 metres along cliffs rising straight from the water, the 40 images portray people, birds, animals, a serpent with horns, and various geometric designs. Since these ancient images were likely painted from a canoe, a canoe is the ideal way to appreciate this special paddle-through art gallery.

