



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.



In The Wake of History

STURGEON-WEIR RIVER

The Sturgeon-weir overflows with history. It was named for stone dams or weirs that the Cree used to trap sturgeon and other fish. A tributary of the Saskatchewan River, this 250-kilometre system of river and lakes provided a vital link between the Saskatchewan and Churchill Rivers. Fur traders coming from Hudson Bay or eastern Canada could paddle up the Saskatchewan to Cumberland House, then head north along the Sturgeon-weir, connecting with the Churchill at Trade Lake.

In the early days, the Hudson's Bay Company relied on Indians from the interior to come to them with furs. But more entrepreneurial Montreal traders the likes of Louis Primeau and Joseph and Thomas Frobisher, travelled inland to intercept Indians on their way to Hudson Bay, making it easier to exchange furs for goods without the long commute. The Bay men realized that they too would have to improve their customer service to stay competitive, so in 1774 Samuel Hearne established the Company's first inland post at Cumberland House. For the next century, the Sturgeon-weir became a heavily travelled section of the voyageur highway.

TOP: *Lower stretch of the Sturgeon-weir River; marsh marigolds.*

BOTTOM: *A rail track runs the length of Frog Portage. Boats can be loaded on a small rail car and pushed across the trail.*





Down Dead Man's River

PORCUPINE RIVER

The Porcupine is the ultimate northern wilderness river—little known and little travelled, with some of the most exciting white-water and stunning landscapes around.

While the Dene have travelled this country for generations, they avoided parts of the Porcupine, especially the rugged lower canyon, preferring instead parallel routes such as along the Chipman River and a series of lakes between Selwyn Lake and Black Lake. They called the lower reaches of the Porcupine "Dead Man's River"—too dangerous and difficult to travel. Very comforting to hear when planning a trip.

Starting at Porcupine Bay in Selwyn Lake, just below the Northwest Territories border, the Porcupine zigzags south for almost 140 kilometres, meeting the Fond du Lac River about 12 kilometres before it empties into Black Lake. Travelling south, we notice changes in the terrain as we pass from one ecoregion to another. The upper reaches are part of the Selwyn Lake Upland Ecoregion, with terrain similar to that of Selwyn Lake itself, characterized by gradual rounded contours, long sandy eskers, and open lichen-covered woodlands. But soon we enter the Tazin Lake Uplands Ecoregion with steep ridges of Precambrian bedrock, towering granite cliffs, a thinner layer of glacial deposits, and a thicker, less open forest. Surprises are everywhere. In this country of seemingly solid rock we sometimes round a corner to find a fine sand beach tailor-made for camping.





Journeys on an Inland Sea

LAKE ATHABASCA'S NORTH SHORE

While we would be hard pressed to name our favourite Saskatchewan river, there is no contest in choosing our favourite lake. Lake Athabasca—big, bold, beautiful, often foreboding—wins hands down. Athabasca is less a lake than an inland sea. Covering close to 8,000 square kilometres and stretching some 300 kilometres long, this is the biggest lake in Saskatchewan, the fourth largest lake entirely within the borders of Canada, and the ninth largest lake in North America.

The north and south shores are two vastly different worlds. The north lies in the Tazin Lake Upland Ecoregion—rugged Precambrian Shield country with numerous islands, rocky outcroppings, towering cliffs, and irregular inlets and bays, some so large that they seem like separate lakes. The south shore is part of the Athabasca Plain Ecoregion where thick layers of glacial deposits blanket a landscape that is lower-lying, less rocky, and with long fine sandy beaches. Islands are few (non-existent in the sand dunes region), allowing the full force of the giant lake's fury to wash ashore.

A pinnacle rock looks over Lodge Bay; dry-ground cranberry.