

Descent of the Mountain

It's midnight and I can't sleep. As an insomniac this is nothing new, but here, a couple degrees south of the Artic Circle in July the sky is still light enough even to keep a narcoleptic restless. My mind wanders aimlessly but not as aimless as the sheep I should be counting. Hearing Mark, my tent mate shuffle a turn, I ask, "Mark. You awake?"

"No."

"I thought you were."

"Thanks to you, no."

"I can't sleep."

"Either can I with you waking me."

"This river we're on."

"Is there a problem?"

"Why do you think they named it the Mountain?"

"You woke me up to ask me that?"

"Don't you think it's wrong?"

"Waking me? Yes."

"No naming it the Mountain."

"Should I care?"

"You start at the bottom of mountains and climb up; this Mountain we've just been going downhill."

"Every trip I've been on with you has been that way."

"But to call it a mountain is an oxymoron."

"Oxymoron. Hmmm. That's a much better name for a river."

“It’s calling a ying a yang.”

“Make up your mind, then it’s the Ying Yang. Now seriously, I’d like to go back to sleep.”

“It fouls up the semantics of river running. What if you die? Your obituary might read, “Drowned on the Mountain.” “

“I don’t even care if even read, “Fell off the River.” At least I’d get some rest.”

“Be thankful you’re not suffering from pulmonary edema right now.”



Going down the Mountain started for five of us when, at various times on various rivers around the world, we had met the common downward denominator of our group, notorious British paddler Peter Knowles, a.k.a. Slime. We converged in Edmonton from three different continents. In a jet sporting a polar bear logo on its tail we puddle-hopped from Edmonton, to Yellow Knife, then Norman Wells, Northwest Territories. People asking where we were from got an answer that sounded like "BaScOEnAland" as we

answered in unison. And if that didn't back them off at a run, we explained: Mark Nichols, English; Mike McDonald, Scottish; Jock Montgomery, American, along with his wife, Annie Miniscioux, French, who both live in Bangkok and whom, as we deplaned in Norman Wells quickly surmised we'd certainly find no Thai restaurants in *this* neighborhood. Then again, braised moose *is not* served in Bangkok.

Who did the naming in the region is unknown. I can only assume it was the same nutcase who named the Mountain River. No one could tell me if the town was named for a person or a well. Presently it's a strip mall without the mall, just a long dusty dirt road flanked by buildings on screw jacks standing askew like drunks looking for lampposts. Keeping up with the Joneses here means being constantly under your house, adjusting jacks to counteract the frost heaves. As for population you could fit the town into a 747 but there wouldn't be enough room for the alcohol to keep them happy more than ten minutes. By all appearances, in the planning stages theodolites were unknown. Instead, local moose paths were widened. The town's pocket money comes from the spit spat booms of the gas and mineral industry—which is good because they certainly need the metal to build the cars and the gas to fuel them in order to drive around and stir up dust. That and build planes to take us to our put-in.

But no one knew where our plane was. So, using the excuse of information gathering we racked up a \$100 taxi tab fetching a pizza. I can only hope the money went for a muffler. Our mission did, however, uncover an extremely important fact: Prince Andrew had just left after canoeing the Natla-Keel. In fact, Randy Andy's signature in the Visitor Center

guest book and was the town's feature attraction. His scribble was scrawled on almost a full page and I couldn't discern whether he was never taught to use the economy of lines or if Royal Privilege let him ruin pages of otherwise perfectly good guest books. In smaller, mortal-sized writing surrounding the signature, were those of his bodyguards.

"Protecting him from what? Bears?" Slime wondered. "When he went for his morning constitution did the guards follow him? Just *what* did *they* do?"

Our eventual flight to Willow Handle Lake, our put-in, left us \$4000 poorer. A Twin Otter carried our three rented canoes—along with our gear, grub and six of us. The canoes fit easily, the grub, gear and bear-proof barrels fit grudgingly leaving the six of us contorted in our seats like bottled embryos. Willow Handle was not at the top of the Mountain because landing higher upriver also metered a higher cost and, with the U.S. dollar globally tanking, the hour flight into Willow Handle would have been a financial disaster had they not given us baseball caps. From our put-in we were looking at 17 days for our 190-mile run to the Mackenzie River, or measured in mosquito bites, around 5,000. We were also looking at our gear haphazardly scattered across the tundra. In Edmonton, we had—except for Slime who brought 5000 of the driest granola bars on earth--stuffed our shopping carts according to \$1500 worth of time-tested river recipes. With our superior knowledge we brought enough food to winter over *and* feed the bears. Presently, the food all had to be sorted and puzzled into the barrels; the mess looked like a yard sale run by lunatics.

We assaulted it.

It fought back viciously.

Finally, deciding we brought too much of everything, Slime suggested the sensible thing; the beer was going to hog far too much space. We should sit down and deal with the problem... Which didn't help packing at all. Meticulously, we pulverized our food into the six small supposedly bear-proof barrels.

In the morning the open valley allowed an early sun—not that the damn thing ever went down. It just napped for a couple hours over the horizon. Fortunately, the bears left our barrels alone. Unfortunately, in order to eat breakfast we had to unpack the barrels. After breakfast, since we merely needed to cross the lake, then a kilometer portage followed by a small stream day, we didn't restuff the barrels but heaped the gear and food in and began. The lake was glass, the day sunny, mineral-stripped mountains surrounded us with the serene sounds of nature: the cry of a loon, the dip of a canoe paddle, the buzz of a horse fly, a slap, a sucking cluck of a bug juice bottle being opened and the familiar cry of the harassed canoer, "Sons of bitches."

At the end of the lake came the portage. Every real canoe trip must have one, and if it's not hot and sweaty with even more aggressive horse flies and squadrons of mosquitoes, then it is not really a portage. As I trudged the kilometer boggy trail, dripping enough

sweat to float the canoes I wondered why I did these trips; wondered what the hell I was lugging guaranteed forty-below clothes for. Our clothes accounted for our trip's lone misfortune: we had to wear our own. Patagonia had sent Jock clothes for us to wear while we got chased by bears so he could take pictures of us. But the clothes never arrived and now I'll never be able to wear Patagonia since I still can't afford it. (If you're reading this Patagonia, I'd like a jacket but don't send me one of those bile green ones like Jock was wearing, OK? I wear a size L.)

Push Me Pull Me Creek came only as a short relief before it presented a new toil. The creek was wide enough for a canoe, but not long enough. The meandering bends were a lot less than 17 feet long. Standing in ice water to maneuver the boats our feet grew increasingly cold—until we couldn't feel them any more. Push Me Pull Me was not its name by the time we reached its mouth. Mysteriously at the mouth was what looked like tide-abandoned ice flows that we maneuvered through. There was no evidence of it being avalanche debris as flanking mountains were hardly steep enough. Later we got educated: these were *aufies*, run-off that flowed over, and then froze on top of the previous layers of ice.

Still we had not reached the Mountain River. Instead we had entered Black Feather Creek. Although we knew this trip was challenging, we—the self-appointed experts—didn't expect to be *this* challenged. Here, there were boulders in the river and annoyingly placed. The problem is a kayaker, alone with boat, knows what side of what rock they are going around. In the canoe I still knew what side of what rock I was going around but Mark on the opposing end saw it differently. To make it dramatic sudden williwaws

whistled from the cliffs sailing the boat broadside into uncharted obstacles. Wrapped on a rock it would have been a nasty place to pull a boat from. I was disappointed with the rented canoes. I reckoned these trusty old steeds had been down the river so many damn times they'd know their own way down it by now. They certainly didn't shy from obstacles and despite our best efforts to rein them, they tried to reacquaint themselves with as many rocks as they could.

After hours of canoe wrangling we arrived at the Mountain and camped immediately at **Grizzly** Meadows. I only emphasize **Grizzly** because so far you've read this article waiting for one to attack. By unwritten law every article now that mentions canoeing in the North is required to refer to bears in order to sell magazines. I worried because this particular meadow was, from talking to a canoe guide in Norman Wells, **Grizzly** infested. He'd had an incident here.

“Bad?” I asked.

“The worst.”

“That bad?”

“MmmmHmmm.”

“What happened?”

“One of the customers was throwing rocks at the other clients.”

“You’re kidding!” I said, “You let kids on the trips?”

“No, he was a 48-year-old stockbroker from Toronto.”

Fortunately there were no stock brokers camped in the meadow but we did see our first bear. Well sort of. The good thing about getting older along with your friends is that with our eyes all going south we see things we wouldn’t see when younger.

“Bear!” Mark shouted.

“Where?”

“There!”

“That’s a porcupine!”

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After a few more days on the river, although not so carefully packed, we still had 6 full barrels of food. Or rather we had five full barrels of food and one full of Slime’s crumbled granola bars. As we descended, we camped according to the scenery and access hiking into it. There was certainly no lack of scenery on the upper section. It was like passing through a valley of a giant buffet of desserts made by chefs on acid. Nor were we

the only ones looking at these strange colors. Daily we heard or saw helicopters or planes, especially in this upper part. More color meant more minerals: The area is filthy rich in them. Exploration was at frenzy, thus the aircraft. Mohammed, with companies like DeBeer's help--is about to move this Mountain also.



Unlike the popular Nahanni River to the south, the Mountain River is not a provincial park, meaning it is unprotected from exploitation. In the Norman Wells visitor center, right next to Andy's signature, is a rack of freebies promoting the area. Curiously, one of the offerings is a CD guide to the mineral deposits of the Northwest Territories, produced by the Northwest Territories Industry Tourism and Investment. It's not material for weekend rock hounds—unless you like sentences that read:

Mylonites: Dextrally-sheared K-feldspar porphyritic granite from eastern Tsu

Lake, part of a recently-discovered Paleoproterozoic shear zone in the western Taltson Magmatic Zone.

And there are 200 pages more where that came from, clearly indicating that some people go to school way too long. Personally, I never could tell the difference between the Mennonites and mylonites. The CD though is revealing for it includes the region's mineral and the oil dispositions maps. These are real maps drawn by the likes such as Chevron or Husky or DeBeers. It's multinationals on a treasure hunt. The maps also show who these invading tribes *don't* want playing with them, specifically any one who's been living there for several millennia.

As canoers we were hardly interested in all the diamonds and other gems scattered liberally about the beaches and gravel bars. I'm an unrock collector sort of guy, but soon, when we'd hit the shore an unspoken competition would begin of who could find the most weird and colorful rock. The Mountain is rock hound Mecca. Which is good because if we'd come to see wildlife we would have been disappointed. We saw little of it. Mostly I would have liked to have seen flocks of mosquito-eating birds. We saw a herd of Dahl sheep, several caribou and Mark's porcupine. On the fifth day we saw our first *real* bear.

For protection, the only problem with Canada is you can't bring a gun. The only problem with Alaska is you can. Either way if you have problems you're going to have problems. We carried bear spray, highly recommended by the people who are concerned about their

retirement's inadequacy and sell it. When first inquiring about it I thought they said, "Use hair spray." –exactly what this poor bear could have used. He was walking mangle; his rug was worn out even before his relinquishing it. He looked like an escapee from a third world zoo. He was the only bear we saw and seeing Jock's bile green jacket, he ran from us. We saw plenty of bear sign, mostly paw prints but at one camp we encountered a scat so large it could have been a feature on a topographical map. It was entirely composed of berries. Now if an animal leaves droppings *that* big containing nothing but berries I can only surmise he is lacking in protein. I thought Mike and Slime would be the obvious choices since they were unremitting snorers, no doubt attracting the bear. Up until this point everyone had been pitching their tents with liberal space between them, which meant as far away from Mike and Slime as physically possible but still within a half an hour's commute to the kitchen. But as soon as the scat was discovered, the tents mysteriously were all moved next to Mark's and my tent.

Around the campfire the talk of the bear wouldn't go away. Finally, I said, can't we talk about something else?

"Like what?"

"Anything. How about movies?"

"Anyone see Grizzly Man?" Annie asked.

We never did see the bear. I can't tell you what an extremely irritated protein-starved bear attacking in the night sounds like but it can't be worse than two chronic snorers putting in a solid eight hours' sleep. Slime had even accidentally left his granola bars out. All this time we had tried using them as fire starters. We had no idea how good of bear deterrents they were.



As a river runner my biggest concern was the five canyons we entered. Several were mere walls but several had ominous entries looking like the express lane to doom. If I was running the river blind and came to them, I wouldn't proceed without scouting. Canyon two would have been a day's project. I wouldn't even want to think about a portage. For the most part all are benign unless you have Mark in your stern steering a shortcut involving one of the largest holes in the river. It stopped us long enough to carry on an entire conversation. After bathing me in the bow, the boat shot skywards.

“Paddle!” Mark pleaded, in a gurgled, under water voice.

“I can’t,” I sung back in a soprano, cold-water-seeping-into-my crotch voice, my paddle stroking nothing but air.

We landed upright.

Although all the canyons were way too short they still had that cathedral feel: We were guests being graciously allowed to pass through. Measured against the fast, unconfined flow through the gravel beds, the water running through most the canyons was deep and slow. Beyond the fourth canyon the geography flattened, scenic, but in comparison to the geologic chaos above, the lower section slumped to mundane. On the last day, to reclaim time invested higher up the Mountain, we paddled fifty miles to where the Mountain meets the Mackenzie and where we were to rendezvous with our chartered skiff to take us the 70-kilometer return to Norman Wells. And why Norman Wells?

Because it was there.