

Lapland Adventure

From the time I was a boy I have listened to my dad recount his youthful exploits fishing and canoeing in the Yukon Territory of Canada. I have wanted to experience the same. My dad agreed that this year, after completion of my 1st year of university we would go on a wilderness adventure. As we are now living in Greece, the Yukon was too far. We decided to go to northern Sweden instead. After doing our homework, we decided that the Lainio River, 300 km north of the Arctic Circle would be our destination.

We arrived in Stockholm and spent the night in town with several friends of mine. We departed early the next morning for Kiruna, a mining town an hour and a half flight north of the capital. Allen, our guide from Camp Tystnaden was there as planned, to take us to the camp some 150 km northeast. "Steve and Michael," he called out in his friendly manner, "are you ready to begin your Lapland adventure?" We were.

During the trip to Camp Tystnaden, which means silence in Swedish, we passed through low mountain country surrounding the mining town of Kiruna, through spruce and birch taiga forests punctuated by streams and lakes. While driving Allen told us about the wildlife, fishing and the river. The area was teeming with reindeer and moose and bears were not uncommon sights. At Vittangi we crossed the Torne River, wide and slow moving – our appetite to be on the river growing!

A short time later we arrived at the camp. We were the first visitors of the summer season and we had a small log cabin to ourselves on the bank of the swollen Lainio River. The fishing was normally superb at this time of year; pike, perch, trout, salmon, arctic char and grayling abounded. However, due to the high water levels the fishing would not be tops. As for the river itself, only several weeks earlier it had been choked with ice flows. The fine weather we now enjoyed hastened the snow melt in the highland areas to the north. The river was now high and fast! We spent the remainder of the day preparing for our week on the river.

The following morning we tested the canoes. We decided that the best choice would be a 17' fiberglass canoe that was strong and stable. Later in the day we headed for the 'canyon', a class IV rapid where the river ran through a narrow defile. As we approached the canyon on foot, we heard a roar which became louder and louder. The reason was soon clear. There was white water up and downstream as far as the eye could see. The current was fast. The water boiled furiously where rocks on the river bed blocked its progress. We stopped and stared from the safety of the high river bank. Huge, churning waves and deep holes in the water made the section look impossible to pass in a canoe. I wondered if we would encounter anything similar upstream!

Around noon the next day, Allen, my dad and I set off for the starting point of our canoe journey 150 km northwest of the camp. On the way there, Allen answered our remaining questions about the river. As we drove north, the conifer forest gave way to tundra, a barren, treeless land occasionally interspersed with scrub birch and punctuated by ancient, weathered hills.



Lainio River above the class IV “Canyon” rapids

After about half an hour on a dirt road that seemed to run across the top of the world, we crossed the river Lainio at Jarkaståkka Bridge, where the water seemed a lot livelier than it had at the camp! It was narrow, but navigable. A good place to start, I thought. We loaded our gear into the canoe tied everything down with a nylon tarp and bid Allen farewell. As we paddled into the middle of the river the current carried us quickly downstream. Allen’s words spoken earlier in the day echoed in my head: “What doesn’t kill you will make you stronger!”

Our first challenge was to pass the ‘Kurakallinka’ rapids, which lay about 4km downstream. Normally it was rated class III, but due to the high water level, it was now given a higher rating. We first heard it as we paddled along a deceptively calm and flat section of the river where waterfowl fished in the quiet, swift current. It was about a quarter of an hour later when we caught our first glimpse of the rapids. As they came into view we pulled over to the shore to check the map before entering. My dad called out the rapid classes following the ‘Kurakallinka’; a class II rapid, then a class I, II, I, II and a class III rapid all in quick succession. We decided that the left bank of the river would be the best side to pull ourselves to shore should an upset occur. The next village, Soppero, was located 40km downstream on that side. Before setting off, we surveyed the river and agreed that the path down the middle of the river looked the most favorable with whitewater churning all around for more than 200 meters ahead.

Without further hesitation, we paddled into the middle of the river, feeling the force of the current take us like a charging locomotive. Here, even the strongest paddling caused only a slight change in direction. All was fine. I was enjoying the excitement of the rolling river. About 50 meters into the rapids I looked ahead and noticed a bulge in the water. “Dad,” I yelled, “look out! A huge boulder!” Before I could finish speaking, we were pushed over the boulder and then descended down a steep slope of water into a deep churning sink hole, previously blocked from our sight by the bulge created by the submerged boulder. A wall of freezing white water hit me with its full force straight on,

swamping the front of the canoe and stopping its forward motion. The stern of the canoe, however, kept moving ahead and we were now perpendicular to the current traveling sideways down the river. The next massive wave struck the canoe broadside, capsizing it, sending us flying into the ice cold torrent!

I grabbed onto the canoe, still clutching my paddle in one hand. I looked downstream and saw my dad bobbing like a cork through the rapids. He turned, waving an arm to indicate that he was uninjured. As I charged ahead, still attached to the racing canoe, trying to catch up with my dad, a submerged rock slammed against my lower body. I adjusted my position so that my feet and legs could buffet my body from the many boulders that lied just below the water level. Doing this, however, meant temporarily letting go of the canoe, and it was soon out of reach, rushing downstream. "Dad" I screamed as loud as I could, trying to be heard above the roar of the thundering waves, "get to the canoe!"

My dad inched his way through the unrelenting current to intercept the canoe. With not a moment to spare, he lunged and reached the stern of our now flooded craft. Driven by the current, I somehow managed to meet up with him and the canoe. By this time, we had been in the water for at least 5 minutes. The cold was starting to numb my legs and arms. We held on to the canoe for a few moments, exhausted by our exertions, relieved that we were able to retrieve it and supported by its buoyancy. I realized, however, that we would not survive much longer in the freezing water. The river was turning to the left, propelling us closer to the right shore. "We have to get to the right bank!" I shouted. As we kicked and pulled desperately to bring the canoe to shore, the river straightened, bringing us once again to the middle. The river was changing course again, this time turning to the right. The current showed no signs of abating and waves of ice cold water crashed over me and down my throat. The canoe was now nearly completely flooded and very heavy. The left shore was approaching us, and I knew that this was our last chance to reach safety before the river straightened and turned again. "To the left! To the left shore!" I shouted! My dad was showing little signs of movement, numbed by the near freezing river. It would take our combined effort, however, to reach shore. "Kick!" I howled, "KICK!!!" Suddenly revived, my dad started to focus every last bit of his energy on reaching the shore and kicked anew. Soon, we were touching the river bed, but the water was still too deep and fast for solid footing. Eventually, we pushed and pulled our battered bodies and inundated canoe closer to shore. Finally we could stand up. We had reached safety at last.

Relieved, we pulled into a back eddy. The canoe safely secured to a scrub willow growing on the river bank. We immediately set about our work, for the ordeal wasn't over yet. With the exception of the tent and sleeping bags, which had been packed in a watertight barrel, everything we had in the canoe had been completely soaked. There were however, a number of things to feel grateful for: the sun was shining brightly, none of our belongings had been washed away and most importantly, we had come to shore next to an ideal campsite, a sunny, low bluff overlooking the river. While I unloaded the grounded canoe, my dad quickly started a fire from the ample scrub birch surrounding our camp. We pitched our tent, stretched the lines to dry our gear on and prepared supper: reindeer steaks and tortellini with tomato sauce. I think it was the best meal of my life!

That evening, around the campfire, my dad and I discussed the day's events. We planned how we would continue without the maps that were torn from inside my dad's shirt during our ordeal in the river. We agreed that it was better to walk along the shore, even in waist deep water, roping the canoe past difficult rapids than to risk another upset in which we might not be so lucky.

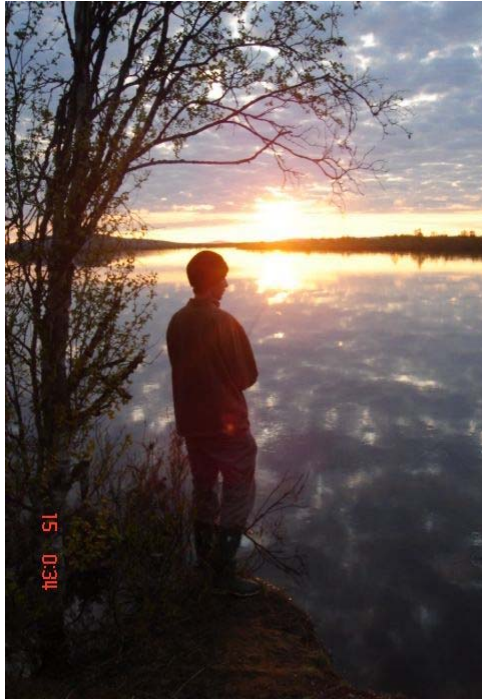
It was well after midnight when we hit the sleeping bags and the sun was still shining brightly. In northern Lapland, the sun doesn't set between the end of May and the end of July, circling around the sky and dipping down around the northern horizon at midnight where it hovers for several hours before beginning its ascent again. In full daylight we fell into a deep sleep. When we awoke, we dug into a hearty breakfast of fried potatoes and onions with salt pork and hefty portions of Swedish pancakes smothered in lingon berry jam all prepared over the campfire. We broke camp, packed our dry gear and paddled downstream to the village of Soppero. The country changed abruptly from only scrub birch to spruce and fir interspersed with much taller birch trees. We started to see a few unoccupied primitive cabins along the river, built by the local Sami people for hunting, reindeer herding and fishing.

As we continued downstream, the weather remained fine, clear and warm. We avoided the worst of the rapids by roping the canoe through the water, along the side of the river bank, my dad leading while I held the line secure to the back of the canoe. We passed safely in this manner although one incident did give us a scare. In fast flowing sections of the river just before the beginning of rapids it is best to approach the river bank parallel to the shore so that we can both secure the canoe as it approaches land. However, on one occasion, we came into shore at an oblique angle just ahead of the rapid. Before I could get out to secure the canoe, the current took the stern, carrying it out towards the middle of the river. The canoe was now going downstream backwards toward the next set of rapids! "Paddle right, paddle right!" my dad shouted as he furiously back paddled on the left. Slowly, the canoe turned sideways before eventually straightening out, allowing us to pull successfully onto shore moments before entering the next set of rapids.

That afternoon, we arrived in Soppero. There, we telephoned the camp and requested that the maps for the remainder of the river be faxed to us. We examined them closely. Of the remaining 40km to camp, 20km of class III, II and even IV rapids remained to be navigated.

My dad and I decided to end our trip at Nedre Soppero, 8km downstream, just before the next set of violent rapids. We left town in the early evening, and after a short paddle found an excellent campsite on a high sandy bluff overlooking a fine river panorama to the north and south. After setting up camp, my dad and I tried our hand at fishing. My dad caught a pike and I hooked a perch, which did nicely for breakfast the next morning!

The following afternoon we met Allen again. We loaded the gear into his jeep and returned to camp. When we had requested that the river maps be faxed to us, he suspected our upset on the river. He was relieved that everything had turned out as well as it had.



Fishing under the Midnight Sun



Breakfast



An Evenings Catch

For the remainder of our time in Lapland, we chose a lake-stream-river course that was mainly devoid of turbulent white-water, allowing us to navigate quietly through unspoiled wilderness for several days. We sighted a moose and its calf grazing at the waters edge. We observed reindeer and waterfowl and had ample time to catch all the pike and perch needed for breakfast, lunch and dinner! The rest of the trip was spent in near perfect weather. We were sad to say goodbye to the friendly people, beautiful landscape and rugged yet peaceful way of life that we had experienced over the week that we spent there.

I learned a lot about canoeing and mastered my fishing technique. Most importantly I had experienced wilderness adventure that few people have had the chance to live. And I now understand why my dad fondly recalls his youthful days in the Yukon.

Michael Moran - June 2005