

Where first people paddled, you can today

By **Kari Bodnarchuk**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ERROL, N.H. — Our canoes sliced through the shallow water, dispersing a swath of pollen that floated down the river and stirring up water bugs that darted across its surface. To our left, a gangly heron took flight and crossed a small cove where autumn's fruity colors reflected on the water. I felt like an explorer, drifting through a seemingly untouched wilderness where moose and eagles outnumbered human visitors.

The Magalloway River soon spilled into Umbagog Lake, where my fellow paddlers and I joined the Northern Forest Canoe Trail. This magnificent, 740-

mile water route snakes through Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, and southern Quebec as it traces trade routes used by Native Americans and early European settlers. Between Old Forge, N.Y., and Fort Kent, Maine, it links more than 75 lakes and rivers, and passes through 45 communities, from sleepy hamlets to lively towns. It even flows beneath a hotel in Vermont and over submerged villages on a dammed-up lake in Maine (it's possible to see a church steeple when the water is low).

At times, paddlers on this mainly self-guided route cut through some of the region's most remote wilderness, and in other spots, they can tie up their canoes

in the middle of a town and wander across the street for pizza. Similarly, they can pitch a tent and sleep on the ground or, in sections of Maine and New York, paddle from inn to inn and enjoy more luxurious accommodations.

"Water trails are closer to communities by nature," says Kate Williams, executive director of the Canoe Trail. "I can't think of a town along our trail that isn't there because of the waterway."

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Part of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail on the Androscoggin River in the Lake Umbagog wildlife refuge.



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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Gliding from cove to white water, hiking to portage and park

► TRAIL

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I had always been drawn to New England's coastline and forested footpaths, but had spent little time on its inland water trails. The now mapped and signposted Canoe Trail, which officially launched in June 2006, offered a chance to explore several waterways and discover their natural, cultural, and geological history.

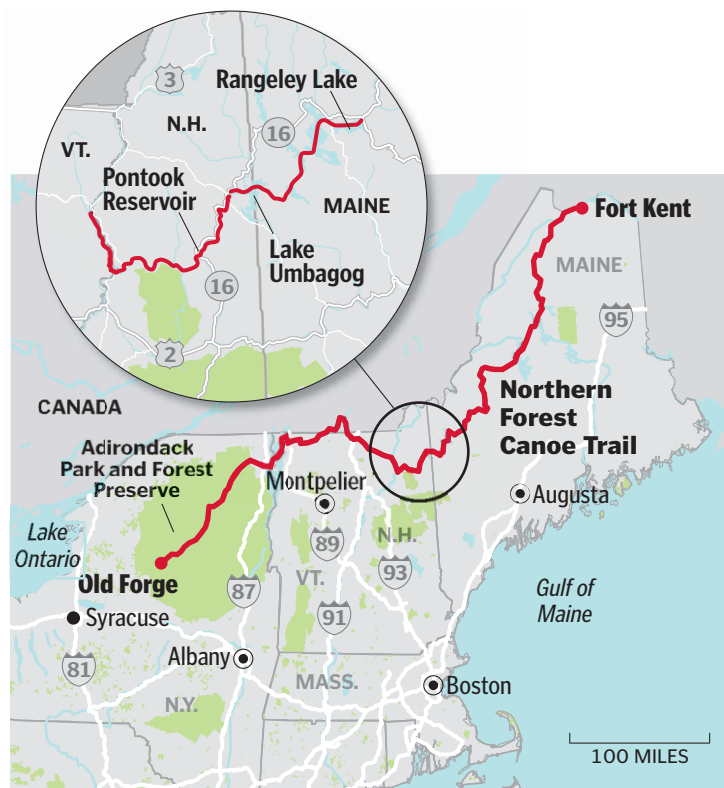
A group of us had gathered for a three-day trip along the trail, from the Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge on the Maine-New Hampshire border down the Androscoggin River to Pontook Dam. The 25-mile stretch included a 200-yard portage, frothy and turbulent white-water sections, coves and inlets to explore, remote campsites, and few brushes with civilization.

We launched our Old Town canoes from a put-in beside the wildlife refuge office, about four miles north of Errol on Route 16, and spent the first two days traversing Lake Umbagog and enjoying the area's amazing birdlife. That night, we pitched our tents at the Cedar Stump Campground on the Rapid River, where the sharp, spicy scent of balsam fir hung in the air and red cedars lined the embankments. Our wooded site, accessible only by boat, had picnic tables, fire pits, and tidy pit toilets. The Canoe Trail used existing camping areas, where possible, but also built 10 new campsites along the route, making sure to avoid culturally sensitive areas.

"We worked with Native Americans to be sure we were getting the information right and not exposing sites or stories that weren't ours to expose," says Williams. "We wanted to share what we think is an interesting heritage without putting places or interpretations at risk."

We retraced our paddle strokes west the following day and headed down the Androscoggin, ducking into backwater coves where osprey nested and common mergansers floated among the sedge meadows. Just before Errol, we portaged 200 yards around a hydroelectric dam, shuttling our canoes and gear across a parking lot and down a dirt road. That felt like a big accomplishment, until I learned that the trail has 55 miles of land crossings, including some that can truly test one's fortitude if the conditions aren't right.

"Last year, we had torrential



SOURCE: Northern Forest Canoe Trail

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If you go . . .

Northern Forest Canoe Trail
4403 Main St., 2d floor
Waitsfield, Vt.

802-496-2285

www.northernforestcanoetrail.org

Sells maps and provides trip-planning information.

Although **outfitters** along the route offer paddling instruction, canoe rentals, and trip support, the trail is mostly **self-guided**. You can put together your own trip **using the trail's website**, which has maps, route descriptions, suggested itineraries, equipment checklists, and **local resources**: outfitters, services, campgrounds, and other amenities on the route. If you prefer to let **someone else do the organizing**, you can buy vacation packages for several sections of the route, which include a guide, gear, and all necessary trip logistics.

rain, high winds, and a big slog," says Jo-Anne McCoy, 49, of Fairfield, Vt., referring to a land traverse she completed with her husband and two kids near Saranac Lake, N.Y. "Portaging three-quarters of a mile with loaded boats in the rain with your teenagers can bring it all home."

Adds McCoy's husband, Danny, "First we had to drag the ca-

noes knee-deep through the mud for half a mile in the pelting rain, and that was just to get to the portage. Think of Humphrey Bogart in 'African Queen' getting covered in leeches."

Thankfully we had clear weather, few portages, and no leech sightings. Since we only had to paddle 3½ miles to reach our campsite at Mollidgewock State Park, we spent that afternoon playing in the Class III rapids just before the Errol bridge. We practiced ferrying across the river, dipping in and out of eddies, and catching waves. Getting onto a wave and off again took strong, precision paddling, and I nearly capsized on one attempt. Those who decided not to run the rapids hiked around them following a well-blazed riverside trail.

A big benefit of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail is that adventurers can choose a section that best suits their skills. The trail draws day trippers, weekend warriors, and "section paddlers" like the McCoys who canoe the route in bite-size chunks over a season or multiple years.

"We've done the beginning and the end of the trail, and now we just have to do the middle," says Jo-Anne McCoy, whose family has been chipping away at the trail one week at a time for the past four years. "The Adirondacks were a great place to start because there's plenty of history



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Paddlers portage 200 yards around a dam on the Androscoggin River.

and solitude and wildlife. You can see these old rusted [locomotives] in the middle of the forest. . . . And we'd find campsites with great rope swings so the kids could spend the rest of the day being Tarzan and Jane."

Another paddler, John Stookey, 79, of Sheffield, Mass., has canoed the entire route in about eight trips over the past year. His goal was to finish the trail before his 80th birthday in January, and he completed it recently with his 51-year-old daughter.

"It's amazing to me the number of people in a community who can't wait to help you," says Stookey. "I've had people who've driven me back and forth when I've needed a shuttle, and have refused to take any money. And they've been so full of local lore."

About two dozen people ("through paddlers") have done the entire route in one fell swoop.

The first was Donnie Mullen, 37, of Hope, Maine, a former Outward Bound instructor, who did it in 2000 before the trail was officially mapped out. He used a homemade wood-and-canvas boat and hand-drawn maps that he transferred onto US Geological Survey maps.

"I wanted to have a Daniel Boone, days-of-old experience," says Mullen, who is writing the Maine section for the trail's guidebook to be released next spring. "One of the great aspects of the trail is that you can never have paddled in your life and still be appreciative of the water and the scenery."

The trail takes paddlers on a journey through time. We spotted old pylons and other rem-

nants of the area's once-thriving logging industry and giant granite boulders deposited by glaciers during the last ice age. The trail also passes important Native American sites, historic homes, and heritage museums.

The idea for a long-distance canoe trail was hatched in the 1990s, but it wasn't until 2000 that Kay Henry and Rob Center, former owners of Mad River Canoe in Waitsfield, Vt., took the idea from conception to reality when they established the nonprofit trail. They spent the next six years working to get people in local communities on board, get permission from landowners for public access — about 90 percent of the trail passes through private land — and create an invaluable set of standardized maps that includes not only route-finding information but also interesting historical facts. We learned, for in-

stance, that just beyond the take-out point at the end of our route lay an old paper mill, a World War II camp, and natural springs that the Abenakis believed to have healing powers.

The Northeast's waterways have been well documented and charted, but still invite the true spirit of exploration.

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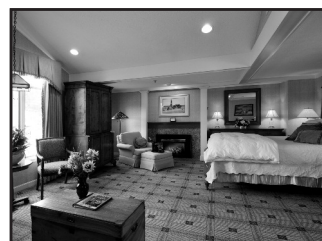
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