

MAINE'S UNTOUCHED BEAUTY

RETRACE THOREAU'S 1857 JOURNEY

BY JENNIFER FODEN WILSON





background: Throughout my 90-kilometre paddling excursion, we often felt we were the only people on the river.

top right: I savoured my time in the Maine Woods, using the sun as my clock and the ground as my bed.

Jennifer Foden Wilson



WE PADDLED HARD, THE HOT SUN BEATING DOWN ON OUR SHOULDERS.
WITH EACH STROKE, THE BEAT OF THE DRUM GREW LOUDER.

I had been paddling for 90 kilometres, others more than 400. Rounding the final corner toward Indian Island along the Penobscot River, members of the Penobscot Nation continued to drum and sing our canoes all the way back to land.

The first day of June marked the 16th and final day of a 150th anniversary expedition through the Maine Woods, retracing the route taken by classic American author Henry David Thoreau, his companion and their Penobscot guide Joseph Polis. Their journey, as well as other trips Thoreau took through the Maine Woods, was preserved in Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*, published in 1864. More than 40 people (myself included) paddled, camped and portaged segments of Thoreau's original 1857 journey. The paddlers consisted of scholars, writers, photographers, guides, Maine tourism professionals and members of the Penobscot Nation (who call the river we paddled home). Of these paddlers, eight brave adventurers travelled the entire 520-kilometre route, which included 400 kilometres of paddling. Their journey was at times rigorous, as their bodies and minds battled 30-plus-kilometre days of paddling, intense rapids, powerful thunderstorms and long portages.

WILD AND FREE

The Maine Woods are lush, green and striking. "Nature must have cooperated with art here," Thoreau observed. The vast forest, the calm blue lake are something out of a fairytale. Somehow, 150 years later, this landscape still remains relatively untouched. When Thoreau passed through the woods in the mid-1800s, he described it as such:

What a wilderness walk for a man to take alone! None of your half-mile swamps, none of your mile-wide woods merely, as on the skirts of our towns . . . Here was traveling of the old heroic kind over the unaltered face of nature.

This isn't your typical vision of cottage country: throughout my 90-kilometre paddle, we very rarely saw any signs of civilization. The vast "unaltered face of nature" stretches on. The river is home to one deserted island after the next. Many times it felt like we were the only people on the river. Peace and quiet took over, and the only sounds were birds singing and soaring above us; and the rhythm of our paddles all hitting and gliding through the water. Even in the mid-1800s Thoreau recognized that this kind of wilderness was rare. Cities have historically developed along riverbanks, like the Hudson and the Seine. Yet, today, almost 4.5 million hectares of forest in Maine still remain wild and free.



AT PEACE WITH NATURE

The Maine Woods appear to have transformative effects too: “I haven’t yet had time to fully comprehend what I learned from this trip. But I know it was profound,” says Stan Tag, an associate professor at Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies in Washington. Tag was one of the eight individuals who paddled the entire 400-kilometre journey. He is writing a book on the 19th-century history of Mount Katahdin and the people who climbed it (that includes Thoreau as well as nearly 500 others). “My body felt at home in the woods and on the rivers for 16 days. What I hope is that the rivers themselves, the woods, the camaraderie, the hard physical labour of it all, the spirit of curiosity and goodwill, that all of this finds its way into my own words, my writing.”

I too savoured my time in the Maine Woods, using the sun as my clock and the ground as my bed. We read passages from the book around the campfire. We ate like kings. Steak and potatoes, bacon and eggs, blueberry pancakes, venison stew, moose and bison burgers. Jason Pardilla, one of the Penobscot paddlers, recognized how paddling through the vast Maine wilderness gave him the opportunity to appreciate the land’s culture and history: “I became even more mindful of my relationship with the environment that goes back thousands of years.”

GUIDED EXPEDITIONS

While most people won’t retrace Thoreau’s entire journey, visitors to the Maine Woods region can choose to travel different segments of his expedition. Mahoosuc Guide Service and New England Outdoor Center both run guided canoe trips throughout the area. Even the most experienced paddlers should consider traversing the area with a guide, simply to learn of the river’s cultural and literary heritage. As the only Canadian paddler in the group, I was pleased to hear that Kevin Slater and Polly Mahoney, founders and owners of Mahoosuc Guide Service, also run canoe and dogsledding trips in Québec.

The untouched beauty of the Maine Woods is less than a day’s drive from many east coast Canadian cities, such as Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal and Halifax. Literary lovers can channel their inner Thoreau. The outdoorsy can camp and canoe off the beaten path. History and culture buffs can learn about times gone by: the river’s logging industry and the Penobscot Nation’s land claims and cultural origins.

Yet, for everyone, exploring the Maine Woods is somewhat like travelling back in time. It is comforting to know this natural beauty looked relatively the same to Henry David Thoreau when he travelled down the Penobscot River all those years ago. ■



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left: Peace and quiet took over as the rhythm of our paddles hit and glided through the water. Jennifer Foden Wilson

travel planner

For more information, visit:

Maine Office of Tourism:

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Maine Woods Discovery:

mainewoodsdiscovery.com

Mahoosuc Guide Service:

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Center: neoc.com