

How to test your mettle

A city girl's look-before-you-leap guide to roughing-it vacations

BY MAXINE PAETRO



Forget staying dry. Just try to stay inside a rapids-running raft.

I was seduced. The river was described as pristine, untouched by man. The rapids, little ones the first couple of days and not many after that. The water teemed with "the mighty coho salmon" swimming upstream to spawn; the air was filled with what seemed to be the greatest concentration of bald eagles in the world.

The page of the travel brochure that first caught my eye was headed "The Tatshenshini River in the Wilds of Alaska." Living glaciers were promised, and mountain goats, and wolves and wolverines and the Kodiak bear. I

turned in my vacation request form, booked my trip, and that night I dreamed of eagles.

SATURDAY: I sat on the plane next to a high-ranking Alaskan government official. He'd never heard of the Tatshenshini River. I think this was an omen.

SUNDAY: I was in Alaska, which is just about as far from New York City as a city girl can go. A mere week before I was surrounded by things I know. Muggers, I know. Roaches, I know. Married men, overdraft checking, life on the 36th floor, all that stuff I know. But wilderness survival? Very funny.

Six hours later, we put the rubber boats in the water.

MONDAY: I saw the regal bald eagles. They soared, they swooped, they watched from skinny spruce trees. I got pictures of them and found an eagle feather.

The boats were inflated rubber donuts elongated into ovals. Our gear was tied into the boats at the front and the back. We, the paddlers, straddled the sides of the boat, with one foot in, one foot out, cowboy style.

The river was clear and cold. It carried us through canyons banked by granite cliffs, past crumbling gravel bars and golden aspen trees. Our points of entry and outcry were in Alaska, but actually the Tatshenshini spends most of its time in Canada. The trip was 140 miles. Our river time was to be 12 days.

TUESDAY: I fell out of the boat. I was the only one who did. I was minding my own business, just sort of enjoying the air and the view when a boulder crept up behind the boat and knocked me off. Cindy, my tentmate, said I did a perfect backward somersault. She laughed.

I changed into a set of dry clothing which I wore until the last day. My wet clothes wouldn't dry. Cotton is a loser in the rain. So is goose down. For your information, if it grows on a bird, don't take it on the river. In desperation, the third wet-jacket day, I

hung the miserable thing on a stick in front of the fire. The inside of the ski jacket got dry just before the sleeve went up in flames.

THURSDAY: Bushwhacking, they told me, is walking through bushes without trails. When the hike is straight up, and several miles, and the toggles on your stupid blue-and-green yachting boots come undone at practically every step, it is not amoré.

My camping companions were experienced hikers. They hiked, then rested, then hiked some more. I climbed, sometimes on my hands and knees. I got blisters. I tore my clothes. I reached the rest stops in time to watch my fellows dust off their pants and stride away. I lie: Sometimes they waited until I undid my knapsack, spread out my camera equipment, screwed on my macro lens to photograph some engaging little rock, and then they bolted away.

Three or four miles into the hike, one of my long thigh muscles said to hell with it, and curled up for a nap. I was tripping one out of every three steps. Not little toe-stubbers, real stumbles down to the ground. Remember Dorothy's walk through the woods in *The Wizard of Oz*? Like that.

FRIDAY: I ate forbidden foods. Dark chocolate slabs mortared with chunky peanut butter. Hot chocolate, berry cobbles, pork (Continued)



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Above: On their last day, the rain stopped, the clouds split and a fiery, pungent rainbow broke out and spanned the river. Right: Maxine Paetro.





Spending your days roughing through big and tiny rockscapes, left and above, instead of inside an office building is only half challenge. The rest is reward. So is a two-hour shower when you get home.

If it grows on a bird, don't take it on the river. A wet goose-down jacket is a loser

HOW TO TEST YOUR METTLE *continued*

chops, pancakes, Genoa salami, and a million other foods I don't dare eat at home. One of the leaders said I was burning about 5,000 calories a day in the cold and the rain. Hooray for the cold and the rain.

We wore wet suit bottoms while in the boat. The men looked sexy with leather belts cinching in their plaid shirts over the black rubber bottoms, their knives sheathed and strung on the back of their belts. The women dressed in the same outfits looked like mutants.

SATURDAY: I learned how to pack my rubber duffles. The duffles are flat black rubber sacks with permanently creased folds at the mouth and strap-and-buckle arrangements on the sides. The deal is this: Vacuum seal the duffles, or get your clothes wet. How hard is that? Imagine this envelope made of inner-tube weight rubber, two and a half feet long, and a foot and a half wide. Now imagine stuffing in a Fiberfil sleeping bag twice as wide and three times as long. Imagine the sleeping bag fighting back. Imagine getting the damn thing in the bag and then having to fold the creases down

while kneeling the top of the bag to force the air out and create a vacuum. Imagine resting for a split second and having your sleeping bag jump out of the duffle like a jack-in-the-box. Imagine clubbing your sleeping bag to death with a rock.

SUNDAY: I contracted "out-fitter's crack." This is what I called the interesting way exposure to the elements made my hands look like the bottoms of my feet. I got the runs. No big deal. I got dandruff. I kept my hat on. I didn't care how I looked by Sunday anyway. I peeked in a mirror. To my amazement, I looked fine. There was some color in my face. In fact I looked good.

I took a bath in a bucket of hot water. It was heaven. I looked down at my body after so many days of no full-length mirror behind the bathroom door. I looked skinny to me. It was an illusion.

MONDAY: A mile of jagged granite boulders lay piled between us and the Grand Pacific Glacier. I climbed carefully, choosing my boulders one wobbly step at a time. My camera gear clunked contentedly in my red knapsack. My thin rubber boots flexed over each hard angled edge. At last I touched solid blue ice. I

reached the highest ridge on our climb, hot, sweaty, triumphant. I put my face into a glassy well in the glacier's side and drank cold blue water too delicious to describe.

That night we saw the northern lights. It was a quiet event. The sky was black, the stars sharp and pointy. A streak of pale light appeared to the right of the camp. It didn't shoot or anything, it just appeared, and then was gone. To the left, another streak, a pair of them, and then gone. A wide, pale rash across the ceiling, and then blackness. To the right again, several vertical rails of light, side by side, like searchlights.

TUESDAY: I have conquered an iceberg. It is the size of a two-story building. I am on the first floor. It is my job to get a good grip on the ice and hold the line which is attached to the boats below. When I haul up on the line, making it very taut, it will act as a handrail so the group on the second floor will be able to descend safely.

First I must establish my footing. Shiny slivers of ice spray up from the tip of my \$2.98 Kamp King scout knife as I chip out my foot hold. Soon my position is secure. I am a rock. I beam with the joy of success. My compan-

ions pass me one by one, lowering themselves into the boats. At last it is my turn.

Not for me the measured tread from toehold to toehold. I decide I am a gold-cup champion otter and make my descent on my derriere. I end in an ignominious jack-knife—feet in the boat, head on the berg, tush in the river. **WEDNESDAY:** I got my period. The first day on the river, Joe had planted his feet in the sand, gazed over our heads and announced, "All right now, you girls. If any of you get your period, don't you all go setting your tents up by yourselves. Bears are attracted to the scent, so put your tents near the men."

We were camped near a mighty coho salmon cannery, which was where the planes were picking us up the next morning. Our tents were a few hundred feet from the waste dump—read bear food.

It happened that night. I thought about the bears. Should I, dare I, keep these cursed panties in the tent? If a sex-crazed bear comes lopping up and gets a sniff, do I stand a better chance with the panties in the tent, or out? I made a decision. I unzipped the tent, tossed them out, zipped up, and snuggled in once more. It was raining. I

thought, okay. Soon the water will rinse the panties clean. No scent, no bear. Saved. I shut my eyes.

I opened my eyes. What if instead of rinsing the scent away, the rain spreads it around. If I peek out, will I find not one bear but a whole gang of bears? Just before panic set in, the flap unzipped and in crawled Cindy, veteran camper and member of the Adirondack Mountain Club. "Don't worry about a thing," she said. "I've had my period for the last four days."

THURSDAY: The rain intensified. There was talk that the weather might prevent the planes from coming in. I willed the rain to stop. I wanted to be off the river. The rain slackened. A two-seater dropped in out of the sky. Not ours. More rain. Well, if the rain was going to stop the plane, then I was going to stop the rain. I concentrated. I paced and swore. I knew every blade of grass, every leaf near the cannery. I got anxiety rash over my whole body.

What were the others doing? Playing mumblety-peg. Reading. Laughing. Having a good time. Something was clearly wrong here. A half-dozen people were having a perfectly fine time in the rain waiting for the planes to come. One person dressed in bright blue rain gear marched around the airstrip looking like *Star War's* See Threepio in a Cookie Monster costume.

I gave it up. I hauled myself over to the food pack, palmed a couple of apples, stashed half a bag of Fig Newtons in my pocket and lumbered over to a semi-damp spot under a rubber boat lean-to. I hunkered down and watched the rain. In a little while I got kind of comfortable. And in a little while longer the rain stopped.

The sky lightened . . . and a rainbow appeared. It was, as my dad used to say, a corker. No pale shimmery job, this rainbow. This rainbow was pungent. It was fiery. It was a full 180 degrees and it spanned the river. It was a hell of a rainbow.

The sun dropped and we set up the tents again. We had mighty coho salmon for supper—we bought it, sliced in steaks, straight from the plant. We played Scrabble and I won by a narrow 200-point margin. It rained all night.

FRIDAY: The planes came. It was one of the brightest moments in my life. It was seconded a few hours later by my first shower which lasted an hour and 45 minutes. I flew out of Juneau the same day. I didn't even say good-bye. □

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