

## FROM JASPER TO TUKTOYAKTUK: A PADDLE OF A LIFETIME



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When Vicki Lefrancois met her now-fiancé Ben Roche, she was given an ultimatum.

Her young English beau told her he was going on a four-and-a-half month expedition, canoeing from Columbia Glacier to Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, whether she came along or not.

It was a 4,000-kilometre adventure Roche had been planning for quite some time and he wasn't about to let anything or anyone stand in his way. But Lefrancois isn't just anything or anyone.

She's a woman in love.

So, the Quebec-native, who had never before camped or paddled, learned how and learned quickly.

"I couldn't let him go for four months and not know if he would come back alive," she said with a laugh. "I had to go with him. He needed someone to take care of him."

And take care of him she did. For two months before the couple left on their grand Northern adventure, Lefrancois spent her time dehydrating all of their meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner and dessert. And while on the water, she earned her keep, paddling hard for hours on end, often encouraging Roche to keep going just a little further.

The pair met nearly two years ago while working at the Sawridge Inn and got engaged while on the trip.

It only took a week of paddling together, setting up and taking down camp together, cooking and eating together, and spending every waking moment together, for Roche to know Lefrancois was the woman he wanted to marry.

"If we could do that, I figured everything else in life would be easy," he said with a laugh.

The first day of the trip, April 23, was the most challenging of them all. The couple and their then-seven-month-old Norwegian elkhound, Tallak, had to lug all of their gear, including their canoe, from Sunwapta Falls to Athabasca Crossing, a 20-kilometre trek through waist deep snow and rain. It took 12 excruciating hours.

"Every time I took a step, I would just sink in and fall over," said Roche. "So after an hour of that, we had to turn the canoe into a sled and pull it up to the campsite."

"And then, at the end we had a nice thunderstorm and pouring rain, just to finish it up," said Lefrancois. "It was one of the worst days of the trip. But then we said, 'If we can go through this one day – which was a horrible, horrible day – then it can't be worse after that.'"

And they were right, it didn't get much worse.

The couple averaged 35 kilometres of paddling a day.

On their best day, when the water was moving quickly, they completed 100 kilometres. On their worst, they travelled three kilometres. That was on Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories.

"We started paddling, there was too much wind, we pulled over and we waited," said Lefrancois.

For Roche, Great Slave Lake was the most memorable body of water.

"It's like an ocean," he said. "I come from England. You can stand on the shore of England and you can see France across the sea. So, to go to Great Slave Lake and see nothing beyond was incredible."

But, as incredible as it was to see, it was equally as challenging to paddle.

"There was such wind and such waves, we had thunder and lightening storms pretty much every day that sometimes we had to paddle through," he said.

"It was one of the most challenging parts of the trip. I never hope to repeat it."

After enduring numerous thunder and lightening storms, the couple finally made it to Beaver Lake, the stretch of water where Great Slave Lake meets the Mackenzie River.

That was where they had their first encounter with swarms of pesky sand flies.

"It turns out their habitat is long, waterlogged grass," wrote Roche on the couple's blog. "We made the ultimate mistake of moving into a patch to see if we could get out and will never again make that mistake."

"When the bow of the canoe touched the grass, a literal black cloud burst from within and covered us and the boat. I was wearing short sleeves, shorts, and my shirt was undone. My skin was black and crawling with flies. It was horrifying, and they followed us like that for around two hours. We didn't go near the shore again."

With the expectation of running into enormous insects in Canada's North, the couple packed bug nets and six cans of Deet insect repellent. But, despite being prepared, Roche made Lefrancois ration her Deet usage, for fear that they would run out.

“We came back with four and a half cans because I rationed it,” said Roche with a hearty laugh.

From Beaver Lake, the couple continued North up the Mackenzie River, stopping in a number of small communities, including Fort Providence, Fort Simpson, Norman Wells, Fort Good Hope, Inuvik and finally Tuktoyaktuk.

In each community, they were surprised by the warm welcome extended to them by the locals, who happily opened their homes and cupboards to the couple.

“We got a lot of invites to dinner. On a few days, people even showed up in the morning by motorboat – First Nation guys – and asked, ‘Do you want some fish for breakfast?’ and then pass us a giant whitefish,” said Roche.

“Yeah, I didn’t expect that,” continued Lefrancois.

Nor did she expect the beauty of the Northern tundra, where there are no trees hindering your view of the never ending sky.

“I was really amazed by that. It’s just huge and a lot of emptiness,” she said. “The sunsets were amazing.”

On the couple’s last night of camping, before arriving in Tuktoyaktuk, they saw green streaks of light dancing across the sky. It was the Aurora Borealis.

They viewed the sight as a reward for all of their hard work and as a good omen for their final day of paddling.

The next morning, Aug. 30, they woke up early and paddled into Tuktoyaktuk just as the sun was rising.

“It was magical, and all the more of a powerful paddling experience as it was our last on the trip,” said Roche.

After a week in Tuktoyaktuk, the couple flew to Inuvik, where they met a friend who drove them the 3,500 kilometres back to Jasper.

They arrived home Sept. 10 and now plan to travel east to Quebec, where they will build their own house, grow their own food and become self-sufficient.

But, this doesn’t mark the end of their adventure. In two years, the couple plans to return to Athabasca Crossing to depart on a canoe trip to the Pacific Ocean, and later, after they’ve built their own canoe, they hope to go back a third time to make the trip from the Athabasca River to the Atlantic Ocean.

“From Jasper it’s so easily accessible right at the door,” said Roche of adventure. “We started by going North. Now we have to go East and West.”

To learn more about Roche, Lefrancois, Tallak and their Northern adventure, visit [www.paddlethewaters.org](http://www.paddlethewaters.org).