

How far is it? We all looked from our campsite across the sparkling blue water at the little island taunting us in the near distance. 400 meters. No way. 200! No it must be 300 meters. 250. No, it's got to be more. Maybe 700 meters. We all looked again and tried to envision the distance in our minds. A couple of football fields? No. It was further than that. A kilometer. No, it couldn't be.

And then little Joe spoke out. I have a GPS cellphone. Let's go find out. Was there a better way to spend some quality family time on a hot summer afternoon in Algonquin Park? Nope.

{gallery}canoe/2007_algonquin{/gallery} Our three-day Vesely family canoeing trip had started noon the day before. Our group included my wife Aline and I, my dad Joe and stepmom Jarka, and Jarka's daughter and husband Petra and Joe. I had promised to take my dad on a canoe trip a couple of years back - even though he's more of a Club Med kind of guy - and he's been reminding me about my promise ever since. So with Jarka's family visiting from the Czech Republic, we thought it'd be a perfect opportunity to organize a group outing and introduce them to a Canadian wilderness experience.

Our route was a three-day August long weekend 30KM loop beginning at Canoe Lake, heading north through Joe, Little Joe and Baby Joe Lakes to Burnt Island Lake and then back again through Tom Thompson Lake. On a mid-summer weekend - and particularly the August long weekend we were there - any backcountry traveller starting out from Canoe Lake is likely to think they're paddling through a suburb of Toronto - that's how many inexperienced paddlers crowd the lake. But it's a popular spot for many reasons including its easy access from southern Ontario, its varied route options and its place in Algonquin history.

Around the turn of the century, when the Ottawa, Arnprior and Parry Sound Railway offered the main means of access to the park, Canoe Lake was the commercial center of Algonquin. Artist Tom Thompson lived here for much of the year, making extended trips into the interior in the spring and fall to paint. Thompson's body was found in the lake in 1917; many believe he was murdered here. A cairn dedicated to Thompson is located under an incongruous totem pole on the north shore of the lake.

After leaving behind the launch crowds and stopping briefly at the cairn, we soon found our paddling rhythm and spent the next six hours paddling and portaging our way through the Joe chain of lakes (yet another reason why this route was chosen seeing as how we had a pair of Joes on the trip!) until we finally reached Burnt Island Lake around 6PM. It took us another hour to realize that all the sights in our near vicinity were already taken and we would have to make due with a makeshift camp on Caroline Island.

Lucky for us, the island had a flat enough grassy space with room for three tents and enough rocks and dead wood to make a campfire. Supper was our staple pasta and sausages meal and we washed it down with a bottle I had made my dad carry among his personal baggage - an apple slivovice.

After a breakfast omelette the next morning we backtracked to our last portage point and walked the 1140 meter portage to Littledoe Lake which connected to our destination at Tom Thompson Lake. Originally the plan had been to pond jump and portage our way through the Sunbeam Lake loop over to Canoe Lake but after the difficulties finding a campsite the previous night, it made more sense to make sure we found a new spot earlier today.

It was a wise choice.

We reached Tom Thompson Lake by 2PM and found a large group site on a point which we snagged and then had the afternoon to ourselves to contemplate life's great mysteries - like the distance from our site to that elusive island in the distance.

Petra, my dad and I decided to swim it while Aline, Jarka and little Joe paddled alongside. It took Petra and I about 12 minutes to swim the distance. My dad took the easy way out and grabbed the painter line from the canoe and urged the canoeists to drag him along. Needless to

say, that slowed them all down. Though as my dad proclaimed throughout the weekend whenever it was convenient: "You married me not only for this (pointing at muscled arm) but also for this! (pointing to brain)" That's my dad for you. Finding the least physical way out wherever possible. Though, for a 62-year-old on his first overnight canoe trip foregoing the comforts of a soft mattress - I'll cut him some slack. He and Jarka were troopers and carried their fair share without complaint the entire weekend. It wasn't as the crow flies but the distance was approximately 490 meters. Give or take a little. After a leisurely swim we back, Aline and I tested out a new supper - dehydrated ground beef and a dehydrated spaghetti sauce we had dried ourselves earlier that month on pasta and zucchini. Delicious. And light! Definitely something we'll try again. For the second straight night we had some fun trying to raise our foodpack to a safe spot before turning in as the sun set. Monday morning's breakfast was pancakes before we closed camp and headed down Teepee lake back to the launch at Canoe Lake. The weather, which had been hot and sunny for the weekend, was a shade more crisp today and there had been rain forecasts - but we managed to get off the water and return our equipment around noon before the weather turned.