



Best Fjord Forward

Tim Pozzi tackles three days by kayak along Canada's Saguenay Fjord, battling its choppy waters by day and building fires from beaver-gnawed driftwood by night...

'I have to say,' spluttered my fair-skinned friend Adam, his face liberally plastered with dead insects, 'this is my idea of hell.' Somewhere in the wilderness behind our tent, pitched on the edge of the Saguenay Fjord on a shelf of rock, there were moose and bears. We must have been a rare treat for the plague of small black flies and mosquitos that had emerged to devour us. We were soggy, cold and bushed after battling all day through blustery winds and sizable waves in a two-man kayak. Neither of us had slept in a tent for many years, and since we both snore, we expected little sleep. We'd have to do it all again the next day.

Both pushing 50, we felt that we might not be able to handle this sort of adventure five years down the line. Time and tide wait for no man. Although, as city dwellers, we'd never given much thought to tides. We'd arrived that morning in L'Anse St Jean 45 minutes late for an 8am rendezvous.

'OK fellas, the tide's going out. Let's get packed and ready to go. We need to get on the water,' said our chunky, affable guide for the trip, Simon, ex-army, and a decade younger than us. 'Then I'll give you a few pointers on how to pilot a kayak.'



I'd been in a kayak once before, for a couple of hours, some years previously. Adam likewise. No wonder we were nervous at the prospect of covering 60km in three days. Now Simon was showing us how to squeeze air out of our kit bags to keep them waterproof. Where to store cooking equipment and food on the kayak. How to fit our elasticated 'skirts' over the rim of the entry holes, to keep out the water. With red lifejackets over our black wetsuits, and sporting beige, broad-brimmed hats, we looked like a pair of half-arsed aquatic Mounties.

And then we were afloat, skirts taut, Neoprene shoes full of water, wobbling worryingly. Simon assured us that two-man kayaks are very stable, and that his novices average only one capsize a year. As 'the best dancer', I was in front, dictating our paddling rhythm. Adam had the trickier task of steering us, using a couple of pedals.



I'd pictured Saguenay as a sort of broad, sleepy river. But there is a clue in the word 'fjord' that, since we were in Canada rather than Norway, I'd not properly taken on board. This gargantuan, glacier-hewn waterway is 105km long, up to 4km wide, with an average depth of 210m (the average depth of the English Channel is 63m). The forested cliffs on either side reach up to 350m. Flowing into the St Lawrence River, it carries a mix of saltwater and freshwater and is governed by tides and complex currents.

After paddling 500 metres along the shoreline, Simon announced that we were going to cross to the other side of the fjord. What?! Really? It looked an awfully long way. 'It's only about three kilometers,' he said.

There was another problem. 'Er... my right arm hurts Simon,' I said. After less than half an hour, I was feeling a lot of pain from my forearm to my shoulder. I wasn't sure I could continue. Our whole adventure would be ruined. 'Try to relax. It's not about strength. Don't use your shoulders so much,' said Simon. The pain dissipated a little, and we pressed on, one stroke at a time.



In the middle of the fjord it was blowing 24 knots - 27.6 mph. Simon later told us that if the forecast is for wind at more than 25 knots, they won't make the crossing. Less than an hour after leaving shore, we were at the limit of what any inexperienced kayaker might reasonably undertake.

We lurched and bobbed and plunged through the cold, tea-coloured waves, making very slow progress. 'C'mon guys, you need to move a little faster,' urged Simon. It was hard going, but I was thrilled as wave after wave washed over our yellow boat and we bounced back to the surface, our skirts having prevented any water from entering it. I was oblivious to the fact that every time I raised my paddle, the water dripping from it was being blown back into Adam's face.

As we neared the far shore the wind eased and the waters became calmer. We'd made it. We pulled into a small cove to stop for lunch and discovered that, weary as we were, we now had to lift our extremely heavy kayaks, stuffed with gear, out of the water and some way up the beach to prevent them from being washed away. We were clearly going to be burning a lot of calories.

Happily, Simon had also been a chef for several years. At the end of that first day, while the flies and mosquitos feasted on us - they didn't seem interested in Simon - we at least had the consolation of barbecued venison steaks and bison sausages, washed down with a bottle of claret.



After a night of pitifully little sleep, we awoke to a magical scene: no wind, and the sun burning mist off the beach and the shallows. After a magnificent breakfast we slipped gently out into the fjord, now seeming to glide almost effortlessly across the glassy stillness. We hugged the glacier-scarred cliff-faces rising vertically from the water, where swift subcurrents helped to propel us through the water.

We covered 12km before lunch with ease, passing landmarks with names bequeathed by the loggers who'd lived here long ago: Pissing Moose Waterfall, Broken Pants Bay, Butt Cove. Most beautiful was St Margaret's Bay, where beluga whales bring their young to teach them to fish in sheltered surrounds. We were disappointed not to see any.



Adam and I established a deeply satisfying rhythm. As I tuned in to his paddle dipping almost noiselessly into the water at the same time as mine, and watched the ripples arrowing gently out from the nose of our kayak as we skimmed across the water, I felt deeply content. The only sounds were of gentle splashes, the occasional cry of a peregrine falcon, or the skittering of an alarmed squirrel.

Simon promised us a shower that evening, which turned out to be a woodland waterfall. We built a fire of beaver-gnawed driftwood on a small headland where wild iris and dog rose grew, and the chef prepared confit of duck for dinner. 'This is like a 5-star hotel!' I said to Simon. 'No. It's a million-star hotel!' he replied with a cheesy grin, pointing to the sky.



We needed to be off by 9am on our final day, to reach the mouth of the fjord before the tide turned. Simon urged us periodically to press hard through choppy stretches, when the wind picked up, or we were faced by a counter-current. No problem. We were seasoned kayakers by now, as at home on the water as the last of the Mohicans.

Suddenly Simon shouted, 'Minke!', and we turned to face the far bank of the fjord. We heard them first - a sound like a juggernaut's hydraulic brakes, as the whales sprayed water from their blowholes, and white surf rippled off their glistening black backs. We watched three of them, 70 or 80 metres from our kayaks, as their backs arched and their tails flipped out in what seemed like slow motion. One even rolled over on its side, treating us to a view of its white belly. Any closer, and I think I'd have been terrified. What would have happened if one of these 8m-long monsters had surfaced directly beneath us? As it was, I have rarely been more thrilled.

That tide wasn't going to wait for us though, and we had to press on to Tadoussac, and the strange sight of houses, boats, and people. Simon radioed the coastguard, who cleared us to cross the mouth of the fjord as the two ferries that ply it eased towards either side. We paddled through a mysterious mist, past sailing boats invisible save for their masts, and steered towards a sandy beach. I didn't want to land.

On the shore we were greeted by half a dozen French tourists, who gathered around us excitedly. When we told them we had travelled 60km over the past three days, they produced a small burst of applause. Being clapped by six people seemed to me about appropriate to the scale of our achievement, but Adam felt differently. 'I have to say,' he beamed, 'that's one of the best things I've ever done.'



How to do it: A 4-night *Kayaking the Saguenay Fjord* trip with Wildlife Worldwide (www.wildlifeworldwide.com) costs £805 per person based on two sharing, including two nights' B&B in a small hotel in L'Anse-Saint-Jean (before/after kayaking), full board accommodation while kayaking (1 night in a rustic cottage and 1 night wild camping with basic facilities), all transport, equipment, waterproof clothing, paddle jacket and special gloves, dry bags for personal effects, camping gear, and three days' car hire. Minimum of two people, and a maximum of six people. Minimum age of 17.

Daily distance: 18-22km (or around 5 hours' paddling).

Start/end: L'Anse-Saint-Jean (return by boat or road from Tadoussac).

Season: Regular fixed departures from mid-June until end of August (2014 dates not available yet). For more information visit www.quebecoriginal.com

Source : <http://www.cntraveller.com/recommended/active/kayaking-the-saguenay-fjord/lanse-st-jean>