



T4 ★ TORONTO STAR ★ THURSDAY, AUGUST 9, 2007

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JAMIE KENT PHOTO COURTESY OF GRAND EXPERIENCES

The gentle Grand River is ideal for kayaking and canoeing: it's not too deep or dangerous — except for the odd rock — and it's surrounded by beautiful forest scenery.

A Grand adventure

Kayaking on the peaceful Grand River brings a sense of freedom and an urge to go exploring

JANICE BRADBEER
TORONTO STAR

PARIS, ONT.—We take off like truant school kids, leaving the group of kayakers and canoeists far behind. My friend Mary and I are on a five-hour, 22-kilometre paddling stretch down the Grand River from Cambridge to Paris, one hour west of Toronto.

It's a combination of a beautiful, warm day and our restless, independent spirits that lead us to tackle the gentle currents of the Grand River on our own.

Paris may be nestled between the Grand and Nith Rivers — instead of the Seine — with the town named after the nearby gypsum deposits used for plaster of Paris, rather than the City of Light; but it still has a picturesque, European charm with its historic cobblestone homes.

It's also headquarters for Grand Experiences, a canoe and kayak outfitters company started in 1997 that provides paddling excursions down the Grand River and surrounding Southern Ontario waters.

They have supplied 20 enthusiastic members of the Halton Outdoor Club, led by Dorothy Rideough, with everything needed for a day out on the water.

This is the third year that Rideough has organized trips down the Grand for the Burlington-based club.

JUST THE FACTS

GRAND EXPERIENCES offers canoe or kayaking guided trips from April to November for two to 150 people, for all ages and from novice up. Rentals are also available per day or per hour. They're open from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week. The store is in Paris, Ont., 113 Grand River St. N. grand-experiences.com, 1-888-258-0441.

THE PRICE for guided day trips per adult (not including tax) for kayak starts at \$79 and \$60 for

canoe (\$49 for those who sit in the middle). Children 12 and under in the middle of the canoe pay \$24 and children 7 and under in the middle pay \$5. Group discounts are offered for adult and school and community groups. Fee includes boat, paddle, PFD, use of guide, shuttle ride and tripper lunch (our club had a reduced rate since we brought our own lunches).

TRIPS INCLUDE four- or five-hour paddles along the central

Grand River, as well as overnight trips to such spots as Long Point Marsh and the Haliburton Highlands.

DOROTHY RIDEOUGH of the Halton Outdoor Club (spectranet.ca/-outdoor) urges paddlers on the Grand to wear shoes or sandals that they don't mind getting wet and muddy, as well as quick-drying shorts and T-shirts, sunglasses, a hat, insect repellent and plenty of water and sunblock.

"It's a nice, easy day trip (from the GTA). Anybody can go down the Grand. It's hard to get into trouble, since the water is only a few inches deep," says Rideough, who became hooked on kayaking while vacationing in her native New Brunswick five years ago.

"When they're on the water, people chill right out," says Jamie Kent, owner of Grand Experiences, who calls the Carolinian forest (with unique deciduous species) in the Grand River valley, "a big, natural oasis in southern Ontario."

The 300-kilometre river (more than 200 kilometres of it navigable) is the most biologically diverse area

in Canada, he says. Kent's company takes 10,000 customers a year on day trips and overnighters, about 90 per cent on the Grand.

His clientele has increased by about 40 per cent yearly, which he attributes to paddling's growing popularity as a recreational sport, particularly kayaking — which many find swifter and easier to master than a canoe.

"With kayaking there's a sense of freedom of being in the boat by yourself," he says.

A school bus takes us from the parking lot in Paris to the starting point for our excursion in Cambridge.

Paddling down the central Grand, the air is filled with the almost sickeningly sweet scent of pastel flowers.

Along the way, Mary spots wild irises and two great blue herons. We get caught on the rocks more than a few times and use our paddles to pry ourselves free. But in doing so, we tip the canoe — three times.

After starting out around 10:30 a.m. (with one quick stop for lunch on a tiny island), we arrive back in Paris about 3:30 p.m. Still no club members in sight.

"You're the first one back," says the woman behind the desk at

Grand Experiences.

"How far did we paddle?" I ask.

"Twenty-two kilometres."

We leave a note for the club, take our car and do a tour of the picturesque town before the one-hour drive back to Oakville.

Rideough phones me that evening.

"Where were you?" she asks. "We counted the boats at our lunch break. We started out with two canoes, but one was missing. We figured you were way ahead of us. I knew that there were enough people on the river to help you, though, if you ran into trouble."

Rideough says the club stopped for lunch at the ruins of a mill, built in the late 1700s and once used to process wool. Farther downstream guides pointed out a hollowed-out, 300-year-old sycamore tree, which separates the Carolinian forest from the softwood boreal forest. Paddlers were also shown a spring bubbling from a rock on the banks and walked up a rail-trail to a look-out on one of four abutments of limestone pillars, part of an unfinished train bridge constructed before World War I. They finished about 5:30 p.m.

"I feel awful that you missed out," she says.

"Oh, but we had fun," I tell her.

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