

DOG PADDLING IN ALGONQUIN PARK

BY DALE PEACOCK

Camping and canoe tripping has gone all to the dogs thanks to Eren and Kathryn Howell's unique guiding company, Dog Paddling Adventures. The brilliant idea to combine their love of animals and the outdoors came to Eren ten years ago shortly after the Howells got their first dog.

Kathryn recalls, "Eren returned home from a short canoe trip with our puppy. He was really excited about how much Jessie enjoyed the experience. Out of the blue he blurted, "We have to do this as a business. I can't believe that people would leave their dogs behind if they had a choice." Kathryn lovingly credits Jessie, their blue-eyed Husky mix, with being the inspiration behind the company. She says, "Jessie just loves to introduce other dogs to the special places she's discovered over the past decade." Of course, it is a big bonus that Jessie is the only staff member who will work for kibble!

After a couple of successful test runs with friends and their pooches, the fully qualified outdoor enthusiasts

founded Dog Paddling Adventures (DPA) in 2000. As the saying goes, they've never looked back. They now provide adventure camping all year round – yes, in winter too – for dogs and their humans. It's a way of giving dog owners the opportunity to enjoy nature with their four-legged best friends and to bond with other likeminded people.

All DPA guides are ORCA (Ontario Recreational Canoe Association) certified. They also have their Wilderness First Aid Certificate. Kathryn says that the greatest strength of their staff is everyone's wonderful ability to create a comfortable and relaxed group environment. She says, "It's amazing how everyone co-operates and starts to work as a group right from the beginning. We'll have clients who pitch in with meal preparation and clean-up (even though they don't have to do a thing)." Since all trip participants are dog lovers, no one is ever alone in keeping tabs on their pup.

Interestingly, DPA finds that while many clients are outdoor enthusiasts, a number of people who have never



camped plan a trip specifically to give their urban dwelling dogs a chance to experience the great outdoors. After a mention in the prestigious New York Times a few years ago, DPA was inundated with calls from Manhattanites who had never been in a canoe or slept under the stars. They were (mostly) as thrilled with the great outdoors as their dogs were. Kathryn is sanguine on this point: “Canoe tripping isn’t for everyone.”

While the company offers a wide range of activities from day trips in and around Toronto to pet photography seminars, the canoe tripping program remains the heart and soul of Dog Paddling Adventures. The trips vary in length and location but they all offer people and pups the joy of off-leash exploration in some of Ontario’s most glorious parks, including fabled Algonquin Park.

Kathryn says that even dogs with intense ‘nose drive’ will only go so far, because there is so much to keep them engaged around the camp. She reports that watching a dog that has never been off leash enjoying that freedom is a wonderful thing to see.

All DPA trips are fully outfitted with top-notch gear and delicious food that allow people and pups to enjoy a hassle free vacation of swimming, relaxation, eating and bonding. Clients are required to bring appropriate clothing and the food they normally feed their dog. Camping accommodations, yummy meals, all equipment, park permits, lifejackets and backpacks (for both people and dogs) and the services of a wilderness guide are all included. For most trips, no experience is required. The stable, flat-bottomed canoes help to keep dogs and humans from tipping and doggy lifejackets keep pets cool and protected from the sun.

Kathryn laughingly says that while no day with dogs is ever exactly typical, DPA canoe and camping trips usually start with a gentle wake-up featuring birds chirping and the aroma of coffee brewing and bacon sizzling over an open fire. Hot and cold cereals, fresh fruit and pancakes or crepes make up just some of the rise and shine menu choices.

Then it’s off to swim, paddle or explore the rugged beauty of an Ontario park. The morning activity usually works up an appetite for an abundant picnic lunch. Some participants swim and play Frisbee in the water with their dogs while others work on their paddling strokes under Rover’s watchful eye. Kathryn enthuses, “Dogs just love it! They are so happy and in their glory!”



Returning to the campsite after an active day in the fresh air, campers tend to take it easy. They may opt to write in their journals, play cards or sit with their pets and gaze out at the lake or up at the star-filled sky. Kathryn says that reminiscing about the day’s activities over a delicious, healthy and creative meal is one of the highlights of the day. Even the dogs are happily tired out and love nothing more than sprawling on a sun-warmed rock and having their ears ruffled by their owners while they (the humans) sip on a glass of wine.

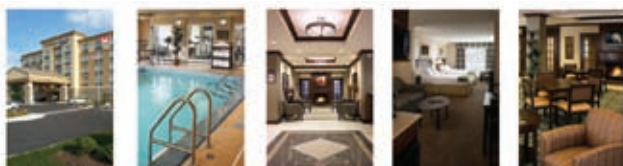
At nightfall, the group gathers beside a roaring fire to marvel at a glorious sunset and the sounds of the forest settling down for the night. Trippers might be lucky enough to hear the haunting call of a loon on the lake. As Kathryn notes, “A pack of dogs is generally a discouragement to wildlife! It’s the only downside to camping with your dog.” Occasionally a moose will be seen and although these behemoths are often hard to spook, barking drives even the boldest creatures away from camp.

Thank you notes flood into DPA’s e-mail inbox after each trip. One American client said, “Everything was made so easy for beginners like us! Our guide was fantastic and made it a really fun, relaxing and memorable experience.



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It was well worth the 12 hour drive from Illinois!" A client with a sense of humour wrote, "Our tiny dog was carried half the time, but she is still "dog tired" now. Thanks for letting us bring her (even though she's not a "real" dog)." A grateful camper offered, "We had an absolute blast on the trip and it was so cool to see the dogs having more fun than we were. Lincoln loved every minute of it and made a best friend in Cooper, a Golden Retriever with the

SAME exact birthday!!! I can't say enough good things about everyone involved in the trip."

Kathryn says that people often get very emotional when they try to describe what the bonding experience with their dog means to them. Softly, she adds, "People often tell us that the experience has been life-changing for them and their dogs." She pauses, "It means so much to us to know the impact that this experience can have on people and their pets. It is really magical."



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