

STORY & IMAGES: PATRICK KINSELLA

THE SECOND COMING

ON THE HIGHLAND RIVERS OF NEW SOUTH WALES, PADDLEMAG MEETS A QUIET AMERICAN WHO IS SPEARHEADING THE REVIVAL OF AUSTRALIAN CANOEING

In 2009 I entered the longest annual paddling race on the planet – the Yukon River Quest in the far north of Canada. You can do the Quest in all kinds of craft, from single sea kayaks to 8-person Voyageur canoes, but my mind was made up from the minute I'd decided to have a crack at it: I was going to Canada, so I'd be doing it in a Canadian canoe. Of course they don't call them Canadian canoes over there. Just canoes.

And that got me thinking. Why the hell are these boats referred to as Canadian canoes anyway? Sure, Canadians are pretty enthusiastic about their single-ended blades, but there's solid evidence that canoes have been in use Downunder for tens of thousands years, and I'm pretty sure that makes Indigenous Australians the original boat people.

Be that as it may, I couldn't find anyone to give me lessons in proper canoeing techniques before I left for the Yukon – at least not in Melbourne.

I should have looked a bit harder. Four years later I found the very person I'd needed while preparing for the Quest – a bloke who lives and breaths open-boat paddling and who is championing a second coming of Australian canoeing. He lives under the shadow of the Giant Potato in the New South Wales' town of Robertson, and he's from upstate New York.

When I meet Travis Freney for a week of paddling around the waterways of the Southern Highlands we are surrounded by canoes. And there isn't a Canadian in sight.

Lewis Wylie runs the first rapid on the Lower Shoalhaven





DURING THAT RACE ALONG THE YUKON RIVER I LEARN'T A LOT IN A SHORT SPACE OF TIME. THE FIRST THING BEING THAT EXPERIENCE IN A KAYAK AND ON A SURFSKI DOESN'T COUNT FOR ANYTHING WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO PADDLE A CANOE FOR THE FIRST TIME AND THE FINISH LINE IS 715 KILOMETRES AWAY.

After more than 60 hours sat on my arse trying to keep pace with the born-and-bred bona fide Canadian canoeist I was sharing the C2 with, I came away from the experience with some scars (to pride and posterior) but also with a new found love of open-boat paddling.

I'd been seduced by the history and left spellbound by what I'd observed. Watching some of the First Nations guys handle their canoes was like witnessing the Bard write poetry, and paddling through the wilderness in the same style of craft that a couple of hundred years earlier had opened up trade routes through some of the most remote regions on Earth gave me goose pimples. My heart was well and truly snagged – a canoeist I would be.

Back in Australia, however, my love was unrequited. Compared to north America the canoe culture here seemed non-existent. Years went by, and any knowledge I'd absorbed by osmosis during that bum-breaking baptism evaporated.

And then, at an outdoor trade show in Canberra, I met Trav, who not only teaches canoeing to outdoor rec students at Tafe, but also appeared to be on one-man mission to convert Australians in general to the religion of the one-ended paddle.

Trav imports Wenonah Canoes into Australia – but his desire to see more people paddling open boats stems more from his passion for the pursuit of canoeing than it does from any business plan. He was born and bred on the shores of Oneida Lake, has paddled canoes his entire life and since moving to

Australia has spent most of his time scratching his head and wondering why more people aren't exploring the country's waterways in canoes.

His local river, the Shoalhaven, is a canoeist's dream playground, boasting a range of conditions for touring, exploring and sharpening skills. The river slithers through Morton National Park and its upper and lower sections offer technical runs that rank among the best downriver trips in the region for more experienced paddlers.

Joined by two of Trav's more advanced Tafe students, Kent and Jeremy, we initially put in on the middle section of the Shoalhaven, just above the dam at the confluence of the Kangaroo River, where the water sprawls out fat and wide to form the large and lovely Lake Yarrunga, an expanse of calm water fringed by a dramatic red escarpment.

For the following two days, as we explore some of the many hidden corners and creek arms of the lake and bush camp along its shores, Trav teaches me all the canoe-paddling techniques that I would have arm-wrestled a grisly bear to have perfected before I took on the Yukon.

Canoeing is a deceptively elusive skill – even on calm water. Strokes and subtle movements that look simple and effortless when performed by a lifelong canoe paddler such as Trav, turn out to be a whole lot trickier than they appear. Just mastering the J stroke, which enables you to paddle on one side of the boat and maintain a straight line, requires many hours to properly refine.

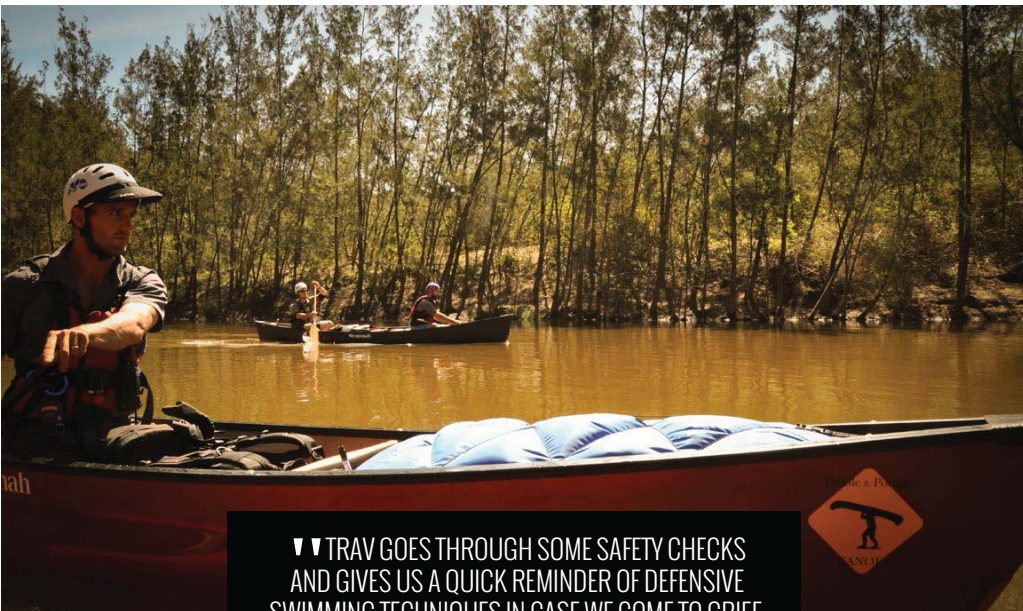
However the Highlands have blessed us with a series of bluebird days, the company is good and the surroundings jaw-droppingly beautiful, and I'm content to put in as much paddling time as I can as we nose up curvaceous corridors of calm water and look for campsites.



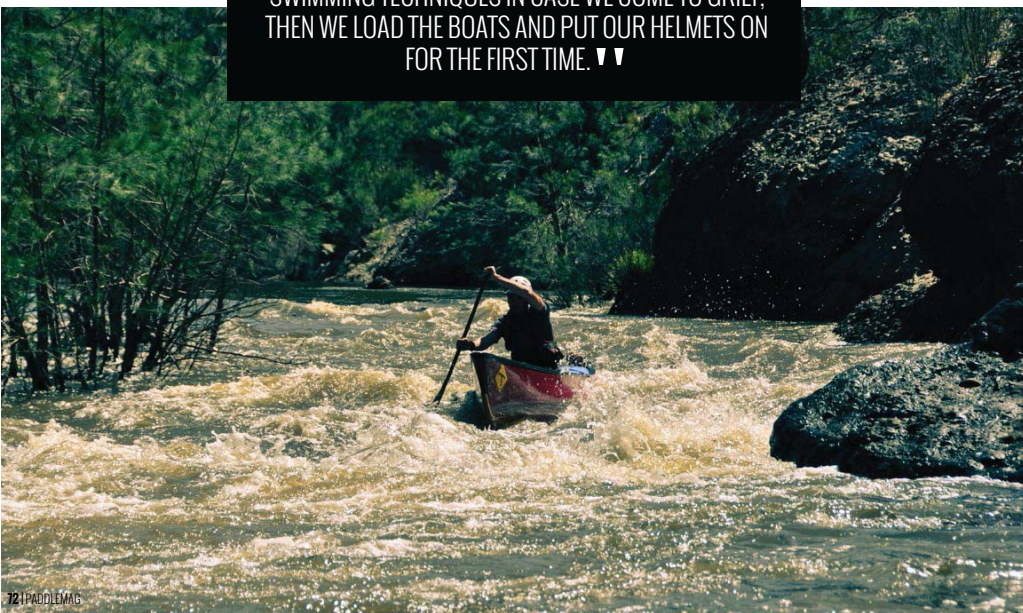
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● The canoe sensai himself - Travis Frenay

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After a couple of days on the gentle waters of the lake, Trav decides to up the ante. We reconvene at the dam, where more paddlers join us and additional boats are unloaded.

Tempted by the prospect of a two-day downriver run along the Lower Shoalhaven, Trav has mobilised quite the paddling posse and there are now seven of us on the water, including two of the most experienced professional outdoor instructors in the country, both called Matt and both from the UK. Also with us is Lewis Wylie, a pro paddler who works at Penrith Whitewater Stadium and narrowly missed out on a C2 spot in the London Olympics.

We now have boats from right across the Wenonah range, including a couple of Prospector 16s, a Rendezvous, a Barracuda Spirit II, a Recon and an Ultra-lite Minnesota I. These canoes all have different performance levels on moving water. Trav has brought the whole fleet out to show me their party tricks, but also, I suspect, to test Kent and Jeremy by putting them through their paces in a few different canoes.

Despite the glorious conditions, there's been plenty of rain recently and the water is high. A careful scout of the first rapid below the dam reveals a river in a feisty mood. Trav goes through some safety checks and gives us a quick reminder of defensive swimming techniques in case we come to grief, then we load the boats and put our helmets on for the first time.

We – myself and Trav are in a Prospector, Wenonah's classic canoe built to the same design as the boats that opened up America. It's a solid canoe, nice and stable but still responsive with a decent rocker.

Having graduated from the flatwater part of my canoeing crash course, I'm now chucked straight into the more tricky moving water section. I'm the front paddler for this rapid and Trav talks me through my bow draw and cross bow draw techniques. Thumb down. Thumb up. Don't over extend or you'll pop a shoulder. Use your core. Keep paddling until you hear my shout. Relax it's going to be fun...

Trav has to shout as we approach the rapid, which is screaming like a banshee. He picks our line and we commit. I keep paddling hard, following instructions bellowed from the back and we sail through barely getting wet.

Lewis is in the Recon, a solo boat with high sides built for wilder water than this, and he makes it look easy. Matt Price has a crack on his own in another Prospector and pulls it off too. Just.

Then it's Kent and Jeremy's turn. They appear out of shape on the approach and right enough the bow of their canoe suddenly kicks way up into the air, flooding the boat when it crashes back down. The two lads are soon swimming to the bank, pulling the canoe along by the painter behind them. This

is a good practice rapid and we try a few configurations and partnerships before heading off to see what the rest of the river hold in store.

None of the group has been along the Lower Shoalhaven for some months and rivers have a great way of keeping things interesting by mixing up their levels and introducing new natural obstacles at any given moment. Even for Trav, who has paddled this way numerous times before, every rapid we come to has a new feature in the shape of a downed tree or an exposed rock.

As you'd expect from a group of outdoor professionals, each rapid is carefully assessed for dangers such as strainers before the group commits to it. Lewis is generally our scout-cum-stuntman. He goes first, picks the best line and whistles the all clear once he's eddied out on the other side. Next we send the boats with the biggest consequences, the Prospectors heaped with all our camping gear, and then one of the Matts performs the sweep, making sure everyone is safely through.

In between rapids we swap boats and I practise my strokes from the bow and the stern, as well as having a crack as a solo paddler. The two true canoe gurus, Matt Price and Trav, critique my technique.

Kent and Jeremy recover well from their morning swim and tackle every other rapid with aplomb, both together and solo. Trav seems well pleased with his protégés.

Lewis, however, is in a class of his own. At one point during a lull in the rapid action he demonstrates how to fully roll an open boat. Impressive stuff. Matt too doesn't mind a bit of showboating. Shortly before we find a place to make camp for the night he finds a rapid ideally suited for a play, and proceeds to demonstrate how to pole a canoe up and down a rapid while standing up in the boat. My education is going well, but I'm happy to get through the rapids sitting down at this stage, so I think I'll leave the pole for another time.

At the beginning of the day, Matt Tranter had fired a pointed question at Trav: "So, tell me again, why are we paddling this river in canoes and not kayaks?" he'd demanded to know.

Trav had a myriad of answers for this, but for me the most compelling one of the lot becomes self evident when we pull into the banks of the river and make camp for the night. Canoes are spacious beasts and there's plenty of room for a few luxuries when you're touring in one. Chairs are hauled out of boats, along with heaps of food, and someone has even brought along a bottle of red that is enthusiastically shared around to accompany raw tales from the river.

The fire is soon roaring as loud as a rapid, and the yarns get increasingly animated. I'm the least experienced canoeist here, by a long way, but I'm the only one who has done the Yukon

◆ Kent runs a rapid solo

▼▼ WE PADDLE OVER FOR A CLOSER LOOK
AND DISCOVER A BONSAI DINOSAUR, SITTING
FROZEN LIKE A STATUE AND EYEING US WITH A
COLD-BLOODED STARE ▼▼

River Quest – a dream for most paddlers – and the lads are keen to hear what it's like. The Matts trade tales from the old country and Trav has us all salivating at the thought of doing the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, which opened up eight years ago in the States.

My J stroke is smoother and I'm much quicker on the draw (bow and cross bow) by the second day, but my body knows all about muscles it hasn't employed before.

Somewhere between rapids I notice a movement on a rock. We paddle over for a closer look and discover a bonsai dinosaur, sitting frozen like a statue and eyeing us with a cold-blooded stare. It's a water dragon, a beauty too, and it's suddenly joined by another, valiantly standing side by side with its mate as we interlopers in our UFO (unidentified floating object) approach. As we push our luck and paddle closer, they unanimously decide to retreat and leap into the water to swim to safety on the shore.

It's not long before we reach our own pull out and have to make like the water dragons. Trav has arranged a car shuttle and we're soon back at the top of the dam.

For Kent, Jeremy and the two Matts this is where the trip ends and they return to terra firma, but Trav and I decide to take the two Prospectors and explore the other end of Lake Yarrunga. I have another night up my sleeve and see no reason not to spend it outside in a campsite accessible by canoes alone. These opportunities are only too rare and I want to spend us much time as possible in the boat working on my technique.

After dinner I find yet another reason why canoes rock: you can sleep in them. With the painter of my Prospector tethered to a tree I make myself comfortable, lying along the bottom of the boat, wrapped in a sleeping bag and staring up at the stars, with just a layer of Royalex between me and the water and a gentle breeze moving the canoe in lulling motion. Try doing that in a kayak.



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