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TRIP LENGTH
1-2 weeks
105 km

CANOEING THE CLEARWATER RIVER



The legendary Clearwater has it all—unspoiled wilderness, thrilling whitewater, unparalleled scenery and inviting campsites with fishing outside the tent door. This Canadian Heritage River didn't merely play a role in history; it changed its very course.

History of the Clearwater River

For years fur traders from the east tried in vain to find a route to Athabasca country. Things changed in 1778, when Peter Pond crossed the 20 km Methye Portage from the headwaters of the east-flowing Churchill River to the eventual west-bound Clearwater River. Here was the sought-after land bridge between the Hudson Bay and Arctic watersheds, opening up the vast Canadian north. Paddling the Clearwater today, you not only follow in the wake of voyageurs with their fur-laden birchbark canoes, but also a who's who of northern exploration, the likes of Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson, John Franklin and Peter Pond.



Skull Canyon, Clearwater River Provincial Park. Robin Karpan Photo

Location, Accessibility and Planning Your Trip

From its headwaters near Broach Lake in northwest Saskatchewan, the Clearwater flows southeast and then makes an abrupt turn west, eventually reaching the Athabasca River at Fort McMurray, Alberta. Over its 300 km course, the Clearwater crosses two ecozones, from the hard exposed outcroppings of the Precambrian Shield to younger sedimentary rocks and sandy soil of the Boreal Plain. The lower half of the river is framed by a wide magnificent valley carved by an ancient glacial spillway. The entire Saskatchewan section of the river is protected in Clearwater River Provincial Park. This is a wilderness park with no available services, and visitors should be well prepared.

For most trips on the Clearwater, canoeists access the river by chartering a float plane from one of the nearby communities. There are also two road accessible spots on the Saskatchewan side of the river – Lloyd Lake, near the river’s headwaters and at the Warner Rapids Bridge northeast of La Loche, the only place where a road crosses the river. See the Contacts and Resources section for local air charter operations.

To paddle the entire river you should allow at least two weeks. Rather than running the entire course, most paddlers concentrate on one section of the river, the most popular by far being the 105 km stretch from the Clearwater’s confluence with the Virgin River (where the south-flowing Clearwater turns sharply west) to Contact Rapids (north of Lac La Loche). Most paddlers plan for a week; this definitely isn’t a trip you want to rush.

The Clearwater should only be paddled independently by those with extensive whitewater experience, and with skills in self-sufficient and no-trace wilderness camping. The most attractive option is joining a guided trip with one of Saskatchewan’s experienced canoe outfitters. They know the river the best - its tricky stretches, scenic campsites and secret fishing holes. Best of all, they do all the planning and ensure that you have a safe and enjoyable adventure.



Canoeing, Clearwater River Provincial Park. *David Buckley*

Clearwater River Highlights

It’s one stunning scene after another with cliff-lined canyons, waterfalls and frothing rapids galore. The Clearwater is famous for its long stretches of rock gardens. Sometimes you bump and grind over shallow sections of barely submerged rocks, while at other times the non-stop maneuvering becomes more intense as you zig-zag among boulders the size of small trucks.

In the last 30 km stretch from Gould Rapids to Contact Rapids, the river drops 70 metres, taking you to its most spectacular landscapes, but also the longest portages – a couple are over a kilometer long. Only 2 km after leaving the canyon walls of Gould Rapids, you arrive at the Clearwater’s iconic feature - Smoothrock Falls, twisting and turning as it plunges over a series of turbulent drops. Your campsite sits right on the cliff’s edge overlooking the falls. Talk about a room with a view! During high water, Smoothrock’s overflow channel becomes a magical place, as wispy multi-layered cataracts pour over glistening red rocks. Round pools worn into the rocks below the falls invite you for a dip on a hot summer’s day.

Gazing over Smoothrock Falls, you can’t help but think that wilderness campsites just don’t get any better than this, but tomorrow night’s stop at Skull Canyon might change your mind. The Clearwater races through a narrow gorge lined with 25-metre high sheer cliffs covered in orange lichen, a large flower-pot island in the middle dividing the river into two boiling channels. Look closely at the notches on the cliff faces and you might spot bald eagle nests. This is the best place along the river to do some hiking, as the mostly flat-topped canyon rim serves up one outstanding vista after another. The best view, however, is right from your campsite. While freshly-caught fish sizzles over your evening campfire, watch the setting sun magically transform the canyon walls to dazzling shades of orange, red and purple. In the morning you’ll see how this canyon got its name when the back-lit cliffs reveal the mysterious skull’s features.

Contact Rapids marks the transition zone from the Boreal Shield to the Boreal Plain, and are the last rapids in the Saskatchewan section of the river. The wide stretch of water just below is the last dependable spot to land float planes before Fort McMurray. Other take-out spots farther downstream are sometimes used, but are dependent on water levels.

One advantage of paddling farther downstream is to experience the historic Methye Portage. Crossing the legendary trail became an important rite of passage for voyageurs, where a novice mangeur de lard (pork eater) became a true homme du nord (man of the north). In the early days, voyageurs hauled freight on their backs, but later horse and ox carts wore the deep ruts into the trail that we see today. From the river, hike along switchbacks that zig-zag to the valley rim 200 metres above. It was this view from the rim that inspired a long list of northern explorers to extol the beauty of the valley in their journals. John Franklin described it as “the most picturesque and romantic prospect we had yet seen in this country.”

Be sure to register at a Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment Office to receive an official Saskatchewan Voyageur Certificate as a memento of your canoeing experience on the historic Clearwater River. For office locations, visit: <http://canoesaskatchewan.rkc.ca>.

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Canoe Saskatchewan

Documented routes, trip plans, history, geology, archaeology
W: <http://canoesaskatchewan.rkc.ca>

“A Guide to Canoeing on the Clearwater River”

Prepared by Zach Dzuba for the Parks Service Branch
Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport
W: <http://www.tpcs.gov.sk.ca/A-Guide-to-Canoeing-on-the-Clearwater-River>

Clearwater River Provincial Park

N of La Loche, 700 km N of Saskatoon
Wilderness campground 60 km NE of La Loche via Grid 955
Open: May – Sep
P: 306-236-7672 **TF:** 1-800205-7070
W: www.2sk.ca/13383

Methye Portage - Historic Trail

One-way trail from NW end of Wallis Bay on Lac la Loche to Clearwater River
P: 306-236-7672
W: www.2sk.ca/13383

Courtesy Air

Float plane charters
Buffalo Narrows Airport
P: 306-235-4373 **TF:** 1-888-325-1313
W: www.2sk.ca/15899

Voyage Air

Float plane charters
Waterbase – Buffalo Narrows and Fort McMurray, AB
P: 306-235-4664 / 780-743-0255
W: www.2sk.ca/17601

Village of Buffalo Narrows

Information on accommodations, dining and services
P: 306-235-4225
W: www.2sk.ca/com/1000116

Village of La Loche

Information on accommodations, dining and services
P: 306-822-2032
W: www.2sk.ca/com/1000464

SASKATCHEWAN OUTFITTERS

CanoeSki Discovery Company

Saskatoon
P: 306-653-5693
W: www.2sk.ca/14819

Churchill River Canoe Outfitters

In Missinipe, 80 km N of La Ronge on Hwy 102
P: 306-635-4420 **TF:** 1-877-511-2726
W: www.2sk.ca/11619

Clearwater Canoeing

Paynton, on Hwy 16 between Lloydminster and The Battlefords
P: 306-895-2001
W: www.2sk.ca/21554

Paws ‘N’ Paddles Wilderness Tours

Air Ronge, near Lac La Ronge Provincial Park
P: 306-425-3111
W: www.2sk.ca/21836