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Giant Mackenzie River a window into the people and places of Canada's vast Northwest Territories

Story and photos by Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty

September 3, 2006

YELLOWKNIFE, Canada – If the good ship Norweta, sailing south on the Mackenzie River in Canada's Northwest Territories, had known ahead of time, we wouldn't have missed the wedding.

But it was nine o'clock on a July evening when we disembarked at Fort Good Hope, 25 miles south of the Arctic Circle. By that time, the bride and groom and their guests, dressed in their best beaded moccasins, had already left the church and walked to the park.

In southern climes, the celebration would have been half over. But here in the western Arctic, where the summer sun shines 22/7, the party was just beginning. The guests, gathered at picnic tables, stared in surprise at the 16 unfamiliar faces suddenly in their midst. A bonfire crackled, and strips of moose sizzled on a dozen barbecues. On the dance floor, a low wood deck, the musicians were about to play.



Along Canada's great Mackenzie River, the vistas are wide and the people are friendly - so much so they'll invite strangers to join in a wedding dance (below).

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"C'mon, let's dance," whispered Adele Clilli, the Norweta's cabin stewardess, a member of the Dene (Athabaskan Indians). She smiled shyly and tapped her foot as nine wiry men, each with a large, flat hand-held drum, began to pound out a rhythm.

"I have a second cousin here, and they've invited us," she said, tugging on my sleeve. In a minute, we had met the newlyweds and were circling with two dozen other dancers to the thundering beat of a traditional dance.



A wedding was the last thing we'd expected when we booked a cruise on the 103-foot Norweta, which sails eight-and 10-day trips on the 1,000-mile long Mackenzie River, or Deh Cho ("Big River"), as the Dene call it. But surprise is part of the charm of a trip to the north.

"These are communities, not tourist destinations," said Margaret Whitlock, 68, the Norweta's co-owner, a fourth-generation resident of Hay River and a licensed riverboat captain. "We're never sure what we'll find until we get there, but it's always interesting."

Sailing mid-June through July, the Norweta follows the historic route pioneered in 1789 by explorer Alexander Mackenzie, between Hay River on Great Slave Lake, and the town of Inuvik on the Mackenzie River Delta, near the Arctic Ocean.

Along the way, the ship docks at a half-dozen sleepy outposts, including Dene and Gwich'in villages, historic forts and towns built around former fur trading posts, where the passengers get off to explore.

In Norman Wells, we found a small but impressive museum, with history exhibits and a shop selling native crafts. In Fort Good Hope, we visited the beautifully decorated little church, a bit of classic folk art. In Tsiigehtchic, where the Arctic Red River meets the Mackenzie, the main attraction was the simultaneous arrival of a hunter in a motorboat, with a moose – just shot – stuffed into the prow.

The Mackenzie River, the continent's second-longest river system after the Mississippi, is a mammoth body of water, draining one-fifth of Canada. Flowing from southeast to northwest, it bisects the Northwest Territories, a region twice the size of Texas, but home to just 45,000 people.

The river once bustled with activity. In the 19th century, travelers heading downstream wrote of seeing dozens of Indians fishing from their canoes, trappers laden with furs for the trading posts, and riverboats ferrying cargo and passengers. But life on the river changed after the fur trade died and airplanes came to the Arctic. Eventually, most people moved off the land and into towns.

Now what you'll see are trees in the trillions, from the river banks to the mountains and beyond. There are so

If you go

For information about the itinerary, the ship, recommended dress, choosing a date, booking a cabin and making airline reservations:

www.norweta.com, then call Margaret Whitlock directly at (866) NORWETA (866 667-9382).

Prices per person for the cruise start at about \$4,640 for a cabin with two single beds, and about \$6,040 for a cabin with a double or queen bed. All meals are included. Alcoholic beverages and Canadian taxes are extra. Most shore excursions are free; the Tuktoyaktuk and Nahanni National Park flight-seeing cost extra.

many trees, in fact, that during the summer, 30 or 40 forest fires, started by lightning, burn at any one time, fated to smolder until winter snows put them out.

“No one pays any attention to them, not unless they're threatening a town,” said George Whitlock, 73, the Norweta's co-owner, first mate on our trip, and Margaret's husband, as he scanned the horizon. “It's part of the natural cycle. But there isn't much else out there, you know. Just a few hunters.”

The Norweta, small but functional, is a working ship with four decks. The engines and crew are on Deck 1, below the water line. The cabins, on Deck 2, have large private bathrooms with showers, built-in furniture,



SOURCE: ESRI

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large drawers for clothes and narrow closets. Screens on the portholes keep out mosquitoes. You can close them to block out all light, or leave them open and pull the curtains.

The combination lounge/dining room and the bar are on Deck 3, with an open deck around the perimeter. The sun deck, behind the bridge on Deck 4, is surfaced with artificial turf and equipped with deck furniture. It's a nice place to get away, but it can get very noisy here, and in several other places close to the engines. Fortunately, earplugs and noise-canceling earphones are now part of our standard travel kit.

The meals, mostly American dishes, are delicious but not fussy, prepared with first-class ingredients and served restaurant style. Late-evening snacks of cookies, cake and fruit also are laid out. You can purchase wine, beer or mixed drinks.

If you don't get enough exercise on shore, the ship has a treadmill, or you can walk around the outside deck, where 22 rounds equals a mile. Owing to space limitations, however, most onboard activities are somewhat sedentary: board games, cards, reading, crossword puzzles (bring your own), birding (bring binoculars) and conversation.

We brought a couple of best sellers and our laptop. Other passengers brought knitting, stationery and trip diaries. The ship's library has a nice collection of regional histories, Canadian travel, animal-identification guides, nature references and a few recently published novels.

As the scenery rolled by, there was always something to grab our attention: mountains, rock formations, the ramparts gorge through which the river flows, a passing cargo barge or Canadian Coast Guard vessel, or eagles in the treetops.

Fort Simpson, built at the confluence of the Mackenzie and the Liard rivers, was a favorite stop.

"We're a real town," said 82-year-old Steve Rowan, who leads historic tours for visitors. "We have shops, a visitors' center and museum, some businesses, and a very impressive grocery store. We even have a historical society – with two members," he added.

"It didn't take long for people to realize they couldn't build down there, next to the water," he said, stopping in front of a historic clapboard house on the former site of the trading post, 40 feet up the river bank. "One year, the river ice jammed up during breakup and rose up right up the bank and into this front yard."

Fort Simpson also is the jumping-off place for flight-seeing trips west to



STEVE HAGGERTY

The Norweta cruises the Mackenzie River in Canada, passing areas of untrammeled beauty and stopping at small towns. The passengers sometimes join in community events.

Nahanni National Park Reserve, a mecca for kayakers and rafters, and site of the spectacular 300-foot Virginia Falls. If the weather is clear and the planes have space, splurge on this one (rates are steep, running about \$300 per person); you'll kick yourself later if you don't.

Another highlight was our day tour to Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic Ocean. We visited Maureen Pokiak, 51, who served us caribou soup for lunch and introduced us to traditional Inuit (Eskimo) culture.

"I came to Tuk to teach school, where I met and married my husband, who's a native Inuit and a hunting guide," she said. Together they raised a family, and Pokiak learned traditional cooking, food preservation, skinning and sewing – skills she integrated into an otherwise modern lifestyle.

"I'm living in two cultures now," she said, slicing off bits of muktuk – whale blubber – and offering us a taste. "Go ahead," she added, with a mischievous smile. "Tell me what you think. Really."

Pokiak had cut little pieces, just right for snacking, which is how her teenagers eat it. Thinking of it that way, I could imagine it being a rather pleasant TV-time snack, chewy, slightly crunchy, with a salty-smoky flavor. After all, it's skin with a thin layer of fat, not much different from chicharrones (fried pig skins).

In Fort Norman, our tour guide was Jim, 66, (no last name), who drove up in his truck – bringing a cuddly new puppy – and took us around the town's half-dozen streets, past the 1880s log cabin used as an Anglican church, the cement-block community center, and his house, a prefab cottage perched high on the riverbank overlooking the Mackenzie.

"Oh, I came out here a long time ago," he said. "Before that, I was a farmer in Saskatchewan. Here I worked at the school, as a janitor, but I'm retired now. I never get tired of looking at this river."

Afterward, some of us decided to walk back along the beach, where some town kids, Mandy and Arlene, both 12, and Steve, 9, introduced themselves. They'd built a driftwood fire and were splashing in the river. As curious about us as we were about them, they asked where we lived and if it snowed there. Enchanted by their friendly questions, we lingered long enough to watch the fire die down.

■ Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty live in Marina del Rey.