

MANITOBA OFFERS GLIMPSES OF THE NORTHERN LIGHTS,

WHILE ALLOWING YOU TO SOAK IN ITS WILDERNESS

# NORTH BY NORTHWEST

BY STUART FORSTER

NATURAL WONDER: The Northern Lights in northern Manitoba, Canada, illuminate the sky above Lake Egenolf



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**FACT FILE:**

Gangler's North Seal River Lodge –  
[www.ganglersecoadventures.com](http://www.ganglersecoadventures.com)  
 Manitoba - [www.travelmanitoba.com](http://www.travelmanitoba.com)  
 Canada - [www.destinationcanada.com](http://www.destinationcanada.com)

The phenomenon that started as reluctant flickering, just above the horizon, has erupted into dancing bursts of green sweeping the night sky. Ken Gangler, the owner of Gangler's North Seal River Lodge, mentioned during supper that, from August onwards, the Northern Lights tend to put on a show between 11pm and 1am. Sure enough, they became visible around midnight, so it's been worthwhile battling tiredness after a day outdoors to see the aurora borealis in the sky of northwest Manitoba.

Six of us are now leaning back in wooden Adirondack chairs, peering up at a night that's free from light pollution. Stars of multiple colours speckle the firmament. In cities, where houses and street lamps leech light into the darkness, all but the brightest stars remain invisible. But here – at 58°58'60" North – we're a long way from the nearest city, Thompson, 320 kilometres to our south. The road ends at Thompson, the home of around 13,000 people, so flying is the only practical way of getting to the lodge. A \$1million, 1,645-metre runway that's large enough for a Douglas DC-3 enables people to come and go, plus food and materials to be delivered. Winnipeg, Manitoba's provincial capital, is more than 1,000 kilometres southwards of where we sit.

We're ranged in a circle around a log-burning fire pit that supplies welcome warmth. The night air is chilly, despite daytime temperatures that climb into the high-20s during this time of year. In mid-winter temperatures, far below zero are the norm and around two metres of snow is common. In the near distance, a wolf howls twice, as if to emphasise that we



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**CANADIAN WILDERNESS: 1. People by the campfire at Gangler's North Seal River Lodge in Manitoba; 2. A guide cooks a shore lunch near one of the lakes; 3. The network of waterways in the region offers good paddling for kayakers; 4. Caribou antlers by Gangler's North Seal River Lodge in Manitoba**

really are deep among Canada's northern wilderness. Then all we hear is the hushed rustle of fir trees swaying in the breeze and, less idyllically, the occasional buzz of mosquitoes seeking blood – the repellent I'm smeared with is doing little to deter them. Wolves, of course, are much-maligned by myths and movies. Yet over the coming evenings, I plan on wrapping up against the cold and sitting in a hide – a concealed place for observing animals that's known as a blind here in Canada – to view members of a local pack on the edge of camp. We've already seen fresh pawprints in the sandy earth by the runway's edge.

Those tracks were pointed out by Dr Brian Kotak, the Managing Director of the Manitoba

Wildlife Federation, who also holds a post as the lodge's resident biologist. "This is a tremendous place to spend a summer," he enthused earlier, while showing the group photos of white wolves and the curved rump of a black bear. The images were pulled from a remote camera set up just outside the camp. Dr Kotak's first season at Gangler's North Seal River Lodge was last year, after Ken decided to steer his operation away from fishing and hunting towards outdoor adventure.

Visitors, chiefly from the US, have been heading here since the late 1990s. Over the past two decades, the lodge has won a glowing reputation for the quality of its trophy fishing. The local records include a lake trout



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recall fish ever tasting so satisfying.

"We employ local First Nations people as guides because they have incredible knowledge of the area. The Cree and the Dene have hunted in these forests and fished in these lakes for generations. It's their land and they know it better than anyone. They know the best spots in the lake for fishing," explained Ken when we spoke in the main lodge after dinner.

In years to come, people visiting this part of Canada will view animals through camera lenses rather than sunsights. Over the next few weeks, the 280,000-strong Beverly Qamirjuaq caribou herd will migrate through this lake-speckled region, which is known as 'the land of little sticks' to the Cree. While flying by float plane to Blackfish Lake, we were able to gain an impression as to why: low-growing pine and birch trees dominate the landscape before giving way to lichen-clad tundra as we approached 60°North. A set of antlers, shed by a caribou, lay by the cairn and brass marker – dating from the 1960s, when Nunavut was still part of the Northwest Territories – that denotes the Manitoba-Nunavut border. All the land we flew over during the 45-minute flight was part of Gangler's five million-acre concession. That represents an area approximately five times the size of Dubai or roughly one-and-a-half times the size of the US state of Connecticut.

We also spotted sandy ridges, known as eskers, that are an element of the landscape in northwest Manitoba. During the last ice age, rivers flowed beneath vast glaciers that are estimated to be around four kilometres deep. The eskers were formed when sand, rocks and gravel were deposited along the ice-covered channels.

The Robertson Esker, one of 13 in the region,

runs for more than 300 kilometres and reaches a height of 70 metres. Centuries ago, when the region's water level was significantly higher than today, indigenous people camped on high-grounds of the eskers. Due to the remoteness of the region, it's still possible to see stones that were arranged into rings to hold down tents and shield campfires from wind roughly 2,000 years ago. While walking on the Central Esker yesterday, Dr Kotak pointed out large stones surrounded by flakes of quartz, the by-product of spear and arrowhead production. Remarkably, we also found a handful of the ancient weapons lying discarded on the land. Archaeologists have begun to undertake research in the region but, clearly, much remains to be discovered.

After returning to the lodge, myself and other members of the group had the option of cycling the slopes of the closest esker on fat bikes or taking a kayak out on the North Seal River. I headed up onto the high ground to photograph the sun setting over Lake Egenolf, a sight that was accompanied by the eerie shrieking of a loon, the aquatic bird that features on the reverse of Canadian dollar coins, which are consequently nicknamed loonies. On returning for dinner, I was slightly envious to hear how the group who went kayaking had paddled to within just a few metres of a beaver sitting by its lodge. They described how the rodent slapped its tail into the water before diving out of view.

The day's activities and fresh air are beginning to catch up with me and the Northern Lights are beginning to fade. It's time to head to my cabin, so that I'm refreshed and ready to explore more of the Canadian wilderness tomorrow. W

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