

## French River, Ontario

By **MARNI JACKSON**



>> I won't divulge my favourite place; are you kidding? But my second favourite place might be the French River, in Northern Ontario. Recently, a friend and I paddled the stretch near Wolsley Bay in late summer. It's a three-and-a-half-hour drive north of Toronto, with an access point not too far from the town of Noelville, but it's nicely tucked into the heart of this great historic web of water.

After years of canoeing either in Quetico or Algonquin, I had forgotten what it felt like to paddle on a big, purposeful river system with a vast watershed. The French has a muscular, almost industrial scale and grandeur that flat-water lake-hopping lacks. It's 105 kilometres long, flowing from Lake Nipissing in watery fingers and estuaries across a landscape of ruffled pink and grey granite, as the water level drops over 60 feet, to finally empty into



Georgian Bay. The river is also a provincial park, dotted with orange no-camping zones that remain aboriginal property. This helps maintain the area's wildness, despite the cottages and motorboat traffic on the main channel. It was the French River that carried Samuel Champlain westward in 1615 and became the main route for the fur traders and the voyageurs. A little context like that can make your

tent feel more historic and less MEC.

I met up with my paddle partner at the Pine Cove Lodge. (I've never actually stayed at this elegant cedar resort, but I have the feeling it could be my third favourite place.) We headed east down the main channel. Most paddlers make their way over a series of rapids to the Blue Chute, where one smooth, powerful curl of water offers turbo-charged swimming. We turned north instead, portaging over Five Finger Rapids into the Little French River, which skirts along the Dokis Indian Reserve. (Camping is allowed on the opposite shore.) On the narrow, quiet Little French, we pulled our canoes up on the shore, ate lunch and sat watching the current single-mindedly push past us. Then we had naps, lying with our backs on the country's collective unconscious—Georgian Bay's bottomless, six-billion-year-old granite. It radiates.

Forget the hot-stone massage; head to the French River for the real thing.

*Marni Jackson is the author of several books, including The Mother Zone.*

SPECIAL SECTION