

TRAVEL > FRENCH RIVER

ONTARIO OUTINGS



TRACY HANES PHOTOS / TORONTO STAR

Rene Lahaie, above, wears the colourful sash and antler-handled knife of the old-time voyageurs on his cruises along the French River, parts of which remain much the same as they were in the days of the fur trade.

Following in the wake of the voyageurs

Raconteur Rene Lahaie brings history of French River fur traders to life

TRACY HANES
TORONTO STAR

FRENCH RIVER, ONT.—Rene Lahaie leans back in the captain's chair on his boat on the French River, multi-coloured voyageur sash around his waist, moose antler-handled knife strapped at his hip.

If "no life is as happy as a voyageur's life," Lahaie's is the modern-day version.

For 10 seasons now, the former roads worker and ex-mayor of French River has retraced parts of the river's historic fur trading route in his pontoon boat, sharing stories of the river's rich past.

"I wanted to not work anymore and just dive," says Lahaie, who retired in 1994 and bought himself a pontoon boat.

"I love the sun, diving. . . I pretend I'm rich. That would be alright, eh?"

Following a friend's suggestion, the raconteur and avid historian began offering cruises and made a deal with local lodges to offer the service to their guests.

Rene's Cruises runs two- to five-hour cruises from May to mid-October.

cial, but when I am travelling through these islands covered by virgin forests, when I get out of Wolseley Bay and I'm in 110 feet of water, it's so pretty. I go 150 times a summer and I never get tired of it."

Wolseley Bay near Noelville, about an hour south of Sudbury off Highway 69, is dotted with cottages and resorts.

But once Lahaie gets to the main channel, it's like taking a step back in time.

This section of the French River is virtually unchanged from the days of the fur traders — it's surrounded by Crown and native land, and much of its shoreline remains pristine and many of its islands are untouched, except for paddlers looking for a place to camp overnight.

Craggy, pink granite islands bearing weather-beaten pine trees look like they've been lifted directly from a Group of Seven painting; overhead, an osprey soars.

The 105-kilometre French, a Canadian Heritage River gouged out during the last Ice Age, was the main water highway to the west for fur traders from the 1600s to 1800s.

For thousands of years before that, aboriginal people traded goods along the river.

"The Ojibway, Algonquin and Nip-

River fur traders to life

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Rene's Cruises runs two- to five-hour cruises from May to mid-October and will accommodate requests to stop for relaxing, swimming, photography, picnicking or painting. Just no fishing.

"It's a principle of mine that my business is strictly history and scenery. I don't compete with fishing industry," says Lahaie.

He's also reluctant to discuss his favourite parts of the river.

"I don't know if you're ever been to paradise, but if you go to paradise, what do you think the most scenic place would be? It's all beautiful," he says.

"Five Fingers Rapids is really spe-

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"The Ojibway, Algonquin and Nipissing were allied tribes and 1,000 people a day travelled through," says Lahaie.

"I dove all of the rapids and found Iroquois pipes that are 600 to 800 years old and a 150-year-old voyageur pipe."

It's now illegal to remove artifacts from the river, but you can see plenty of them at the \$5.5 million French River Visitors' Centre, which opened two years ago about 65 kilometres south of Sudbury, along Highway 69 where it crosses the river.

Its interactive displays tell the story of the river through audio stories by people like storyteller/paddler Max Finkelstein, former Royal Ontario Museum archeologist Claude Breede and Whitefish River First Nations member Esther Osche.

Other exhibits cover wildlife found along the French, the evolution of the canoe from birch bark to Kevlar, uses for animal bone (musical instruments, knives, hair pieces, combs) and a tribute to the resourceful beaver.

Make sure to take a stroll across the French River Bridge, Canada's largest cable-supported snowmobile bridge, which spans more than 91 metres and gives excellent views from 15 metres above the water.

Tracy Hanes is an editor with the Star.

JUST THE FACTS

RENE LAHAIE'S most popular three-hour cruise is \$20 for adults, \$19 for seniors and students and \$12 for children 12 and under. See www.frenchrivercruise.com

FOR FRENCH River campsites, activities, facilities, and the new visitors' centre, see www.ontarioparks.com/english/fren.html

FOR THE Lodge at Pine Cove eco-resort, canoe/boat rentals and guided paddling trips, go to www.frenchriver.com

FOR OTHER cottage/resort accommodations including Totem Point Lodge, see www.frenchriverresorts.com

TRAVEL