Canadian Outward Bound Program provides exciting holidays

Black Sturgeon Lake is just south of Lake Nipigon.... that inland sea of island-studded water that sits like a giant heart in the vast wilderness country of northwestern Ontario.

A gravel road winds north, off the Trans-Canada Highway at Hurkett, 88 km (55 miles) northeast of Thunder Bay, Ontario and after another 60 km (37 miles) of north woods scenery, you arrive at the Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School.

Outward Bound, founded during the Second World War (1941) in Wales to teach young men and women an awareness of their own abilities, both as individuals or in groups, has now grown to 30 such establishments throughout the world.

Specializing in mountain, sea and wilderness awareness programs, Black Sturgeon is the wilderness school and complements the rock climbing camp near Keremeos, British Columbia in western Canada.

The area is particularly well suited for the various activities that make up the Outward Bound program.

Upon my arrival, I was immediately invited to join a white water canoeing and kayak class working out on the Black Sturgeon River.

The Class I and II stretches of rapids are ideal for teaching prospective voyageurs how to read and paddle fast water. Students, that day, were asked in turn what features they noted such as eddies or standing waves and were then taught to plot courses through obstacles such as rocks, sweepers and shallows, by executing the proper strokes in conjunction with their partners.

They practised eddying in and eddying out and ferrying across fast water while executing the draw, pry and sweep strokes that make such manoeuvers possible.

This was a 10-day special skills course (white water canoeing and kayaking) where students concentrate on a specific interest. The longer standard courses incorporate a variety of skills and interests basic to wilderness travel and experience.

The following day was allocated to rock climbing.

As we trod our way through and around the huge talus rocks and low bush, I caught glimpses of a rock face, towering dark and ominous in the soft, misty rain. It's called Cleghorn Bluffs.

A footpath, so steep in spots that a rope is used to assist climbers, winds up to the right of the main face and emerges atop the sheer vertical wall overlooking the forested valley.

Resisting an urge to wrap myself around the nearest tree in a terror-stricken embrace, I allowed myself to be tied on with a climbing rope (belayed) so I could lean over the edge to observe and shoot photograpns.

The climbing class consisted of six men and three women who were under the guidance and direction of a jovial ram-rock man named Collin (Col) Bolton.

Everyone seemed to be super organized and went about his or her appointed role with an air of self assurance and efficiency. I was to learn later that they had all started nine days ago on a very small rock climb and had gradually worked up to this monster.

Col Bolton was teaching mountain rescue today. After assigning each member of the class a specific function such as belay, observer, cliff master and choosing the injured "patient", Bolton proceeded to demonstrate a descent.

The victim was draped in a sitting position on his shoulders and lowered down the 33 m (110 feet) to the talus rocks that sloped away from the base of the cliff.

Another method had the injured climber trussed up and totally immobilized in a network of rope, something like a pot roast, and taken down horizontally with the rescuer guiding the patient with his arms while pushing off the wall with his feet.

Bolton, with unanimous consent from the class, graciously offered me the opportunity to be taken down as an injured climber in this manner.

I graciously declined on the grounds that I was suitably terrified just photographing the rock face.

It seems that this is a fairly common initial reaction but several students found that, with technical instruction and acquired know-how, the butterflies and uncertainties are quickly replaced with an exciting sense of accomplishment and well-being. At least three of the students had taken the junior course in previous years.

Instructor Bolton finds the Cleghorn Bluffs well suited for the Outward Bound program and he states there are even more technically demanding rock formations a short distance north of their present location. It seems, other than snow slopes, parts of northwestern Ontario offer climbers the same technical challenge to be found in the mighty mountains of western Canada.

Being allowed to sit in on a final debriefing session of a 25-day standard course was a first hand opportunity to gain straight-from-the-shoulder insight into the Outward Bound program.

For complete information on the Outward Bound experience contact Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School, Suite 200, 11 Yorkville Ave., Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M4W 1L3 or telephone (416) 922-3321.

For general information on Canada as a travel destination, contact the Canadian Government Office of Tourism, Ottawa, Canada, K1A 0H6.

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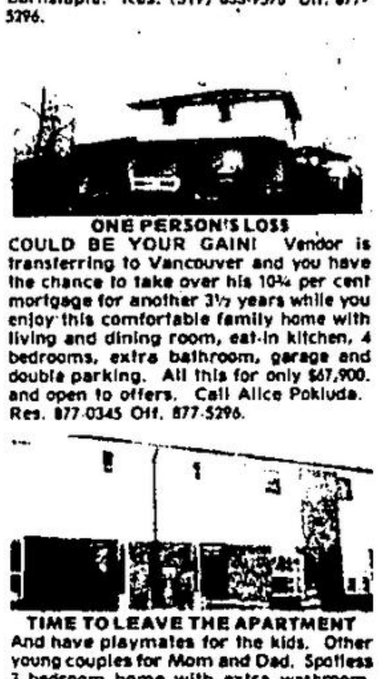
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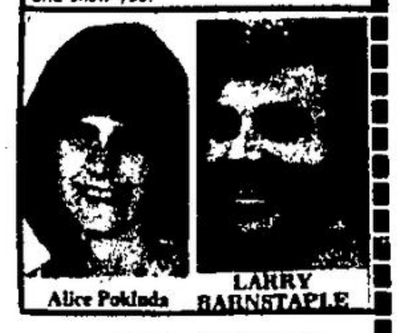

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