

Roughing it alone in the bush, conquering the challenges of the wilderness single-handed, spitting in the eye of Nature's adversities...that's for romantic beginners. Solo canoe trippers are beyond such "macho", silliness. They're at home in the outdoors and seek only harmony.

Harmony is what tripping alone is all about. It's a difficult state to describe exactly, but easily recognized when it both fills and surrounds you. It is active euphoria to those open to receive it.

Perhaps harmony is not given to all to experience. Possibly it comes with the maturity of age, and is not for the young with flowing juices and the lust for action in groups. Certainly it cannot be achieved in the distracting presence of others, but in the rare moments of solitude on such canoe trips, it can be sensed.

It won't come to any driven-by the urgency of distance to be covered or campsites to be reached, or to those who find or place themselves in demanding canoeing situations beyond their expertise. Both create such a single mindedness, there's no place for harmony to enter.

There's more to harmony than peace of mind. That's passive. Certainly there's the element of coming to terms with yourself and the attendant soul-cleansing, but harmony is active as your mind marvels at, and responds to, the sights, experiences and challenges of the passing moment.

Never will you feel more alive or throb more to the joy of being.

And harmony is more than tuning-in on Nature. It's a unique and individual recognition of your wholeness and completeness, and a sense of oneness with the natural world that surrounds.

It comes on gradually after you've crossed the first portage and left the cottages and whining outboards behind. It builds as you buck a brisk cross wind, as you thread your canoe through a maze of drowned timber and lily pads, as a great blue heron undulates aloft ahead, and job and pills and leaking faucets are things of another world.

You and your canoe become as one. However well-designed and delicately balanced, a paddle is never more than a tool for propulsion and steering. But a canoe becomes a living thing, an extension of your body, and you act as one.

In time this sense of oneness extends to include sky, wind, water, rock and living things. You become a part of them and they of you, and you belong.

It's then that you may see yourself as if through the eyes of some unseen observer, who recognizes your presence as part of the natural scheme of things. When this happens, and it eventually will, there will come a feeling of wholeness and completeness, and you've achieved harmony.

It's a wide-awake dream state that the sight of another human or man-made structure can temporarily disrupt, but not destroy, if soon left behind.

Only the return to the world of people can do that, and never entirely so, as the writing of his witnesses.

Obviously, solo tripping is not for the beginner. It's only for the veteran outdoorsman or woman who feels comfortable in the wild, and who possesses the needed bushcraft and canoeing skills, and who stays well within the limits of these skills.

A single mistake or error in judgment can bring woe - even kill you. Read the wind, water or weather wrong, decide to run rather than line down an unscouted rapid, place one foot wrong on a portage, let the axe blade bounce wrong off and unnoticed knot, pitch you tent in the wrong place...trouble, or worse.

Accept some fear, of course; even welcome it. In proper measure it's the needed spice of harmony. Behaviourists tell us that the courting of danger is essential to our well-being.



harmony

But don't over-do a good thing. Stay always within the limits of your know-how and abilities. Should you foul up, you've only yourself to blame.

"But don't you get awfully lonely?" I'm asked. "Not really," I jokingly reply. "I'm one of the most interesting people I know, and I love being with me."

Hidden in that egotistical response is a large truth. In going it alone you really do get to meet and know yourself. And you can learn some very wonderful things through this introduction.

How can there be loneliness when you're in harmony? Well...there are times.

As the campfire's fingers of light and shadow probe the darkness, there comes unbidden from the distant past, the ancients' collective memory of the awesome and dreaded Wendigo. Time to turn in.

It's the unseen or unknown night sounds that can get to you. Something bounces off the tent fly. There are rustlings in the brush. A twig snaps. A terrified or mortally wounded snowshoe hare screams. Were those footsteps? There are times when one misses the reassuring comfort of another person's presence.

Morning comes and nothing's amiss.