

I followed Herb Pohl. What an enlightenment that was. He played the river like Itzhak Perlman plays the violin. Instinctively crossing the river, Herb found exactly the right ebb and flow just as a violinist moves across the strings to the right note. Like a violinist's bow, Herb's paddle stroked the water, sometimes deep, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, all in harmony and with the same delicate precision of a virtuoso. To watch that man hover his solo kayak on a wave crest before sliding down the "v's" into a maelstrom was to watch a Wagnerian overture in motion. I followed entranced for the remaining 7 kilometres of rapids. When we were at the last kilometre where placid water began, Herb was gone. Miraculously he had taken me through the rapids.

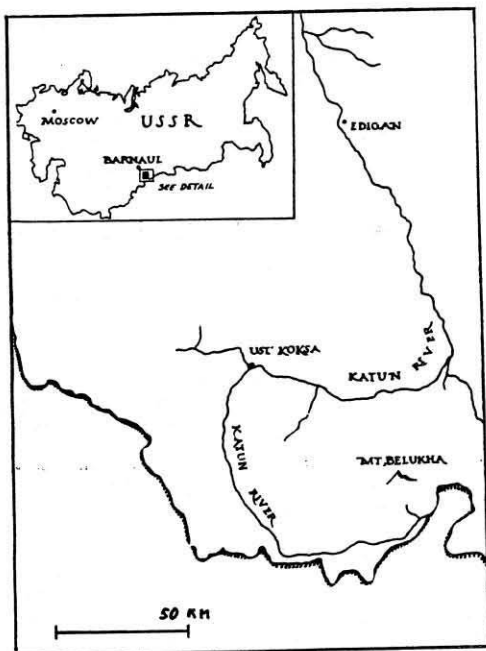
The official WCA report on this outing might mention a pleasant class-one rapids trip. Unreported would be a test of a Canadian-made kayak; promotion of a wilderness area within Metro Toronto; collection of funds for the environmentalists of the World Wildlife Foundation and the "Save the Rouge" activists; and promotion of the activities of the Wilderness Canoe Association.

Also unreported would be the fact that I had been personally enriched by witnessing what many search for and rarely find: that intricate ability that makes gifted athletes so thrilling. They have the ability to be at one with what they are doing. You cannot help but be inspired when you see it. It touches you. Sorry if I embarrass you, Herb, but you not only got me through the day--you made my day.

paddle siberia

An American on the Katun River in the U.S.S.R.

John W. Lentz



In 15 wilderness paddling trips over the last 25 years, I've picked up some unusual skills, but the last thing I'd have expected my adventurous avocation to lead to was writing advertising copy for the Soviet government.

The seed for this bizarre turn of events was sown in 1965. Returning from a canoeing expedition into Canada's Northwest Territories, I began to plot future travel. My mind wandered to that vast belt of taiga, lake and river over the North Pole--Siberia. That year and again in 1970, I mounted letter-writing campaigns, hopeful of gaining entry into the U.S.S.R. for a wilderness paddling trip. Nothing doing; Westerners were routinely refused visits to Russia's backwoods.

Then along came perestroika and its companion, glasnost. These twin concepts of economic restructuring and social openness, plus a thirst for hard currency, propelled the Soviets in a new direction.

But nothing happened in a hurry. It took a year of patient persuasion before muted approval came through in March 1987 and Sovintersport, a division of the Soviet State Committee For Sports and Physical Culture, offered a trip down the Katun River.

I flew to an atlas to find the Katun nestled in the heart of southern Siberia's Altai (Golden) Mountains, a major source of the mighty Ob River. A few miles away lay China and Mongolia. Pounding out of the snowcapped Altai, it looked a challenging stream.

It wasn't the far north of my dreams, but at least I would see something of the U.S.S.R., an immense blank on a Western paddler's map.

With help from the National Geographic Society, the expedition came off last summer as a fascinating cross-cultural experience. Our joy in paddling the cascading Katun and exhilaration on high country hikes were melded with the warm reception given by all Siberians. But it wasn't a canoe

This craft consists of two 17-foot inflated rubber pontoons connected by aluminum poles, with packs lashed on as backrests. These odd catamarans, surprisingly stable when up against heavy whitewater, are standard recreational river boats for Soviet sportsmen, and we found a number in use on the river.

The trip was memorable, and as it drew to a close I felt the urge to return. A similar sensation had drawn me back to northern Canada again and again. Lying in my tent, I hatched a plan.

We had been told Sovintersport hoped to attract many more Western paddlers to the Katun in 1988. The stunning landscape, the expertise of our guides and the hospitality of the Siberians were factors to be exploited.

But would this trip sell in the West? Not likely, on the strength of the skimpy, mimeographed river description we had received. I asked about printing facilities for a slick advertising brochure and learned that a single plant did all the work. Production could easily take a year and distribution was a problem. I could see dull leaflets scattered around Aeroflot offices, hardly a place whitewater paddlers congregate.

We were invited to Sovintersport's Moscow headquarters in late August for a post-mortem session. Since ours was an experimental venture, apparently the first Western party to paddle Russian catamarans, Sovintersport wanted a critique.

It was easy enough to slip in a proposal to produce and distribute a brochure for the 1988 Katun River catamaran trips in a clear but unstated trade for approval to paddle my canoe in northern Siberia. It was a gamble--the Soviets had never allowed a Western canoeing expedition to penetrate their wilderness. I even offered to foot the brochure bill.

Valeri Sungurov, vice president of Sovintersport, eyed me from across the table. A trim figure with dark-rimmed glasses and what looked like a Harris tweed jacket, he would have blended in nicely at a Harvard-Yale game.

Sungurov heard me out, then said, "Get your application for the north in early. It could take awhile to process."

Back home and a couple of yards of Telexes later, I realized they were serious. Not only would Sovintersport trust an American to produce and distribute their river ad brochure, I was even encouraged to put my name on it as a source of information. Perestroika in action.

I quickly beat a path to the door of Lynn Springer, whose Bethesda graphics firm, Design Lines, could provide professional assistance. By mid-February the job was done, with copies dispatched to paddling clubs, outdoor equipment suppliers and whitewater clinics throughout the United States.

Sovintersport has developed an engaging itinerary for the Katun. Some paddling skill is required, and the catamarans are stable yet exciting whitewater boats. Altai Mountain hikes are glorious, and talking with a sprightly octogenarian in her century-old Siberian log home is almost otherworldly.

Did I get my northern permission slip? The jury is still out, but I'm optimistic.

This article first appeared in the 20 March 1988 edition of The Washington Post. WCA-member John Lentz is a senior loan officer with the Export-Import Bank of the United States and a member of the Explorers Club of New York and the Royal