

getaways



Answer the call of the wild

HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN – A beautiful sunrise in Canada's Algonquin Park, which is about four hours north of Toronto, below, by car. Allow more time if travelling by dog-sled



Many people end up too far south when planning their North American holidays. It's true the USA is a fine destination, but run your finger up the atlas a few degrees north and you will find yourself in the most extraordinary place, Canada. **JOHN MATHEWS** found Toronto had too many buildings, so he headed in to the wilds of Algonquin Park

ANSWERING the call of nature rather than the "Call of the Wild" might well be the most pressing concern when you are stuck in the day-to-day tedium of getting to and from the office.

However, if you find yourself yawning and yearning for a great escape from the stresses and strains of modern life, there are few better or more accessible ways to find it than out in the majestic wilderness of Canada.

A little over a decade ago, Robin Banerjee found himself stuck in a rut as a structural engineer in Toronto and decided to start taking friends up on canoe trips to spots he knew in Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario.

Pretty soon he started taking every Friday off for his weekend jaunts which proved so popular that by 1999 he had jacked in his city job to start running Call of the Wild as a full-time concern.

Robin has not looked back, organising year-round adventures by trading in his canoe for dog-sledding expeditions from

his Eco-Lodge when the winter snows come. "The money's not as good as being an engineer, but this is much, much more enjoyable," the 35-year-old explains.

After taking a three-day canoeing and camping excursion with Robin, it is easy to see why.

The park covers an area roughly the same size as Wales (it's always Wales, isn't it?) and is a three to four-hour drive north from Canada's biggest city, Toronto.

Up in Algonquin, a sprawling mass of lakes, waterfalls, cliffs and jaw-dropping scenery, you could not possibly feel further from the nose-to-tail drudgery of your daily commute.

The opportunities to experience unfamiliar wildlife are as vast as the landscape. The national bird of Canada, the Loon, sends haunting cries echoing over the lake, a perfect soundtrack for the ritual roasting of marshmallows over the moonlit campfire.

Once heard, never forgotten.

Other campsite companions will be a

few scurrying chipmunks searching for any scraps of food you may have hidden at the bottom of your rucksack. They are wasting their time because Robin has warned you many times not to have food of any kind that has not been safely packed and strung up in a tree, well off the ground, after meals.

We all know just how high those rations have to be hoisted – out of the reach of any passing bears.

Yes, there are some in Algonquin, but the chances of seeing any are pretty remote in such a huge area (7,700 square kilometers) and Robin is more fearful of furry creatures of an altogether different stature. "I've never had a bear come into our campsite, though I have seen them swimming across the lake when I've been canoeing," he said.

"We have to be aware of wolves and bears by taking the right precautions with food, but we don't need to be afraid of the animals. Nothing bad has ever happened on our trips.

"It's the chipmunks I'm more afraid of than the bears.

"Chipmunks are a constant pest. They look really cute, but they will chew their way through anything, especially your lunch bag."

For other wildlife, early in the summer you are almost guaranteed to see moose

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