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Life-changing adventures for women await in the Northwest Territories

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Paddlers of all skill level are welcome on Black Feather trips. (supplied)

Wendy Grater will never forget that night in August on the Nahanni River when the wolves showed up at the end of her trip with a group of women adventurers. Set in the vastness of the Northwest Territories, where the aurora borealis dances hauntingly over the Mackenzie Mountains, the encounter was a moving, intimate moment even for Grater, a long-time guide for Black Feather, an adventure company that offers wilderness trips to destinations in the North.

"Paddling our canoes, we heard wolves howling, [which echoed] off the canyon walls," says Grater. "Then there were some little yips from wolf pups. As we drifted out of the canyon, there they were -- the mom and four pups along the shoreline. I think everybody got goosebumps. One woman on our trip was a cancer survivor. She later told me, 'You know, I still hold on to that thought of those wolves saying goodbye to us. That'll be one of the most memorable experiences of my life.'"

Over the decades, Grater has amassed a trove of memories, from wildlife sightings and whitewater canoeing to first-hand experiences with Indigenous culture and Instagram-worthy panoramas. A pioneering guide who first explored the Northwest Territories in 1977, Grater has co-owned Black Feather since 1998, where currently almost 50 per cent of the guides are women.

"Things have become a little more sophisticated than they were in 1977, but [Black Feather has] still maintained that feel of northern frontier rawness and adventure," she notes. "I believe [that] women who go up for their first time now still get that kind of transformative experience."



Jaw dropping beauty on the Nahanni River Sunblood Mountain Hike. (supplied)

For women eager to push their comfort zone in an ambience of safety and camaraderie, the Northwest Territories offers unlimited horizons to explore. The iconic Nahanni National Park Reserve, which spans close to 30,000 square kilometres (11,580 square miles) and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978, is home to moose, grizzly bears, caribou and mountain goats. And whether a multi-day expedition involves Nahanni's innumerable pristine rivers and lakes or the spectacular barren tundra along the 845-km (525-mi.) Coppermine River, the experience is an opportunity to reconnect with family and loved ones -- or make new friends under the midnight sun.





A women's paddling trip with Black Feather is a life changing experience. (supplied)

"You rely on each other to help each other, whether it's lifting a heavy pack or helping with the canoe portaging," Grater explains. "It becomes very much a co-operative experience and a shared journey down a river or on a hike. It's not just me accomplishing it, but me and my friends and fellow travellers that are accomplishing it together. [Being] a guide on women's trips out there in nature with other people makes it special."

It's impossible, for example, not to get chills while gazing at the magnificence of Virginia Falls, whose 96-metre (315-foot) drop is double the height of Niagara Falls. Luxuriating in glorious solitude in the sulphurous Kraus Hot Springs is an ideal time to reflect on life's journey. Even preparing delicious dinners together at the campfire offers a unique chance for participants to bond in a back-to-nature setting.



Wildlife are part of most Black Feather adventures. (supplied)

"I like everybody to be part of it," says Grater. "To me, the stories are told as you're stirring the spaghetti sauce over the fire. You're joking and laughing."

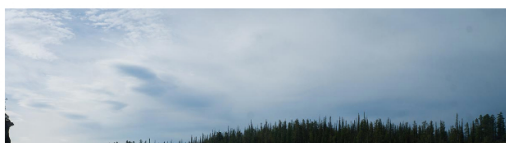
Encounters with the Dene First Nation's culture also enrich adventures in the Northwest Territories. Along the Nahanni River, local Dene youth share stories about where their ancestors travelled in these immense northern expanses and what role animals play in Indigenous traditions.

"When we look at Indigenous history, women were a big part of the team," Grater points out. "They travelled with their families to hunt and set up camps. So, the tradition of women being strong individuals in the outdoors was definitely there. I think it's an amazing opportunity for women to both touch that ancient culture and renew themselves."



The NWT offers spectacular places to unwind. (supplied)

Customizing trips for women, Grater develops bonds with her guests, too. And she harbours fond memories of the many women who set goals and achieved them through a Black Feather adventure holiday. One of them accomplished her objective to get healthy and to go on a Nahanni trip before she turned 60. There's the group of women who have been friends since their university days and celebrated their 30th anniversary of taking trips together by going on an expedition on the Keele River. And then, there's the lively mothers-and-daughters-only group of adventurers.





The Nahanni River is one of the many rivers Black Feather offers adventures on in the NWT. (supplied)

Solo women travelling with Black Feather are usually paired with a female guide and Grater tries to ensure that the trips suit her guests' technical abilities and safety thresholds. In 2011 she earned a Northwest Territories Tourism Lifetime Achievement Award.

Still, the next journey is always the most important one. And whether women are saying goodbye to a relationship or a job or starting a new chapter in their lives, a visit to the Northwest Territories is compelling, if only to hear and see a mother wolf and her young on a summer night underneath the aurora borealis.

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