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## Navigating rivers of the Northwest Territories a family affair for adventure outfitter.

CONTENT FROM: GLOBE CONTENT STUDIO

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A trip with Nahanni Wild is one of the best ways to explore the NWT's greatest rivers. (supplied)

Joel Hibbard will never forget the first time he rafted the Nahanni River back in 1991. He was six years old, travelling with his grandparents, father, pregnant mother and 3-year-old sister. He recalls being astonished by the beauty of the landscapes around each bend in the river – the rapids and white Dall's sheep, perched on the side of steep cliffs.

At their overnight campsite, Hibbard was put to work. "My grandfather taught me to stay busy by chopping wood and feeding the fire," he remembers. "And my dad taught me to look after the others, to help everyone stay warm, dry and comfortable."

By the end of the trip, his experiences had left a deep impression on his psyche. "It was a formative memory from my childhood," he says. "It was when I realized I had to be on the water – in nature – with friends and family sharing these remarkable outdoor opportunities."

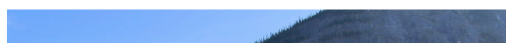
In 1992, Hibbard's father, David, went on to purchase what would become Nahanni Wild, a family-run, northern-based river expedition outfitter now operated by Hibbard and his two siblings, Dana and Luke.

Focusing on offering life-changing river excursions in the Northwest Territories makes sense. There's nearly always a body of water close by, ready to be explored. Even in Yellowknife, the capital city, you can stroll down to the shoreline of legendary Great Slave Lake, on the edge of Old Town, and glide off in a rental boat for an afternoon or spend a week navigating the lake's nooks and crannies. Upon returning to terra firma, take in the views over a frosty pint of NWT Brewing Company's Bug Repellent IPA craft beer and some freshly caught Great Slave Lake fish. Watch the flotilla of floatplanes, canoes strapped to their floats, hopscotching to and from surrounding lakes and rivers.



Camping under the midnight sun makes visiting in summer an unforgettable experience. (supplied)

There are a few roads into this untamed region, but if you zoom in on a map, you'll notice how it's riddled with blue polka dots – ranging from pothole-sized ponds to giant lakes – and crisscrossed with iconic rivers, such as the Mackenzie, North America's second biggest. Take a local-led boat tour from Inuvik through the watery maze of the Mackenzie River delta to the hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk, where you can dip your toes in the Arctic Ocean and experience the culture of the Inuvialuit.





Joel and his record-breaking bull trout on the Keele River. (supplied)

Northwest Territories offers a full spectrum of freshwater adventures in the heart of North America's last great wilderness. Out of the towering Mackenzie Mountains in the west spill grand rivers, like the Nahanni, Mountain and Keele. To the far north on Banks Island, the Thomsen River meanders above the tree line through remote Aulavik National Park. Meanwhile, to the east, the Coppermine and Thelon rivers traverse wildlife-rich tundra through the vast and rugged Barrenlands.

It's no wonder the NWT is one of the world's premier destinations for expedition rafting and canoeing. It has some of the cleanest bodies of water on the planet, including Great Bear Lake, considered the world's largest unpolluted lake. The NWT's range of rivers and lakes mean there is something for everyone, from novices to hardcore whitewater junkies.

Surging through Nahanni National Park Reserve (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), the Nahanni River passes through spectacular mountain landscapes of one of the country's deepest canyon systems. "It offers the gold standard of wilderness tripping," notes Hibbard. "What sets Nahanni Wild apart from other guiding companies is that the three of us grew up running these rivers with our father. We can connect people with the region in a meaningful way."

With 30 years of experience, the company, which specializes in adventures based in the North, offers excursions by canoe, raft and inflatable canoe. It can introduce beginners to the Nahanni with safe multi-day guided trips via inflatable rafts accompanied by experienced guides. From late June through late August, you can spend a minimum of eight leisurely days exploring the river, enjoying the scenery and catching glimpses of grizzly and black bears, Dall's sheep, moose, wolves and raptors, as well as learning about the First Nations' rich history and culture. Or immerse yourself in a 22-day trip that covers 600 kilometres (373 miles) ending at Blackstone Territorial Park by whitewater canoe. At day's end, kick back and savour a gourmet dinner prepared by a trained chef.



Navigating along the river banks puts paddlers close to local wildlife. (supplied)

Hone your paddling skills and try your hand at one of the inflatable kayaks on rafting trips. Or sign up for a Nahanni canoeing expedition to pick up basic whitewater skills along the way with one-on-one instruction before tackling the moderate rapids below Virginia Falls.

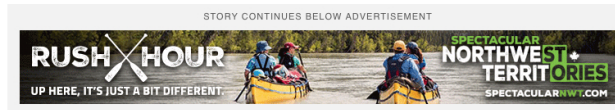
As it winds its way through the majestic Backbone Ranges, the Keele is another in the roll call of NWT rivers to canoe or raft. Even more remote and wild is the Mountain River, which sees fewer than 150 paddlers annually. Dropping more than 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) through five dramatic canyons, it's a roller coaster ride of almost-continuous waves from first paddle stroke to the grand finale at the Mackenzie River.

For a mellower pace with only minor rapids, pick the Thelon River, which winds through the tundra of eastern NWT towards the territory of Nunavut

winds through the tundra of eastern NWT towards the territory of Inuvavut. Canoe through the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary, Canada's largest wildlife refuge. At 67,000 square kilometres (26,000 square miles) it is bigger than Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island combined. View caribou and herds of muskoxen grazing amid wildflowers – ungulates weighing approximately 275 kilos (600 pounds) that survived the Ice Age. Pause for hikes across the tundra and Canadian Shield to spot inukshuk markers, tent rings and other archaeological evidence of ancient Inuit culture.

Then finish your Arctic safari with a riverside cocktail. But don't call it a "sundowner." At this latitude, you could well be falling asleep in your cozy tent bathed in the soft buttery light of the midnight sun.

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