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TRAVELOGUE

**Voyageurs
National Park**

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TRAVELOGUE

Heart OF A CONTINENT

Flying to and touring Voyageurs National Park

by Matthew McDaniel





PHOTO CREDIT: EXPLORE MINNESOTA



We are sitting sidesaddle along the port side of the wheelhouse. My daughter and I share this space, while my wife and son relax below deck in the main passenger cabin. The *Voyageur* is the flagship of the small Voyageurs National Park (VNP) fleet of boats. Nearing the end of our six-hour round-trip tour, we strike up conversation with the young couple sitting beside us. We learn they are young professionals, currently in the middle of a yearlong van life tour of the U.S., centered mainly around visiting national parks. They learn we are touring our 47th national park, deep into our quest to visit all within the continental U.S. (at least).

While the childless couple is traveling via terrestrial means alone, we've been using aviation whenever possible for the past two decades and always have two kids in tow. Soon we are comparing notes on favorite parks and travel tricks. The conversation makes the last hour of our voyage pass quickly, much like any impromptu chat with aviation people can easily lead to a delayed departure. Such are the joys of travel and exploration, which are only enhanced by incorporating aviation into the equation.

Named for historic French-Canadian fur traders

Along the north-central border of Minnesota, the Kabetogama Peninsula juts into Rainy Lake, separating it from Kabetogama Lake (to the south) and Namakan and Sand Point lakes (to the east). As part of the Canadian Shield, the peninsula is made up of the volcanic bedrock that forms the ancient core of North America. This rock is about half the age of the Earth itself, or around 3 billion years old.

VNP is one of the few places where this heart of the continent is visible, deposited there by massive volcanic eruptions that transported it from deep within the Earth as lava and ash, layering it upon the surface. Add in a few eons of erosion to wear down the volcanoes, a few ice ages to scrape away the younger rock on top, wait patiently for the glaciers to retreat, and today we can walk on and touch this ancient rock that once pulsated within the chest of Mother Earth.

Rainy Lake is a massive body of water bisected by the U.S./Canada border. The western tip of its 360-square-mile surface area is Rainy River, situated between International Falls, Minnesota, and Fort Frances, Ontario. Unlike the Great Lakes to its southeast, Rainy Lake isn't particularly deep (with a maximum depth of only 160 feet). Nonetheless, it is a major part of an extensive ecosystem of lakes, peninsulas,



Rainy Lake tours aboard the Voyageur range from 2.5 to 6.5 hours.

PHOTO CREDIT: PAUL VINCENT

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Rainy Lake offers houseboat stays, fishing, water recreation and stargazing within Voyageurs National Park.

PHOTO CREDIT: PAUL VINCENT



The sheer granite cliffs of Grassy Bay rise 125 feet above the surface of Sand Point Lake; it's one of the highest points within Voyageurs National Park.

PHOTO CREDIT: PAUL VINCENT



One of the resident black bears visitors can see at the North American Bear Center near Ely, Minnesota. All bears are rescues unable to return to the wild.

PHOTO CREDIT: MATTHEW MCDANIEL

bays, forests and waterways in the center of historic fur trade routes of the 18th and 19th centuries, extending from areas as far north and west as British Columbia and the Northwest Territories to the eastern trading hub of Montreal.

The VNP region has seen many industries rise and fall since the arrival of European traders and settlers. Gold mining, timber, commercial fishing and various mineral extraction businesses have settled into the area over the past 300 years or so. Some generated little boom towns, but none left the lasting impressions that the fur industry did.

The dense boreal forests, extensive wetlands and interconnected rivers and lakes allowed all manner of fur-bearing creatures to thrive. Indigenous people had established trading routes long before Europeans arrived. By the early 1700s, fur traders were moving farther inland to secure their products. The Ojibwe were the primary native people of the area and entered alliances with white traders and other Native Americans. The trappers, hunters, traders, guides, interpreters and clerks were all cogs in the fur trade machine.

However, none were quite as crucial as the voyageurs – the canoeists who deftly maneuvered their lightweight birch-bark canoes through the waterways of the North Woods while laden with pelts, supplies and themselves. The fur companies preferred their voyageurs to be young and strong because the routes included land crossings, requiring the travelers to pack cargo and supplies on their backs while carrying their canoe. They also preferred those unable to swim, rationalizing that non-swimmers would take fewer risks on the water, making the loss of the precious pelts less likely. They were only paid if the cargo arrived intact. Given the length of their journeys, payday could be as infrequent as once per season. If the haul was lost late in the season, a voyageur's only recourse was often to stay another season in hopes of earning a paycheck at the end of that one.

The industry grew to such importance that the treaty at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783 included as part of the new international boundary, the "customary waterway" used by the voyageurs. This 56-mile fur freeway today adjoins VNP. By 1891, people were already concerned enough with the encroachment of industry to propose a national park to protect the beauty, history and natural resources of the area.

It wasn't until 1975 that VNP was officially established as the 36th U.S. national park. Today, the park protects over



The author's family poses at a Kabetogama Lake overlook at the far end of the Blind Ash Trail.

PHOTO CREDIT: MATTHEW McDANIEL

218,000 acres, of which about 84,000 acres (or roughly 40%) are water. Along with the entirety of the Kabetogama Peninsula, the park also encompasses the south shores of Kabetogama, Namakan and Sand Point lakes, the north shore of Crane Lake, 900-plus islands and more than 500 miles of shoreline.

America's ice box

International Falls does not hold the record for the coldest temperature ever recorded on Earth, nor in North America or even in the continental U.S. It is, however, the coldest spot in the U.S. in terms of consistency. Average temperatures throughout the winter season are around -7 degrees Fahrenheit, while the city's daily high temperature is below freezing an average of 109 days annually (or 30% of the year). Temperatures in the -30 to -40 degree range are common in winter, while the record low is a breath-stealing -55! The title "Ice Box of the Nation" is claimed by other towns as well, but it is International Falls that holds both legal and practical claim to the title.

Despite these environmental challenges, International Falls is a welcoming place, considered the gateway to VNP. Falls International Airport (KINL) lies so close to the Canadian border that landing south requires flight in Canadian airspace to complete an instrument approach or to fly a standard traffic pattern. The airport is equipped to remain operational throughout the snowiest and coldest winter months or to manage the influx of aircraft common during the touristy summer months. Both ends of the 7,400-foot by 150-foot main runway (13/31) have ILS approaches certified to the lowest standard Category I minimums of 200 feet and one-half mile. If you prefer



Visitors to the International Wolf Center near Ely, Minnesota, can usually see the exhibit pack of ambassador wolves.

PHOTO CREDIT: INTERNATIONAL WOLF CENTER

GPS approaches, each runway end has a WAAS/GPS approach with LPV minimums below 300 feet. A small cross-wind runway (04/22) is only 2,999 feet by 75 feet but would be welcome and suitable on the odd summer day when the winds howl out of the southwest. This runway is not maintained in winter, when strong northwest winds prevail.

Einarson Flying Service is the sole FBO on the field and provides excellent service with everything a turbine pilot would need. You'll also find everything necessary to start an extended stay as a tourist, including rental cars, valet services, hangars and tie-downs. As a commercial airport, KINL has full CFR services available on-site. If you call in advance, the FBO will have your rental car waiting to make the 10-minute drive to the Rainy Lake Visitor Center, the largest and most popular of VNP's three visitor centers.

The only realistic alternative to KINL is Orr Regional Airport (KORB), south of VNP and on the southeast shore of the picturesque Pelican Lake. KORB is perfectly suitable for most King Air operations with its single 4,000-foot by 75-foot asphalt runway, served by a single GPS/LP approach into Runway 13. It has Jet A fuel available, significantly cheaper than at KINL, though it lacks on-site rental cars and full-time services. It is slightly closer to the VNP's Kabetogama Lake and Ash River visitor centers.

Planning your voyage

Like most far north parks, summer accommodations and some activities at VNP book up early. Planning well in advance is highly recommended. That is especially the case for Kettle Falls Hotel, the sole landside lodging within park

boundaries. This historic and slightly kitschy hotel is only reachable via National Park Service cruise ship (roughly two hours each way), but it is well worth the effort for the most authentic experience. Multiple hotels, resorts and vacation rentals dot the western and southern shores of Kabetogama Lake and there are many other options within International Falls.

Camping is an option in many areas of the park (with a permit), but perhaps the most popular option is houseboat rental. This option allows touring the watery park at one's own pace, while enjoying solitude and the abundant opportunities for stargazing at night (and the common sightings of the aurora borealis, as well).

We settled on a roomy and full-featured rental cabin situated on a small lake just outside the park boundary. The cabin came with kayaks, a pontoon boat and equipment for enjoying the lake which we did before and after daily park touring. The drives to the various visitor centers were all relatively short and the solitude was at least as good as houseboat lodging without the worry of severe weather or temperature issues.

If you're a hiker, VNP won't disappoint, but it's also not a hiker's paradise. The entire park has 19 trails, as most of its landmass is considered remote and undeveloped. Much of the marked hiking is near or between the visitor centers, with only a handful of trails venturing deep into the park's backcountry.

Water recreation is the most popular activity. Kayak and canoe rental is available from the NPS and from outside



(Left) International Falls, the gateway to Voyageurs National Park, features a 26-foot-tall Smokey Bear.

PHOTO CREDIT: MARY MATHIS **(Right)** The author's wife and two young adult children pause along the Blind Ash hiking trail in Minnesota's Voyageurs National Park. PHOTO CREDIT: MATTHEW MCDANIEL

vendors. Rainy Lake tours aboard the *Voyageur* range from 2.5 to 6.5 hours. Check the VNP website for schedules (nps.gov/voya). We chose the 6.5-hour Kettle Falls Cruise along the entire northern coast of the park, from west to east, with a couple of hours of ongoing tour commentary pointing out historical and natural points of interest. At Kettle Falls, you're allotted two hours for lunch, touring the historic hotel and grounds and visiting the Kettle Falls Dam. Our tour in August was in near-perfect weather with calm waters, with the return trip taking just 1.5 hours.

The entire adventure was worth the money and time spent for its immersion into the park's history and beauty. Shorter cruises are available from the Ash River Visitor Center, staying on the smaller Kabetogama and Namakan lakes. The most noteworthy boating experience is likely the North Canoe Voyages, 1.5-hour ranger-led paddle trips aboard 26-foot North Canoes, like the voyageurs would have used.

Alternates and departures

When in the International Falls and VNP areas, it's a good idea to map out alternatives. Even in summer, the weather is unpredictable and can turn chilly, rainy and blustery on short notice. You can tailor your visit to take advantage of outdoor activities on good weather days and divert to your alternate(s) if the weather sours. We'd picked out two wildlife centers, which house native rescue animals deemed unable to return to the wild. The indoor and interactive education centers at the International Wolf Center and the North American Bear Center, both near Ely, Minnesota, served us well on a nasty weather day.

Unlike some northern national parks, VNP is not completely shuttered in the winter; activities such as snowmobiling, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing are likely possible. The lakes often freeze thick enough to create public-use ice roads beginning at the visitor centers.

A park like Voyageurs offers a variety of options for partaking in its splendor. There is no right or wrong way, there is just your way. There might be an on and off season, but there is no wrong season. Winter's activities, spring's abundant burst of new life, summer's long days and autumn's colorful displays all beckon. Choose the timing that suits you best and make the most of it, rerouting if necessary, just as any good voyageur would do. **KA**

Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 35 years of flying, he has logged over 23,000 hours total, over 6,100 hours of instruction-given and over 2,500 hours in various King Airs and the BE-1900D. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also a Boeing 737-Series Captain for an international airline, holds 8 turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 155 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 10 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for 12 consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at: matt@progaviation.com or 414-339-4990.

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