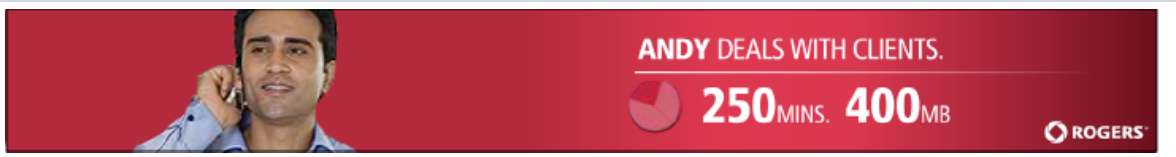


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MONTANA

Upper Missouri River pathway to adventure

Landscape virtually unchanged since explorations of 1800s

Jun 06, 2009 04:30 AM

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JOSEPHINE MATYAS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Virgelle, Mont.—It was pitch black when we started our descent. I squinted.

"Make sure to look out the window when you are landing," a friend from Montana had instructed, thinking I'd be landing in sunshine.

But the darkness had a story to tell: there was a single light far in the distance, another one five kilometres to the south and a few more widely scattered on the inky landscape.

Montana is full of wide open spaces; ranches in the thousands of hectares, pickup trucks that rule the roads and an arid landscape that was once a magnet for generations of homesteaders.

In the speck called Virgelle (pop. 2, occasionally 3), the old general store has been renovated into a bed and breakfast that doubles as a starting point for guided trips down the Upper Missouri River, a waterway so isolated and rugged that it carries the official government designation of "Wild and Scenic."

The night before we took to the river, I slept in the old Mosier homesteader cabin, with no electricity and no water, waking to the song of meadowlarks.

I felt compelled to do something unorthodox when checking out: I stripped the bed linens. It seemed like the polite thing to do.

Putting the canoes in at Coal Banks Landing, the water was wide, muddy and calm.

The wild country, minus a few grizzly bears and bison, has changed little since explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark paddled west along this stretch of the Upper Missouri on their 1805 expedition.

The river served as their pathway and it's still the best way to experience what Lewis and Clark would have seen on their epic journey that paved the way for American westward expansion.



JOSEPHINE MATYAS PHOTO

The Mosier Cabin is an old homesteader dwelling where guests can spend the night (without water or electricity).

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Just the facts

Follow the link for information on **Montana**.

The Upper Missouri River from Coal Banks Landing to Judith Landing is a perfect wilderness float for those who are looking for calm waters. The free state campsites along the way have no water or electricity, but they do have toilets. Guided expeditions, canoe rentals and shuttle service are available through the **Virgelle-Merc Canoe Company**, 1-800-426-

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For Bob Nelson, reincarnated as a river guide after a career in the school system, there are almost as many questions as answers.

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"When you see these rocks there is a lot to think about – like what was their mode of transportation?" he asks on a hike to see ancient teepee rings at a stop known as Little Sandy.

The large circles of rocks are markers of history, once used by native peoples to anchor the edges of their teepees.

"How long have they been sitting here before being covered over by soil?" asks Nelson.

"The smaller rocks would indicate that these people used dogs rather than horses for hauling supplies. Thousands upon thousands of these have been plowed under through development across Montana."

Nelson rattles off a list of the plants on the hillside: silver sagebrush that thrives in the alkaline soil, little fringe sage-wort, winterfat which is a good forage plant, grasses like needle and thread, and little clumps of June grass.

There's the plum-coloured bloom of purple prairie clover and the small low patches of prickly pear cactus that caused pain and grief to the Lewis and Clark corps as they hauled their keelboats along the portages.

It was a vegetation bonanza for Lewis, the expedition's chief botanist. He recorded 178 new plant species previously unknown to western science.

"Pilot Rock is considered the start of the Wild and Scenic," says Peter Pratt, the junior of our two river guides. "This is where the famous White Cliffs start, described by Lewis as exhibiting 'a most romantic appearance.' They're a mixture of volcanic ash and sand and deposited in the sea."

From campsites along the banks, you can hike higher into the White Cliffs, the river's trademark vertical white sandstone bluffs.

Neats Coulee (also known as The Narrows) is a slot canyon with an entrance marked by the thin spires of sandstone hoodoos.

Nelson describes the two-hour canyon hike as "a climb right into the heart of the Virgelle sandstone member of the Eagle Sandstone Formation. Neats is a slot canyon with pockets in the walls where round concretions have fallen out."

The temperature drops in the shade of the coulee – which makes it a favourite spot for prairie rattlers to coil up safe from the midday sun.

From the top, looking towards the lazy, winding river, it's an unforgiving landscape.

This Wild and Scenic River symbolizes the flow of time. Its waters carved the canyons and, at its shallow points, challenged the boats of those charting the new territory and those later pursuing settlement and commerce.

The Upper Missouri still belongs to the bald eagles that watch our progress from atop a cottonwood tree. It belongs to the mourning dove at dawn and the noisy cicadas in the heat of the day.

As for us, we're just passing through.

Josephine Matyas is a Kingston, Ont.-based freelance writer. Her trip was subsidized by Travel Montana.

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