

Canot du nord "North Canoe"



North Canoes were used to transport furs, trade goods, and supplies to, from, and between the various trading posts and forts that belonged to the North West and Hudson Bay Companies.

They were constructed of extra-light weight materials occurring in nature. Originally made by Ojibwe Indians—and later at Fort Lac la Pluie on the Rainy River—the canoes were fashioned from birch bark (for the “skin”), cedar (framework and gunwales), split spruce roots (for sewing the birch bark to the frame), and a sealing compound made from cedar ashes mixed with heated pine pitch to seal all seams.

North Canoes were 26 feet long and four to five feet wide. Manned by a crew of eight, the total weight including freight, baggage, and crew was 2,000 to 3,000 pounds.

Because the voyageurs used the canoes so heavily, the life-expectancy of a canoe was just one year. Constant wear and tear inflicted by running rapids, portaging, and other trip-related accidents took their toll.

If you would like to paddle into the past and experience the life of a voyageur, please contact the Rainy Lake Visitor Center or the Kabetogama Lake Visitor Center for a North Canoe Voyage.



Rainy Lake Visitor Center
(218) 286-5258

Kabetogama Lake Visitor Center
(218) 875-2111

Ash River Visitor Center
(218) 374-3221

Voyageurs National Park
360 Highway 11 East
International Falls, MN 56649
(218) 283-6600

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Voyageurs National Park



Voyageurs: Their History, Clothing, and Canoes



Who were the voyageurs?

Voyageurs were French-Canadian canoemen of the fur trade. Two hundred years ago, brigades of voyageurs paddled birch bark canoes on the waters of Rainy, Namakan and Sand Point Lakes, which are now a part of Voyageurs National Park.

As fur coats and hats became fashionable in Europe in the 1700s, businessmen turned to North America in search of furs, particularly beaver. Fur bearing animals were abundant here and Ojibwe Indians were willing to exchange furs for trade goods. When trappers depleted eastern fur areas, the voyageurs pushed west and eventually opened up Northwestern North America.



Voyageurs paddling birch bark canoes transported furs from as far west as Lake Athabasca to Montreal, three thousand miles east.

These burly men usually started their voyageur apprenticeship in their teens. Their lives were usually brief because by the age of 30 most were physically unable to continue the back-breaking labor demanded of them. Many turned to a solitary life of trapping. Others became farmers or escorted explorers or settlers by canoe to the far reaches of western Canada.

This fur connection lasted almost a century. Around 1840, when silk replaced fur as the fashion in Europe, the era of the voyageur came to an end.

Clothing of the voyageurs

Every item worn by a voyageur served a purpose and was tested by time.

Toque (tuke) – hat

The toque was usually made of red or blue wool. It was used to keep the voyageurs' heads warm in the northern latitudes as well as carry tobacco to prevent it from getting wet.

Chemise d'homme (she.mee.dome) – shirt
Voyageurs favored linen and cotton fabrics dyed in bright colors and made in large sizes. Once tucked into the trousers and secured by a sash, the voyageur could store odds and ends within the shirt. Also, the large sizes provided ventilation and warded off flies and mosquitoes.



Ceinture flechee (sen.toor.fle.shay) – sash

A sash was usually four to six inches wide and six feet long. It took the place of a modern-day weight lifter's belt and helped guard against strangulated hernias.

Calcon (kal.sown) – trousers

Calcons were usually “drop-front” trousers; the voyageur's favorite material was wide-wale cotton corduroy. They were usually only worn as their “dress” clothing. Typically while paddling canoes, voyageurs wore leggings and breechcloth.

Guetre (gay.tr) – leggings

Leggings were typically made of bright colored wool. Voyageurs had two primary uses for them: to “blouse” up pants so they did not chafe the voyageurs' legs and to keep leeches from crawling up the body.

Soulier de boef (sool.yay.deh.buf) – moccasins

Ankle high moccasins of rawhide were made by the Cree and Ojibwe Indians. These working boots provided protection against mosquitoes and black flies.

Bas (baw) – stockings

Voyageurs often wore stockings made of hand-knitted wool that reached to mid-calf. The color was either gray or off-white.