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## Watching the river flow

**Neil Hartling first paddled the South Nahanni River at the age of 23. Nearly a quarter century of adventure later, he says it is still the trip closest to his heart**

ED STRUZIK

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In the summer of 1984, at age, 23, Neil Hartling headed up to Nahanni National Park in the Northwest Territories from his home in Edmonton to experience and paddle a river that had haunted him since he was 15 years old.

Two things happened that summer that would change his life forever.

The first was the South Nahanni River itself. Hartling was so enchanted by the legendary mountain stream that flows through some of the deepest canyons in North America that he paddled it twice, convinced the second time that guiding people down the river was how he wanted to make a living.

The second occurred further downstream at Blackstone Landing where Hartling had finished the latter journey. On that frosty September morning, he was alerted to the screams of help from the river. Running to see who it was calling, Hartling spotted a man, woman and little girl floating helplessly in an aluminum boat that was heading toward a set of dangerous rapids. Their motor had conked out, they had no paddles and they looked to be in rough shape.

With the help of a young couple who were camped nearby, Hartling grabbed a canoe, paddled out to the boat, and with some effort, steered the trio to shore.

Hartling didn't appreciate the significance of this second episode until he naively applied for a licence to be a guide on the river. Northwest Territories officials politely told him that there would be no way they would grant him one unless he got a letter of support from the Dene residents who lived in the area.

Mortified, Hartling assumed he was out of luck. But then he recalled the last words of the father of the family he saved that day: "I owe you big time. If I can do anything for you, let me know."

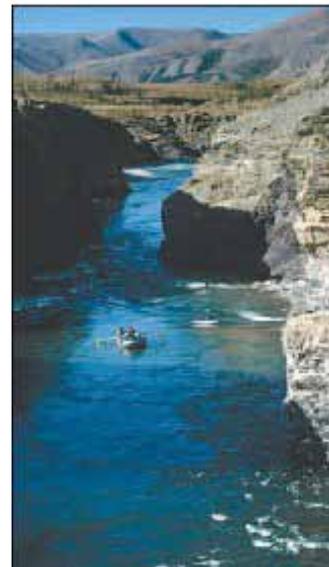
So with the help of an Oblate missionary he had befriended on that first trip, Hartling was able to track down the family and get

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A canoe passes through the famous Figure Eight Rapids along the South Nahanni River. The Nahanni is the river that is closest to Hartling's heart.

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The Firth River flows out of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska into the northern Yukon. The river is one of guide Neil Hartling's favourites.

the letter he required.

He never looked back after that. Not only did he get his licence to guide people down the Nahanni, he eventually expanded his business — Canadian River Expeditions & Nahanni River Adventures — to include 40 rivers in northern Canada, British Columbia, and Alaska, including those that were in the programs offered by two rival companies that he has since bought.

Now, the Edmonton-born, University of Alberta outdoor education grad is using his business savvy and love of adventure to offer similar adventure trips in Belize, Baja and the Galapagos. Unlike the eight- to 21-day epic Arctic river journeys that can cover 200 kilometres or more, those trips are relatively short and sweet. The river trip through Belize, for example, is only four days and 15 kilometres long, dropping down as it does over a series of pools that are, Hartling sighs, “bathtub-warm.”

“There are easier ways to make money, but to share incredible places with great people and do good things for the environment, I can’t think of a better job,” says Hartling whose company now does \$2 million in sales.

“Not that I get a lot of that \$2 million we do in sales. But it’s a long way from the days when I was building boats and operating my first outdoor business in my parents’ backyard in Edmonton.”

Contrary to what some people might expect, most of Hartling’s clients aren’t rich and famous. Nor are they expertly skilled in the art of paddling and outdoor adventure. For some of the rafters, it’s their first time paddling.

“Most are salt-of-the-earth Canadians,” he says. “The average age is 50, although we have had people who were as young as eight and old as 80. They are evenly split between men and women. They tend to be adventurous, curious and conservation minded. And they are keen to be involved in what is going on.

“For some, the experience is so profound that when they pass away, I get a call from family members who ask if I’ll pass their ashes over the river they ran that summer.”

That said, Hartling does occasionally get an eccentric, or someone who lives well beyond the means of most mortals.

A few years ago, for example, one of a handful of billionaires he’s dealt with contacted him about organizing a private trip down the Nahanni for him and two others.

MARK KYTE,  
SUPPLIED



Neil Hartling,  
owner/operator of  
Canadian River

Expeditions & Nahanni  
River Adventures

That seemed simple enough until Hartling learned that they would be coming with a chef and butler. Rest assured, they did not suffer on that journey. “They had the finest wines and the most extravagant aperitifs and foods,” says Hartling. “It was amazing. What I remember most, though, was the fact we carried more weight in ice over the portages than we did anything else. They had to have it for their drinks and to keep their produce cool.”

This billionaire was a terrific client. But he was so obsessed with security, says Hartling, that he used three planes from his personal fleet to get him to Virginia Falls, the starting point of the journey.

Given the challenges that paddlers face on many of these trips, Hartling’s safety record over a quarter century of guiding is virtually spotless. The one tragedy his team of guides experienced occurred several years ago when a Nahanni party, out for a day-hike through a canyon, was confronted with a flash flood that came roaring through. Recognizing the danger before the flood hit, the guide got everyone to scramble up high to safety. One man, however, decided at the last minute to turn back and retrieve a backpack he had left behind. The wall of water hit him before he had a chance to make it back.

Hartling’s trips aren’t cheap. About \$4,500 will get you down the Nahanni and \$2,000 more will put you on the Firth, an idyllic mountain stream that flows out of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska into the northern Yukon.

But when you consider that the price includes gourmet meals, the occasional mug of wine, tents and outdoor equipment, the cost is cheap compared to a European vacation or a weeklong stay in one of Banff or Jasper’s finer hotels.

Then there’s the value-added items that cost nothing.

Not only are Hartling’s 40 to 50 guides fully trained and long-lived with the company, many are characters worthy of their own biography.

Lacombe-born Les Parsons, for example, is the outdoor guide equivalent of Cosmo Kramer, Jerry Seinfeld’s wacky neighbour in the popular comedy show. His hilarious rants and never-ending monologues are worthy of his own TV show.

“Although cancer recently claimed Les’s stomach,” notes Hartling, “he insists that he still has the ‘guts’ to keep on paddling.”

One of the best parts of being in a business like this, says

Hartling, is all the extraordinary people you meet along the way.

“Euclid Herie, president of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, was one of them. Euclid, who is visually impaired, joined me on the Nahanni and Tatshenshini. I marvelled at how he employed all of his senses to enjoy the riverine experience.

“Mathew Soyster, a journalist from San Francisco was another. He was in the advanced stages of MS. Watching him savour the experience was inspiring and watching his friend care for him was moving.”

Asked to choose his favourite trip, Hartling quips that it’s like asking someone who their favourite child is.

“The Alsek, the Tatshenshini and the Firth are very high on my list, but I would have to say that that Nahanni is the one that is closest to my heart.”

Harvey Locke, a repeat client and former head of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Association, credits Hartling for the tireless work he has done getting Nahanni’s narrow boundaries expanded to include the entire watershed of the South Nahanni and other rivers flowing through it.

“A lot of people worked long and hard to get that done and Neil was one of them,” he says. “He donated trips down the river, posted news on his website and did everything he could to get Nahanni expanded. It was tireless effort, as it was for most of us. But it was worth the while.”

Looking back on the past, Hartling is most grateful for the support he got from his father and his mother who recently passed way in Edmonton.

“They really are candidates for sainthood,” he says.

“When I started my first business — a small outdoor skills school — I focused on teaching canoeing in the summer and cross-country skiing, first aid, and even moccasin and mitt-making in the shoulder season. My needs were simple, but my parents helped however they could. I turned my dad’s garage into a canoe factory and managed to destroy their lawn with the canoes that I built late into the night. I can never thank them enough for that.”