

RACE TO THE MIDNIGHT SUN

Two men. One boat. 740km of river. The challenge: to survive the threat of sleep monsters, angry bears, freezing water and acute arse ache in the world's longest annual paddling race – the Yukon River Quest.

STORY Pat Kinsella IMAGES Pat Kinsella + Harry Kern



Considering we'd met over the internet, things were going remarkably well between Iain and me. Now, I don't usually hook up with blokes via websites – no really, I don't – but there's very little that's usual about this experience.

For example, other things I don't make a regular habit of doing include paddling virtually non-stop for 740km, on a swirling monster of a river, in the direction of the midnight sun, while carrying aerosol cans of bear spray about my person.

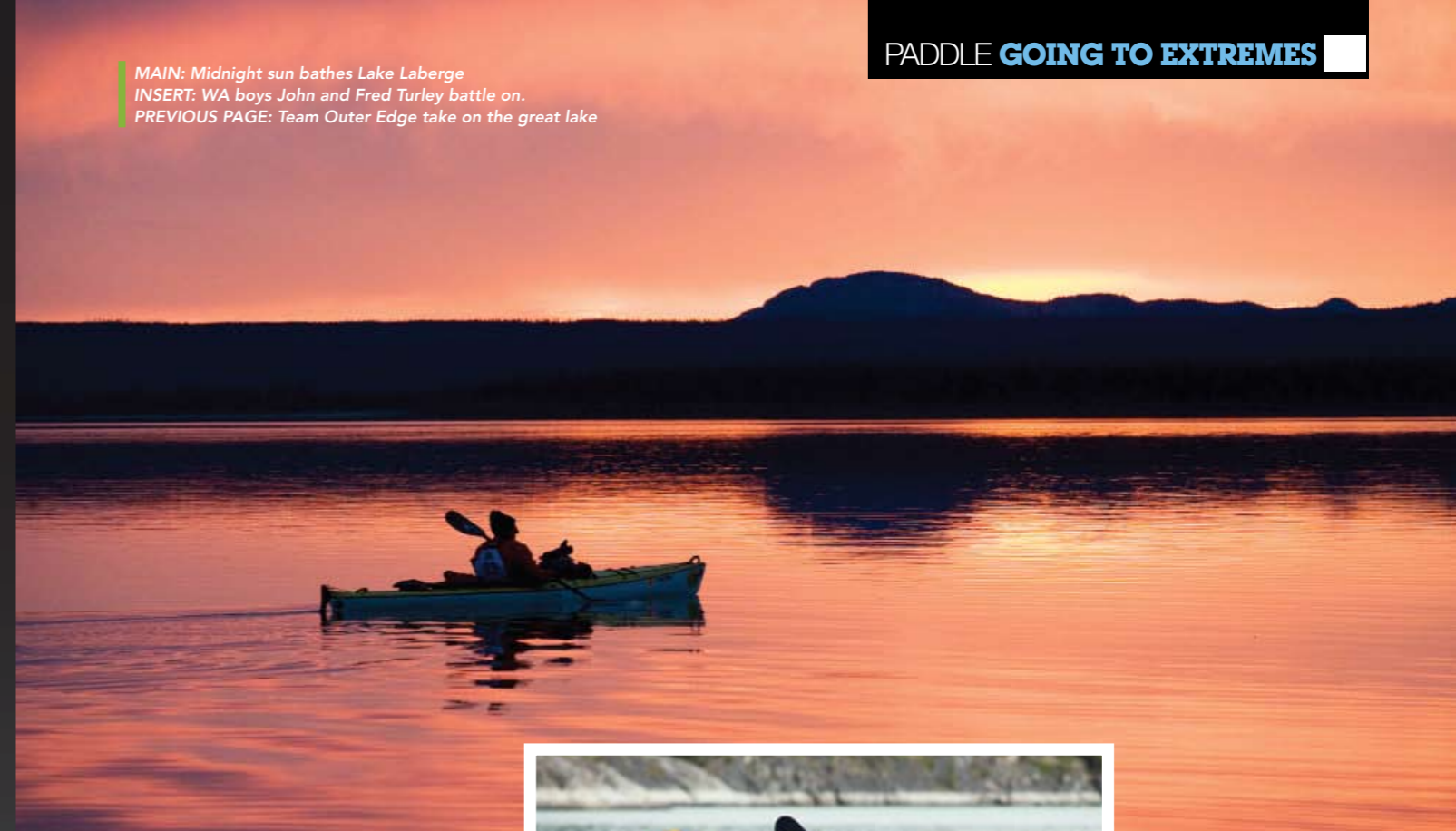
Myself and Iain – AKA 'Team Outer Edge' – are taking part in the Yukon River Quest, the longest annual canoe and kayak race in the world. From the city of Whitehorse, the Quest takes paddlers along the liquid length of the mighty Yukon River, to the wild frontier destination of Dawson.

Now into its 11th year, the race was inspired by the experiences of the diggers and dreamers chasing the last great gold rush at the turn of the twentieth century. The course follows the same river route hundreds of prospectors took, chasing a slice of the gleaming seam of treasure discovered in the Klondike.

If we reckon we've got it tough (and, yes, we do), the conditions those woefully ill-prepared adventurers endured were horrific. Before even reaching the river,



MAIN: Midnight sun bathes Lake Laberge
 INSERT: WA boys John and Fred Turley battle on.
 PREVIOUS PAGE: Team Outer Edge take on the great lake



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they had to traverse the frozen Chilkoot Pass, between Alaska and Canada, carrying (at the insistence of Canadian authorities) one year's supplies, which equated to a tonne in weight. They then built boats to negotiate the wild water and life-threatening rapids of the Yukon River, in a race to reach Dawson City before winter froze everything to a standstill. Among their colourful ranks were writers Jack London and Robert W. Service, whose words have immortalised their ordeal and the raw wilderness where they fossicked for a fortune.

Team Outer Edge isn't expecting to find any gold at journey's end. I'm a complete canoe virgin with raging jetlag, and Iain has a solitary two-hour training run to smash me into shape. Our goals are twofold: 1) Not to die. 2) To cross the finish line before the cut-off time of midnight on Saturday. Most teams have been paddling together for months, some for years. I met Iain two days before the race and we had one trial run - Whitehorse to Takhini River - to prepare. It proved as valuable as Klondike gold.

In a C2, the most skilled paddler takes the back, from where they can better control the canoe. Obviously, Iain took this spot, but my pie-munching frame far outweighed his marathon runner's physique, making steering hard. We solved the problem by repacking our gear, avoiding a major problem the race.

THE YUKON RIVER QUEST came from the even more ridiculous Dyea to Dawson Centennial Race to the Klondike. In 1997 and 1998, this insane endurance event saw teams hike the old prospectors' route from Dyea (Alaska) over the 33-mile (53km) Chilkoot Trail to Lake Bennett, paddle 100 miles (160km) across headwater lakes to Whitehorse, and then race to Dawson.

The only land-based component of our race is a 1km run from the starting line to the riverbank. Predictably, with 740km of racing ahead, everyone sprints this bit like a pack of PFD-wearing Hussein Bolts.

It's not hard to find our vessel. Many paddlers



have custom-made their boats specifically for this race, meeting the minimum hull width by the skimpiest of margins, while keeping their craft as super sleek as possible.

Next to these mean machines, our canoe looks like an early reject from the *Biggest Loser*. Never built for speed, once loaded up with gear and grub she's so heavy I actually wonder whether she'll float. We christen her the *Plastic Panzer*.

The River Quest is contested by kayaks, canoes and eight-person voyageur canoes. Paddling away from Whitehorse, I look enviously at the familiar action of the K1 and K2 competitors. Months before it had all made sense.

"When else will I get the chance to do an iconic Canadian event in a Canadian canoe?" I asked Iain in an early email.

His response immediately told me that I'd made the right choice in my paddling partner at least: "We're both more experienced in kayaks, but if you're after an adventure into the unknown in a canoe - then who am I to stop you?"

I had great intentions about getting skilled up and training hard. But I don't know anyone with a canoe. And work was busy. Suddenly there was only a month left. On the Quest forum, people were talking of a minimum of 120 hours dedicated training for the race.

A Melbourne paddler, Brett Norton, contacted me. Brett was going solo in a K1 under the name

'Giddyup', and he entered so early his bib says '2'. He bamboozled me with talk of maps and books, nutrition plans and marathon training paddles.

With three wintery weekends remaining I hit Port Phillip Bay with a vengeance, wheezing through a five- and six-hour stints in the boat, trying to imitate a canoeing stroke with my sea kayaking paddle. "I'm buggered," I thought.

But in Whitehorse, at the pre-race briefing, I was relieved to discover that I'm not the only contender for the least-serious-preparation award. A Pommy voyageur crew called London Pride tell me that the only boat they could find remotely similar to the one they'd hired for the race was an old prop from the film *The Last of the Mohicans* - and they'd been hooning up and down the River Thames in that.

Jonathan Turley, a Western Australian lad competing with his younger brother Fred in a K2, has been working in the WA mines, as far removed from water as you can be. "I've been going to the gym," he laughs. "Just trying to guess what muscles I'll be using!"

There are some genuine legends in the room too. Brett introduces me to a powerhouse of a man called Heinz Rodinger. A solo kayaker with the hands of a blacksmith, Heinz ('The Austrian') is 68. He competed in the 1972 Olympics and has done every Yukon River Quest since 2001.

And there's Larry Seethaler, who competed in both Dyea to Dawson races and has done all 11 River Quests. Larry hit a moose on the way here, wrecking his car and canoe. But he wasn't going to let that stop him - he just got another boat.

There's also Paddlers Abreast, an all-woman voyageur crew, with every member of the team a survivor of breast cancer.

MAIN: Alaskan K1 paddler Rick Hoegberg goes solo in a kayak he made himself
INSERT: Are we nearly there yet? Ian consults the map.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Giddy up – Brett Norville from Melbourne paddles hard.



FOR THE FIRST FEW hours, I feel utterly euphoric just to be underway. My arms and shoulders are holding up well, and I slip into a reasonable stroke. Our surroundings are blowing my over-stimulated mind. Bald eagles soar overhead, deep forest fringes the river and a rhythmic beat starts to bounce across the water. It's drums. We're passing what's marked on the map as an 'Indian Village'. There are a number of Indigenous teams in the race, but the First Nation people here have come out to cheer us all on. I erupt in goosebumps.

The Yukon River hurries along beneath us, but when we hit Lake Laberge, the flow stops and for 50 long kilometres the water dawdles. It takes over six hours for us to drag the *Plastic Panzer* across the indolent surface, but conditions are kind and the water stays as flat as shimmering sheet of steel. We're lucky. Laberge is a dangerously unpredictable puddle. Race rules demand we stay within 200 metres of shore, but our paddling pattern suffers from the lack of current, and we turn a 50km straight-line paddle into a horribly inefficient serpentine zigzag. I feel Iain's unspoken frustration staring at my inexperienced back, grit my brain and try and get my cadence right. Towards the lake's end I learn another valuable new skill – how to pee out of a canoe.

All competitors must pass Goddard Point checkpoint by 2am or face disqualification. We shout out our number at around 11pm, with a few hours grace under our spray deck, but continue to the end of the lake before making landfall and having some proper food. Pulling into shore, we're greeted by a campfire and welcomed by a thundercloud of mosquitoes. A pair of non-racing paddlers, father and son, sit by the fire sipping on a bottle of red.

To my surprise – perhaps the result of an over-enthusiastic slap at a mozzie – I start pouring some claret of my own...through my nose. As warm blood drips into my bowl of cold chilli, my body decides to start shutting up shop. Within minutes I'm shivering uncontrollably. Iain's the same. We cut the

break short, chuck on some more layers and get going. I've got news for my mutinous body: this is only the beginning.

I'm pretty happy that my paddling partner is a doctor. GPs in these remote parts deal with everything from caesarean births to bear attack victims. I think I'm safe from a least one of those scenarios, but it never hurts to be teamed with someone who knows their way around a bandaid. Iain's a capable kind of a bloke – he even flies his own plane – but he could work on the positivity of his team talks. "The ice only came off the river a few weeks back," he'd told me over a get-to-know-you beer two days earlier. "If you fall in, you've only got about two minutes of useful consciousness to get to the bank or back in the boat, or you're gone."

Checking in on the morning of the race, we were called over for a mugshot. "This is so you can identify bodies isn't it?" said Iain. "Yup," replied the photographer. "Say cheese."

This is an unforgiving event for rookies and regulars alike. One safety boat covers over

740km of river, looking out for over 70 teams, ranging from pro paddlers to rank amateurs. There's nothing on the banks except serious wilderness and grumpy bears. The water is barely above freezing and, despite 24-hour daylight, it gets awful cold here, just beneath the Arctic Circle. If you capsize and lose your boat, or your body breaks down, you may be on your own for days. Each team must carry emergency bivvies, sleeping bags, provisions and means for starting a fire, and the provided rubbish bag is fluro, for attracting rescuers.

But arse ache and mental fatigue – they're the real twin horrors of the River Quest. And there's not much you can do about either. Anticipating that we'd be operating close to the edge, we had secured our paddles to our bodies with cord. Good move. Both of us experienced the strange sensation of waking up whilst still mechanically paddling, having momentarily dozed off. For solo paddlers, an involuntary doze can be fatal.

The hallucinations keep things interesting too – you never know what's going to pop up next. I'm seeing tribal heads coming out of rock faces, totem poles in misshapen branches, and once, in the grip of complete conviction, spin the canoe completely around to show Iain a non-existent bear on the bank.

Worryingly, all this is happening before the first compulsory stop at Carmacks, which at the 323km mark isn't even close to halfway. On our approach to the camp, we both hit a wall. We've been keeping each other going up until now, and this joint meltdown isn't pretty.

From nowhere, two First Nation guys skim past in a C2. Their synchronised paddling motion is spellbinding, like a water insect skating on a pond. Less aesthetic is our botched landing at Carmacks, where the current takes us past the jetty and we squander our last cents of energy fighting our way back.

It's 4pm, Thursday. We've been paddling for 28 hours with just one 25-minute break out of the canoe. As I try to step out of the boat I realise my legs don't work. I'm not alone. Watching paddlers emerge at Carmacks is like a Monty Python Ministry of Funny Walks sketch.

IAIN LOOKS BLOODY AWFUL, and he assures me I do too. His head isn't in a good place either. A lifelong outdoor enthusiast, Iain is an experienced endurance runner who has completed sub-three-hour marathons...but he's close to breaking point.

"This is crazy," he says, as our support team – Margaret – gets us hot food. "You're hallucinating, we're both operating on the verge of collapse and we're not even halfway. We've got the rapids to come yet."

I'm more physically and mentally shattered than I can ever remember being, but reaching Carmacks ahead of schedule has buoyed my spirits, and the promise of hot tucker and a few hours kip is sending me giddy with excitement. This is the final cut-off point. The only way we can be forced out of the race now is if we don't make it Dawson by midnight on Saturday...or if we scratch. I'm worried at the direction the conversation is taking.

"I've got three kids," Iain continues. "I have to think about this carefully and sensibly. People die on those rapids."

I've got one shot at this race, and a story to get. I'm desperate not to bail. I suggest we get our heads down and see how we feel on the flip side of some sleep. Jean-Francois Latour, the race President, wanders into our conversation as talk turns to hallucinations. "Ha ha!" he snorts. "Last year I saw a gigantic tin of Campbell's soup in the forest!"

This isn't helping. Iain's not impressed. "You guys are laughing," he says. "But, as a doctor, I



can tell you seeing things as a result of mental and physical exhaustion is not good. Especially when you have to deal with rapids."

Annoyingly, I wake earlier than I need to. My head pounds, my throat is like tree bark and I have a pronounced feeling of confusion. I've been here many times before, but never without the help of beer. Iain stirs and we have another brief pow wov.

He knows I want to continue, but with the practical mind of a doctor, he's weighing up all the risks. He talks about his kids again. I'm thinking about my family too. One of my little girl's socks is in my PFD pocket for luck, and

I'm wearing her pink hairband on my wrist. It's not the toughest look – God knows what Jack London would have said – but it means every paddle stroke reminds me of her.

But I'm also imagining my Dad, monitoring our progress on the website from England, joining the dots from our SPOT reports. He'd of given anything to be doing this trip, and I'd hate him to see us pull the pin. Besides, with blissful ignorance of what actually lays ahead, I honestly reckon we'll be fine.

I know one thing: after a few hours of recovery, Iain will be devastated if we quit here. "You'll want to do it again if you don't finish it this time," I point out. "And that means going through all this pain again. We've got this far – and conditions have been good."

The rules stipulate a stop of seven hours at Carmacks. We can leave now, but I tell Iain to get another hour's sleep while I clean out the boat. Emptying the *Plastic Panzer* of debris, I bump into John Turley. His brother's in a bad way and we half-joke about combining forces. We both desperately want to finish with our original teammates though, and shortly afterwards I bid the Turley boys farewell as they push off from the jetty. Fred looks frozen and shattered – but he's still paddling.

Iain's made a decision: he wants to go for it. My confidence high, I pose another question: "How about I take a turn in the back?"

"OK", he says. "You've been doing well." The changeover puts me in the driving seat for the rapids.

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IT'S CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT as we clamber back into the boat. Sitting down is a major challenge. My bum will never forgive me for this.

At 3am the map says we're nearing the rapids. The flow increases beneath the hull and our hypnotic stroke becomes more purposeful as adrenaline evicts weariness from our brains.

The Five Finger Rapids are not the most imposing whitewater challenge in the world – a generous grade three perhaps – but you don't often take on rapids in the wee hours, after paddling 360km. And they're only safe if you take the right channel. The other four fingers point with certainty to a furious watery grave.

"Keep right! KEEP RIGHT!!" Iain roars above the scream of the quickening current. I am. There's one golden rule: keep the boat facing forward. If you go through sideways, you're history. Briefly I picture the prospectors blindly hitting these rapids, with no idea what line to take. Then I'm snapped back into the present as the first standing waves explode over the bow.

Our approach is text book – pointy end first we're sucked through the mouth of the rapid, bounced up and down on the shoulders of the waves and then spat out the other end. YeeeeeaaaAAAAHHHHH! I'm awake now.

The danger isn't quite over – a nasty eddy cavorts to the right, and the Rink Rapids wait further on – but we sail through. Not everyone escapes unscathed. A voyageur is completely swamped at Five Fingers, and another – front-runners, 'the Texans' – flips at Rink, with the crew being rescued by first-place rivals Team Dene, an all-Indigenous crew of Saskatchewan paddlers.

The buzz from the rapids keeps us going through the frigid hours of predawn, when the sun stays hidden behind the hills. For hours we see no other boats, but I do spot a moose – a quiet giant watching from the shadows.

Iain confirms the moose is no hallucination, but later I realise I'm experiencing a whole new level of tiredness when my brain begins to flip things, so they appear as if in a mirror. I spend 10 minutes glaring at my watch, willing the face to right itself.

Fatigue comes in waves. The emergence of the sun, the challenge of navigating around islands in the ever-widening river, the sight of an eagle – any stimulus keeps metal collapse at bay... just.

I've broken my sunglasses and the glare from the water as we paddle north, into the midnight sun, is relentless. At Kirkman's Creek we take a three-hour compulsory stop. The 24 hours since we left Carmacks has been punctuated by one quick on-shore break to make porridge.

As we land an older woman leaves in a sleek K1. I think I'm hallucinating, but no, this is Ingrid, another legend of the Quest. She's in her 60s, has had a hip replacement and a heart attack, and she's on her way to become the only solo female finisher for 2009. They're tough round here.

On the bank is another K1, bearing the name Brad Pennington – last year's solo winner and holder of the solo race record (44 hours 14 minutes). He's hypothermic and has bonked. Around the fire he tells me how he was hit by a storm and didn't have the right gear to get warm.

A girl at the camp is huddled in a sleeping bag, coughing up blood. Iain snaps into doctor mode. Pneumonia is the verdict and a helicopter evacuation is ordered. By the time the chopper lands, no more than 20 metres from where we lay



2009 Yukon Quest winners: The Texans

sleeping in our bivvies, we don't even wake.

More persistent than the helicopter, a volunteer shakes us awake after three hours. It's freezing. Ice has formed on the spray deck and my gloves are stiff. Getting back into the boat, a beaver pops up to farewell us for the last leg.

From Kirkman's to Dawson is a mere 158km; it would take a disaster for us not to finish now. We clang paddles when we get to within 100km of Dawson. That's still further than I've ever paddled before, but everything is relative. And besides, the river is working with us now.

As other waterways join forces with it, the Yukon becomes an enormous conveyor belt of water, surging north. We cross from one side to the other, chasing the fastest flow and skirting the faces of enormous basalt cliffs.

And finally, Dawson City looms into view on the map. We spot a kayak ahead and try to chase it down. The K2 senses our predatory approach, and puts on a spurt. It's John and Fred, the boys from WA – they pip us to the post by a whisker.

Saturday afternoon, 4pm: we're in well ahead of the cut off. At 18, Fred is the youngest Aussie to ever complete the race. He looks about 80, but he's smiling. Also on the jetty, waiting for us with Margaret, is Brett. His grin is wider than the river – he placed third among the solo paddlers. A podium spot for Australia and a stunning effort.

The Texans took overall first place, with a time of 40 hours 52 minutes, beating their Rink Rapid rescuers, Team Dene by 50 minutes. Ingrid was the only solo female paddler to finish.

Our own time is 66.24. There's not a specific Plastic Panzer category, but it's safe to say we're brining up the rear in the canoe class. But we finished, in a year when a record number of teams scratched. And no one died. Mission achieved.

Dawson is an unlikely nirvana, but it's a heaven-made finale for a brilliantly strange race. An odder town I have yet to set wobbly foot in. The main attraction here is a drink with a real human toe in it. Yes, real. And not attached to its original owner.

I'm so spaced out that even this doesn't really register as being all that weird, but it's definitely time for a drink. "That was ridiculous," says Iain, as we clang beers. "Never again."

A few days after getting back from Canada I get an email from Iain: "Just bought myself a new canoe and have entered next year's race. Know anyone that might be interested?"

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For more details, visit yukonriverquest.com

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