

Canoeing Etiquette - The Finer Points

A good high adventure team is like a powerful, well-oiled, finely-tuned marriage. Members cook meals together, face challenges together, and finally go to bed together. A bad adventure, on the other hand, is an awkward, ugly, embarrassing thing characterized by bickering, filth, frustration, and crispy meals.

Nearly all bad adventures have one thing in common: poor behavior. This is true even if team members follow the stated rules, such as Don't Wear Muddy Boots into the Tent, Separate Fuel and Food, No Soap in the River, Wash your Hands Before Cooking, Don't Hit Me in the Head with Your Paddle, etc.

Unfortunately, too many rules of canoeing etiquette remain unspoken. Leaders seem to assume that their team members already have strong and generous characters like their own. But judging from a few of the boaters we've encountered, more rules ought to be spelled out. Here are ten of them.

RULE #1 Get your butt out of bed. Suppose your team members get up early to fetch water and fire up the stove while you lie comatose in your sleeping bag. As they run an extensive equipment check, pack gear, and fix your breakfast, they hear you snoring. Last night you were their buddy; now they're drawing up lists of things about you that make them want to spit. They will devise cruel punishments for you. You have earned them. The team concept is now defunct. Had you gotten out of bed, nobody would have had to suffer.

RULE #2 Do not be too cheerful before breakfast. Some people wake up perky and happy as fluffy bunny rabbits. They put stress on those who wake up mean as rabid wolverines. Exhortations such as "Rise and shine, sugar!" and "Greet the dawn, pumpkin!" have been known to provoke pungent expletives from wolverine types. These curses, in turn, may offend fluffy bunny types. Indeed, they are issued with the sincere intent to offend. Thus, the day begins with flying fur and hurt feelings. The best early-morning behavior is simple: **Be quiet.**

RULE #3 Do not complain about anything, ever. You are cold and wet, visibility is four inches with wind driven sleet granules embedding themselves in your face like shotgun pellets, mosquitoes and black flies are sucking one quart of blood per hour, and the day's route includes a five mile portage of your canoe and gear. Must you mention it? Do you think your friends haven't noticed the conditions? Make a suggestion. Tell a joke. Lead a prayer. Do not lodge a complaint. If nothing can be done to correct the situation there is no point to complain. Whiners are generally drowned on the spot and those that survive are not invited back.

RULE #4 Learn to cook at least one thing right. One expedition trick is so old that it is no longer amusing: on the first cooking assignment, the clever cook prepares a dish that resembles, say, Burnt Sock in Toxic Waste Sauce. The cook hopes to be relieved permanently from cooking duties. This is the childish approach to a problem that's been with us since people first started throwing lizards on the fire. Tricks are not a part of a team spirit. If you don't like to cook, say so. Offer to wash dishes and to prepare the one thing you do know how to cook, even if it's only boiled water. Remember that talented camp cooks sometimes get invited to join major expeditions in Nepal, all expenses paid.

RULE #5 Either A) Bathe, or B) Accept an unflattering new nickname. After a week or so in the backcountry, without bathing, hair forms angry little clumps and wads and the body odor is extreme. This leaves the person looking and smelling like an escapee from the basement of a mental ward outhouse. Such an appearance could shake a team's confidence in your judgment let alone your tentmate's willingness to share space with you. If you can't bathe, be prepared for others to do it for you when you least expect it.

RULE #6 Do not ask if anybody's seen your stuff. Experienced canoers have systems for organizing their gear. They very rarely leave it strewn around camp or lying back on the riverbank of your last stop. One of the stupidest things you can do is ask your tentmate if they've seen the tent poles you thought you packed 15 miles ago. Even in the unlikely event you get home alive, you will not be invited on the next trip. Should you ever leave the tent poles 15 miles away, do not ask if anybody's seen them. Simply announce, with a good-natured chuckle, that you are about to set off in the dark on a 30-mile canoe trip to retrieve them, and that you are sorry. Also, it's unprofessional to lose personal items such as your spoon or your toothbrush. If something like that happens, don't mention it to anyone.

RULE #7 Never ask where you are. If you want to know where you are or how much farther the destination is, look at the map. Don't verbalize your question. Everyone is encouraged and welcome to participate in the evening or morning route planning sessions, or you may want the challenge to try to figure it out yourself. Go for it. If you're still confused, feel free to discuss the identity of landmarks around you and how they correspond to the cartography. But if at some point you: A) suspect that a mistake has been made, B) have experience in interpreting topographical maps, or C) are certain that your group leader is a novice or on drugs, speak up. Otherwise, follow the group like sheep.

RULE #8 Always carry more than your fair share when portaging. When the trip is over, would you rather be remembered as a stud or a sissy? Keep in mind that carrying the canoe more than halfway on a portage won't kill you. In any given group of flatlanders, somebody is bound to try not carrying their fair share; usually by stating that their back is sore or their shoulders hurt. When an argument begins, take the canoe the whole way yourself. Then shake your head and gaze with pity upon the slothful one. This is the mature response to childish behavior. After the portage is complete and the canoe is reloaded, contrive a strategy to leave the offender on the shore and let them walk the rest of the way.

RULE #9 Do not get sunburned. Sunburn is not only painful and unattractive. It's also an obvious sign of inexperience. Most newbies wait too long before applying sunscreen. Once you've burned on an expedition, you may not have a chance to get out of the sun. Then the burn gets burned, skin peels away, blisters sprout on the already swollen lips. Anyway, you get the idea. Wear SPF 30 protection. It gives you just about 100% protection. It does get on your sunglasses, all over your clothes and in your mouth. But that's OK. Unlike sunshine, sunscreen is non-toxic.

RULE #10 Do not get killed. Suppose you successfully canoe down a flooded Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, without a wetsuit, and finish by saving the lives of three other canoers. Pretty macho, huh? Suppose now that you take a vertical detour over a waterfall and never make it back to civilization. Would you still qualify as a hero? And would it matter? Nobody's going to run any fingers through your new chest hair. The worst thing to have on your outdoor resume is a list of the possible locations of your bloated, fish nibbled body. Besides, your demise might distract your team members from enjoying what's left of their vacations.

All canoeing etiquette really flows from this one principle: Think of your team, the beautiful machine, first. You are merely a cog in that machine. If you can't think about others first, forget about joining the high adventure. Your team will never have more than one member.



“How come every time we go canoeing,
you lose your paddle?”