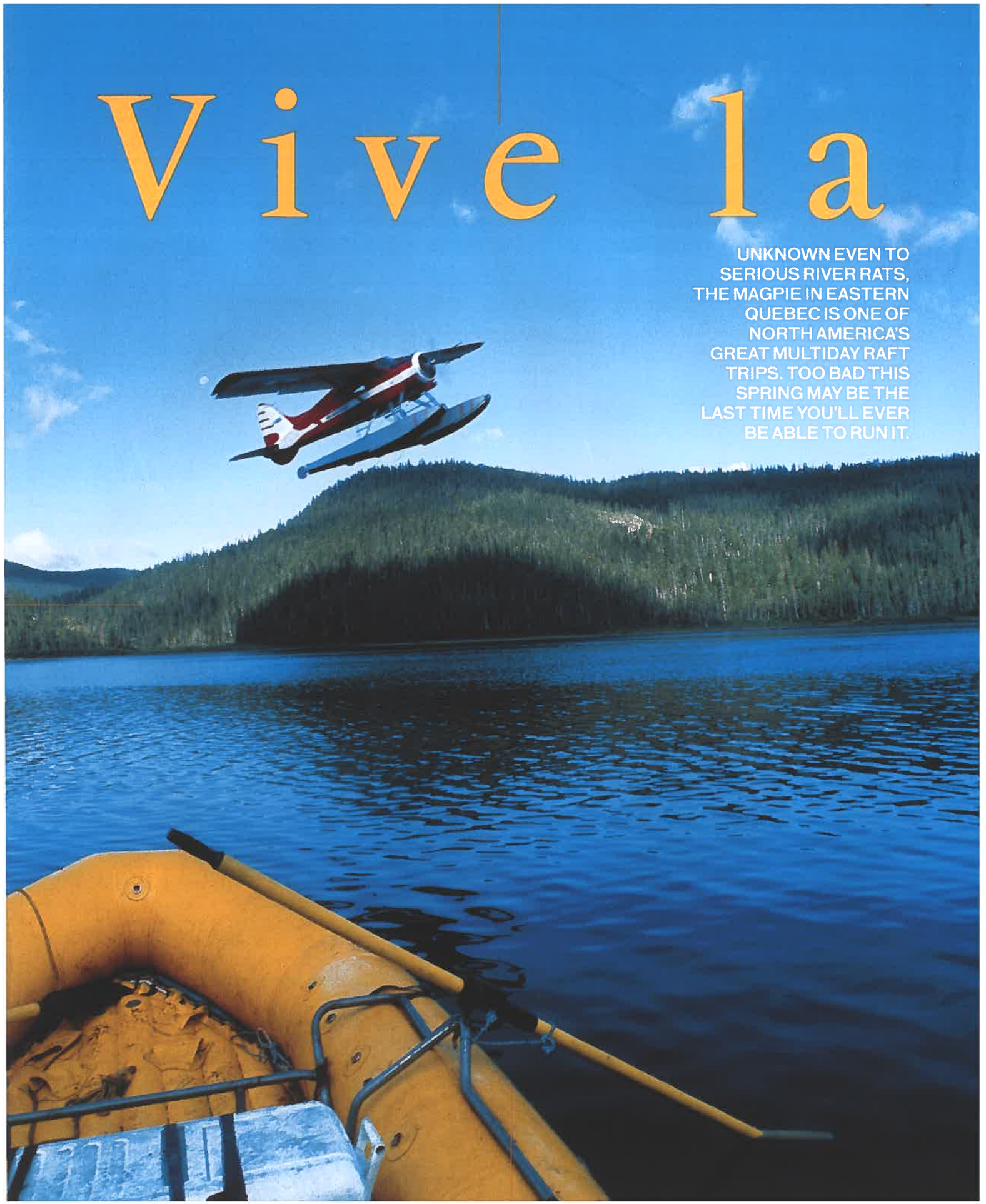
Vive la

UNKNOWN EVEN TO SERIOUS RIVER RATS, THE MAGPIE IN EASTERN QUEBEC IS ONE OF NORTH AMERICA'S GREAT MULTIDAY RAFT TRIPS. TOO BAD THIS SPRING MAY BE THE LAST TIME YOU'LL EVER BE ABLE TO RUN IT.



Magpie!

By Mark Sundeen Photography by Jeff Pflueger

A RIVER UNTAMED: Rafters slap paddles after tearing through one of the dozens of nameless rapids on Quebec's lower Magpie River. Opposite: A floatplane is necessary to reach the lower Magpie's usual put-in.

We're

floating down a big North American river, the kind that flows for days with no signs of civilization. The water is black and inky, and when sunlight hits the foam, copper-colored swirls boil to the surface. Each day without fail more rapids pour off the horizon, black granite lines the banks, and thick stands of fir trees crowd the canyon.

But here's the strange part: Nobody from my 11 years as a white-water guide knows this river, much less has paddled a boat down it. And even though it's late summer, when the days are long and the water temperature is mild, we have the place all to ourselves, tearing down rapids so seldom visited they've never been named.

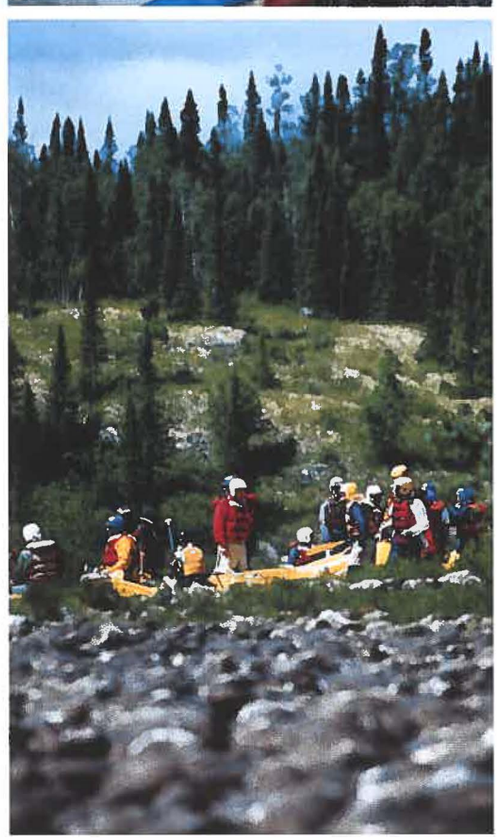
The obscurity of the river isn't the only thing that's unusual about this rafting trip. For starters, most of our party speaks French and smokes Players. And they keep ducking behind boulders to yap into satellite phones.

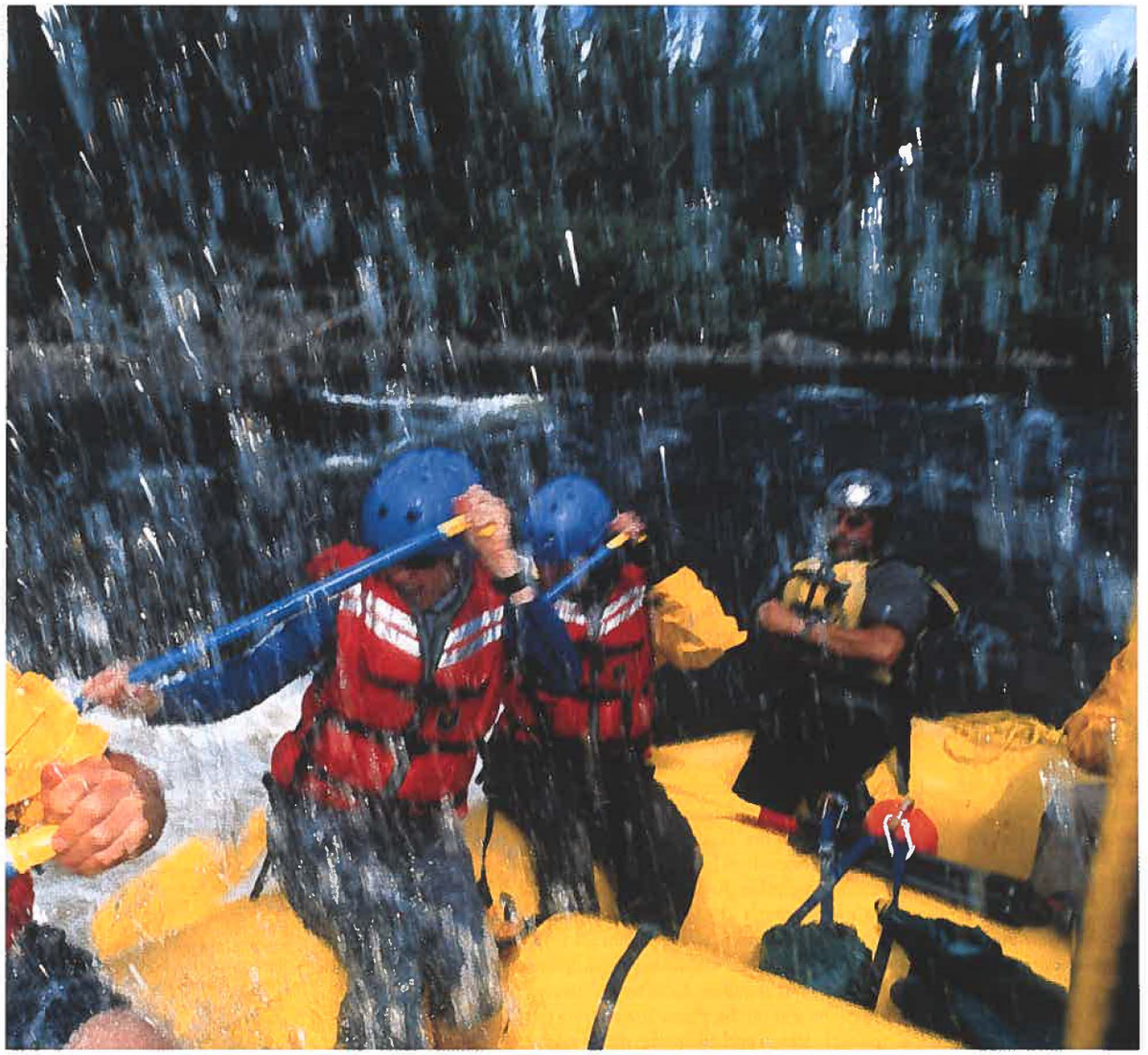
And now, on our third day, as we swat at black flies and line our rafts over a waterfall, we're being pursued by a helicopter. It appears overhead and fills the gorge with the beating of its blades. Dangling below it on a cable is some unidentified prey, which, as it gets closer, turns out to be our gear boat. The aircraft lowers the cargo-laden raft into a pool about 200 yards downriver and lands on a cobble bar nearby.

We beach the rafts, and agaggle of reporters and conservationists— head for a picnic set upon a granite slab. Food is served, sat phones are unpacked, and live from the middle of nowhere radio interviews and dictated newspaper columns shoot back to offices in Montreal.

This little-known place, and the cause of all the commotion, is the Magpie River in eastern Quebec, specifically its last 40 or so miles, a series of Class III, IV, V, and VI rapids that rolls down from Lac Magpie (Magpie Lake) and empties into the St. Lawrence River. East and west of its banks is some of the most remote country in southern Canada, a roadless and nearly uninhabited wilderness of dense forest. Those hearty enough to carve out a life in these parts—not many—congregate in the string of tattered villages along the St. Lawrence or in the town of Sept-Îles, about 90 miles west of the mouth of the Magpie. Even though its mild summer conditions and continuous white water are characteristic of rivers in the lower 48, a raft trip on the Magpie feels remote, wild, more like an Alaska expedition than a guided float some 550 miles northeast of Montreal.

But for all of its one-of-a-kind attributes, the Magpie is, like many spectacular stretches of white water, threatened by a series of dams that would flood its rapids. In response to a governmental energy development initiative, the Montreal power company Hydroméga has proposed a dam and generating facility, which as we paddle is under review by Quebec's Bureau d'Audiences Publiques sur l'Environnement.





LIFE ON THE MAGPIE: Digging into a Class III (at left). Clockwise from top right: The floatplane waits for good weather in Sept-Îles; a brookie's last moments; paddlers regroup after the final Class V rapid, the one threatened by the dam.

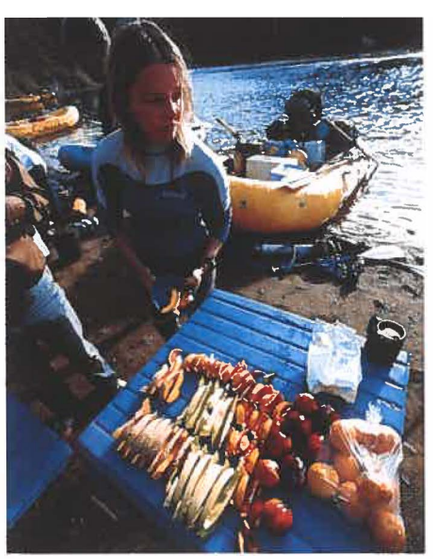
dread that we could be some of the last ones to do so, at least over the portion we're traveling.

If a destination's popularity is measured by convenient flights and cute boutiques, it's clear the Magpie has yet to be discovered. To get within floatplane range, I had to link northbound Air Canada flights to Montreal, then to Quebec City, and finally to a weather-beaten town on the St. Lawrence River. Sept-Îles (rhymes with "wet eel") is Canada's second largest port, the principal interest of which is a massive aluminum smeltery on a peninsula nearby. The downtown is a grid of stormproof boxes wrapped in sheet metal, many of them shuttered and closed to business. The night I arrived, I walked down the lonely main drag until I reached a fish-and-chips joint where, trotting out a few tourist phrases in French, I ordered a plate of fried goodies on Styrofoam, listened to the news on French television, and watched the rain fall.

Sept-Îles and the economically stagnant settlements closer to the Magpie are the kinds of places where power dam proposals are well received. According to Hydroméga president Jacky Cerceau, the Magpie dam will be a boon to the region, producing 40 megawatts of power that will be used locally and sold on the Quebec grid. Cerceau says that the dam will provide two years of construction work as well as "more than $15 million [U.S. $12 million] in direct financial contributions to the eight municipalities of the

region." Dispersed among 6,000 or so residents over 25 years (after which, says Cerceau, the dam would be transferred to Quebec's government), those contributions compute to about $100 (U.S. $81) per person a year. Hydroméga's promises secured the support of the mayors of the local villages, and pending approval from the provincial government, construction could begin as early as this spring.

Perhaps the only folks who don't applaud the dam are the few who have actually seen the free-flowing river from a boat. Chief among them is Eric Hertz, 49, founder and co-owner of Earth River Expeditions, who has been guiding rafting trips on three continents for 33 years from his home base in New York's Hudson Valley. When our group met in the lobby of the Hôtel Sept-Îles, he looked harried, having just driven 15 hours in a mud-splattered pickup truck loaded with coolers of food, four guides, and his 12-year-old son, Cade. He began by ordering us to pack no more than one change of clothes and our paddling gear. "See what I've got on?" he said, pointing to his worn jeans and a fleece jacket. "This is all you'll need off the-river."



"I'd say ther Magpie's probaby the second best week long whitewater rafting trip in all of North Amer-ica, after the Grand Canyon. I'd even rank it higher than the Middle Fork of the Salmon." Hertz told me as I finished packing.

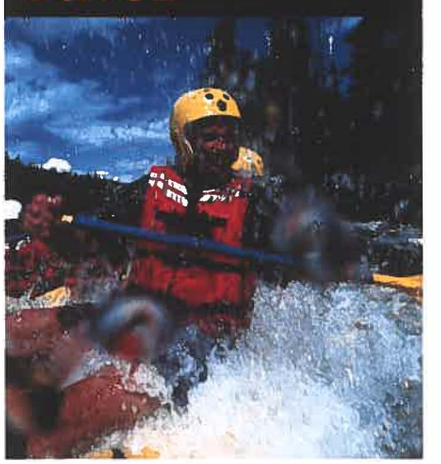
As far as Hertz knows, he was the first person to take a raft down the Magpie. Intrepid canoeists have known about it for decades, but most are confounded by the expense of getting to Sept-Iles and hiring a floatplane to the put-in at Magpie Lake. The only other way in is to take a northbound train to the headwaters of the Magpie Ouest (West) near the rail station by Waco. But this approach makes for a one-week descent of the 114-mile run, with its numerous Class V rapids, just to get to the standard launch. So in 1989 when Hertz chartered a small plane to take him looking for raftable white water, he thought he'd discovered in the Magpie a world-class river. His first float coni med this, but he liked having the place to himself, so he decided not to advertise it too much. "I never made any money on the Magpie," he told me. "But I love it. It's my favorite river." or the past 14 years, he has been the Magpie's only outfitter, g just two or three week-long trips a year. He estimates that fewer than 300 people have ever floated it.

"I guess you could take an extra T-shirt," Hertz relented in our hotel lobby, pressed by a roof l of novice rafters hesitant to leave behind their warm, dry clothes. Just a week before departur the number in our raft party swelled from 25 to 38 members. So now Hertz was struggling to lighten the load, one shirt at a time. As he belted instructions to us, he was on the phone hammering out logistics with drivers and pilots who didn't necessarily speak English. some of the guests had come late so Hertz had to coordinate a mid-trip meeting point with the helicopter pilot. Oh, and as long as he was at it, couldn't the pilot dovetail the drop-off with a quick gear haul that would save the team five, maybe six, hours of portaging? Hertz hung up the phone, tugged at his hair, and waved a sealed drybag at the rafting party. "Take the T-shirt, but your bag can't be heavier than this!"

It was almost dark when our floatplane landed on Magpie Lake, where three of Hertz's guides were waiting for us. We made camp at an old hunting cabin in the forest of alder and spruce and birch that lines the lake, and set a roaring fire on the bank; it shimmered across the water as night fell.

In the morning, Hertz hurried us onto the rafts. We paddled across the lake following a faint current that grew and grew until we were rip The rapids on the Magpie's first c hute, our raft s k in t bring (Continued on page 28) water splashing onboard.

Guide Magpie River



The Magpie River passes through some of the most remote wilderness in all of southern Canada. Here's how to go.

GETTING THERE: Sept-Iles is the gateway for trips on the Magpie. **Air Canada** (*www.aircanada.com*) has flights from $400. Havre-St.-Pierre is reached by **Intercar** bus service ($52; *www.intercar.qc.ca*).

RAFTING: The lower Magpie River, the portion threatened by the dam, boasts some 40 miles of Class III–VI rapids. **Earth River Expeditions** runs all-inclusive eight-day trips ($2,300; *www.earthriver.com*) and donates 10 percent of its profits to preservation of the Magpie.

CANOEING: Paddlers with their own boats can tackle Magpie West's 114-mile stretch of Class III, IV, and V rapids on their own. To reach the put-in, take a **Quebec North Shore & Labrador Railway** train ($20; 709-944-8205) to the Eric Station near Waco.

HIKING: The spectacular islands of the Mingan Archipelago National Park Reserve are a multisport haven. From the town of Havre-St.-Pierre, **Expédition Agaguk** runs three-day trips ($360; *www.expedition-agaguk.com*) that combine sea kayaking, hiking, and camping on Ile Niapiskau, where minke whales are often seen.

ACCOMMODATIONS: **Hôtel Sept-Îles** has decent riverside rooms ($66; *www.hotelsept iles.com*) and is the best bet in town. On the river, it's camping only.

RESOURCES: The **Fédération Québécoise du Canot et du Kayak** has maps of the upper and lower Magpie ($8; 514-252-3001).

—Andrea Minarcek

MAP BY COMPUTER TERRAIN MAPPING

VIVE LA MAGPIE!

(Continued from page 98)

rope. The paddlers take a few strokes into the mist and float irreversibly toward a tiny chute above the froth.

With a quick bark from Hertz, they dig in their blades. The raft drops over the horizon, buckles, and is gone. We hurry down the banks to watch the boat as it's buried beneath the foaming crest of a wave, stalls, and then finally emerges, swamped. The crew lets out a celebratory whoop and paddles safely to shore.

One by one we launch our boats, paddle to the brink, then tear down the narrow chute, skirting big, growling pour-overs on either side and exploding into the wave train below. Everyone has a safe run. Soaked to the skin, we celebrate on a flat rock at the bottom, teeth chattering but bodies shot with adrenaline, then load up for the Magpie's final mile.

Our trip ends at the proposed dam site: a derelict hydroelectric generating station where the Magpie runs under Route 138 before its confluence with the St. Lawrence River. Hydroméga points out that its dam would affect just one mile of the river, and the company's Web site predicts that "the raising of the water level will not prevent sport enthusiasts from enjoying their sport, but rather will improve the access to the area . . . with the construction of an access ramp along with various paths."

While Hertz and Kennedy admit that this first dam would leave many miles of free-flowing river, they can't risk it.

"Once the first dam is built," warns Kennedy, "the next one comes along and you can no longer argue that it will destroy a pristine river. And then you've lost the fight."

In the months after our trip, the battle has simmered on. *The Gazette* in Montreal issued an editorial condemning the dam. The mayor of Havre-St.-Pierre, a village near the mouth of the Magpie, attacked Kennedy and Hertz and their "little gang of environmentalists" for meddling in Quebec's affairs, while Canadian conservation groups have launched a Web site (*www.magpieriver.com*) to organize boaters and activists. Saladzius has been hard at work crafting a new dam proposal that would use the existing structure at Route 138 and not change the river's flow. Support for this plan, though, has not taken root. In January the mayors of the eight local villages reaffirmed their endorsement of Hydroméga's dam. Ultimately, the fate of the Magpie is in the hands of the Quebec Ministry of the Environment, which at press time, was at a standstill. A decision is expected this spring.

Whether the result is preordained or not, Hertz believes the Magpie is worth the fight. "This is a river that changes people," he says. "When they see such a beautiful place and are able to enjoy it with their kids, they are going to want to fight to protect it." ▲

LIBYA

(Continued from page 96)

I come upon a *zawia,* a Sufi mosque, which is having its evening service. Sufism is considered heretical by many Muslims for its belief that one can merge with God—a belief that has forced this mystical tradition underground in many Muslim countries. In Libya, however, it enjoys a place of tolerance in society.

Chanting filters into the dusk and I ask Magdy if I can witness their ceremony. We enter the zawia's long courtyard, and the sheikh comes out—the equivalent of a priest. Magdy explains my interest, and Sheikh Hamza tells me that I can watch the ceremony through a window, but it's the best he can do: Females are not allowed inside. I take my place where instructed, looking through metal bars into the prayer hall.

The ceremony, or *dhikr,* begins. Men form two large circles, some of them glancing at me through the window with suspicious, questioning eyes. A man begins playing a guitar, singing the poetry of Muslim saints, and the group starts beating on little drums. All of this is unique to Sufism, Magdy explains; it's how initiates meet God and enter into union with Him. The two circles begin swaying and bobbing, slowly at first and then more frenetically. The music increases in volume. "All-ah, All-ah," the men chant, louder and louder, their entreaties turning into shouts.

After close to a half hour of this, the music reaches its peak, becomes a great cacophony of sound that stops with such abruptness that the ensuing silence seems almost profane. Everyone looks around, unsure momentarily of where they are or why. And now something strange is happening throughout the room—bodies contort, limbs freeze into strange positions; men drop to their knees, quaking and sobbing. Those who can move help the ones who cannot, massaging bodies back into movement and holding anyone who cries. One man points helplessly to his throat, as if something were stuck inside. Water is brought and poured for him, which he swallows in a rush.

The ceremony over, an assistant passes around little shot glasses full of coffee with slices of bread. I don't expect him to remember about me, but he comes over to the window, smiling, offering me a glass. As the men file out, I stay back, away from the courtyard, but no one seems to mind my female presence now. When I see the man who'd been clutching his throat, I call out to ask him how he is.

"Kway-yis," he says. Good. His eyes are bright and dancing. "Where are you from?"

It is my last night in Libya, and yet the question still gives me a touch of fear. "America," I say.

He looks unfazed. "Have you seen a Sufi ceremony before?" he asks.

I tell him no.

"You are welcome," he says. ▲

VIVE LA MAGPIE!

(Continued from page 84)

the run. The only other boaters we saw in five days were a crew of four very hearty and some-what beleaguered canoeists who, like us, had heard about the dam, and wanted to see the Magpie while they still could.

By day three we're under the Magpie's spell. The paddling's great. Our spirits are running as high as the white water. From our picnic spot on the granite slab, one of the conservationists states, "Damming this is like finding the 'Mona Lisa' in your basement and painting over it. It's the unbroken wilderness of the Magpie, another says, that makes it a "superior experience" to the Middle Fork of the Salmon with its bridges, buildings, and airstrips. Then, abruptly, he stops talking, cocks his ear toward the forest, and says, "I hear an ospr.

When Hydroméga proposed the dam in 2002, Hertz's first tactic was direct action. He and his 10 year old son drove up to Quebec for a public hearing where Cade testified that he'd run the river six times, that it was his favorite, but that he wasn't allowed to run the Class V rapid at the bottom until he was 13. If it was flooded by a dam he'd never get the chance. It was tug-on-the-heartstrings stuff, but it didn't yank hard enough, and soon Hertz decided that the only way to save his secret river was to publicize it. He partnered with Alain Saladzius, 46, of the Quebec river advocacy group Fondation Rivières, who had recently appeared on the cover of *Sélection du Reader's Digest,* the French language version of *Reader's Digest,* as "The Man Who Saves Rivers." Hertz's argument is pretty straight forward: The river is worth more as a recreational draw for tourists that as a power generator.

for tourists than as a power generator. Hertz estimates that in the future a few tousand people per year could float the Magpie. According to the trade group Aventure Écotourisme Québec, this amount of traffic would create $3 million (U.S. $2.4 million) in annual income, which, as Saladzius points out, is a much larger economic benefit than the prom-ised 40 megawatts. If someone promoted its values, the river could produce more revenue and a lot more jobs than building a dam that would make a few people rich by impoverishing the landscape forever.

It's unclear, however, if the Magpie could accommodate the numbers envisioned by Hertz. Swarms of black flies might deter visitors in June, leaving about a ten-week season from late July through September. To reach the $3 million mark, 70 passengers would need to depart from Magpie Lake each day, a spike in usage that could require as many as 15 daily floatplane runs. If the weather turned bad—as it did on our flight day you'd get a bottleneck of delayed clients back in Sept-Iles.

In any case, Hertz says that the outfitters on the Magpie should be Quebecers, not Americans, and claims that his business interest is secondary. "I'd walk away from it in a minute if they told me they would turn the Magpie into a park and that Earth River wasn't allowed to operate here," he says, noting that Earth River paid $10,000 out-of-pocket to sponsor this dam-awareness trip. "I'd still come up here on my own, just without clients. You couldn't keep me away."

The last morning we paddle up to the Magpie's finale, a 25-foot waterfall above a Class V rock garden that has a couple of really nasty holes. Canadian kayakers have nicknamed this place "Les Chutes d'Eau Eternelles," or "Eternity Falls," because it's the Magpie's climactic and most menacing drop, and it's the rapid that would be lost forever beneath the dammed waters.

We line the boat around the falls and then scramble along the bank to scout. A hard rain begins to fall for the first time all week, and coupled with the fog and the foam spraying off the torrent, it feels ominous.

"One time we flipped here with a boat full of lawyers," Hertz says grimly. Nobody responds.

To be safe, we'll run just one raft at a time. A second guide will sit on each boat, in case the first one falls out, and the other guides will wait at the bottom with rescue ropes.

Hertz's crew is first, climbing down a slippery granite slab to the raft, which is roped in place in a swirling eddy. When everyone's seated, Hertz reviews the route, reminds them which way to swim if they end up in the river, then gives the signal to release the

(Continued on page 100)