

Canoeing in the year 2018

Twenty-five years ago I started going on Sierra Club canoe trips. The 1968 Sierrans were a pretty rugged, hard-drinking crowd who eschewed fancy camping gear. Cooking was done on a grill over a wood fire in old buckets and iron pots. Liquids, including aperitifs and hard booze, were carried in recycled bleach jugs. The canoes were mainly aluminum boats made by Delcraft in north Louisiana, and the paddles were narrow-bladed and wooden with pictures of Indians on them. (I still have one of those paddles.) Rain gear was often homemade from plastic garbage bags, a relatively new consumer item.

The not-yet-polluted Tangipahoa River was the most popular for weekend canoeing, with the Bogue Chitto and Magee's Creek not far behind. My domed tent (made of canvas) was a curiosity amid the A-shaped tents supported by rigid, vertical poles front and back. Although some lightweight and high-tech camping gear was available, it was relatively expensive and obtainable only by mail order.

On the Memorial Day weekend a group of Delta Sierrans were canoeing and camping on Red Creek, Mississippi, and were observing the changes in camping equipment over the years. Someone had a new, ultralight backpacker's tent that weighed less than three pounds. In contrast, I haul canoeing gear in the U.S. Army duffel bag issued to my father when he was drafted in 1944.

Small backpacking stoves were in use, hissing and buzzing, but the wieners got roasted over an open fire. There were canoes of aluminum and of fiberglass, and we talked about the super-light-and-strong canoes made from Kevlar, the plastic used in flak jackets.

In one generation we have watched camping equipment evolve from Army-Navy store stuff to amazingly light and strong gear available at consumer prices, even in discount stores. The clothes, the shoes, the sleeping bags, and the cooking equipment are continually improved — or so say each year's catalogs. What, then, can we expect a generation from now, 25 years away, in the year 2018?

At age 76 in 2018 I hope that I'm still canoeing and camping, and maybe the intervening 25 years will bring some advances in technology that will make outdoors outings even easier. Let's begin with the canoe. If a 17-ft. Kevlar canoe weighing about 40 lbs. is available in 1993 (at about \$1100 a copy), why can't 20-lb. or even 12-lb. craft be standard stuff by 2018?

By 2018, computers will be so small you will be able to attach a multi-megabyte device inside the waist band of your skivvies without creating a bulge. As the computer is already essential to many aspects of everyday life, it will be a vital part of camping in the future.

That ultralight canoe will also have an on-board computer system integrating the Global Positioning System (GPS), the Collision Avoidance System (CAS), and a topographic map program projected in Head Up Display (HUD). (You can't talk high-tech without acronyms.) Solar powered, the electronic system will have a backup power source in the galvanic response from the sweaty skin of the canoeist to attached electrodes.

GPS is a navigational system operated through satellites that tells you where you are on the face of the earth within a couple of meters. CAS is an alarm system on ocean-going ships that warns of imminent danger. HUD is a light projection of graphic data and is used in fighter planes so the pilot won't lose the concentration needed to look down at a conventional instrument panel.

With those gadgets becoming smaller and cheaper in the next 25 years, I'll be able to canoe with my grandchildren and, to paraphrase Greyhound, leave the driving to GPS/CAS/HUD.

Obsessive-compulsive workaholics will be able to canoe the wilderness without anxiety because their current cellular phones, fax machines, and lap-top computers will be miniaturized even more, allowing them to experience the heady rush that comes from trading pork bellies by voice-activated computer from deep in the Atchafalaya Swamp.

Maybe by 2018 magnetic-levitation (MAG-LEV) rail travel will not only be established in the transportation business but other uses of the "no touch" technology will be available. I have slept on some pretty cold and hard surfaces while camping, and it would be nice to have an ultralight MAG-LEV bunk on the floor of my tent. Who knows, maybe the MAG-LEV device will be built in as part of the sleeping bag.

On the other hand, I may be content in 2018 to carry my gear in my father's old duffel bag, cook over an open fire, and be far away from phones, computers, and other gadgets. △

— Earl Higgins



"Flowers changed the face of the planet. Without them, the world we know — even man himself — would never have existed."

Loren Eiseley

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