

Journeys on an Inland Sea – *Sea Kayaking in Lake Superior Provincial Park* – by Charlotte Jacklein
As seen in **Sea Kayaker Magazine**.

Veiled by tattered mist and cloud, jagged granite cliffs stretched high above us. A driving tailwind sent us humming past the swirling waves that thumped against the unforgiving dark rocks. Straggly ancient cedars clung to the steep shore in precarious positions. After days of paddling past silken sunlit beaches, the uneasy weather seemed to suit the wild, rugged landscape we were entering.

To the west, choppy waves bobbed restlessly under the hazy grey horizon, evoking the powerful undulating body of a giant serpent. According to Ojibwe tradition, the depths of Lake Superior are traveled by a fearsome underworld spirit named Mishepeshu. The lashing of his huge tail was believed to cause the wild waves and unpredictable storms for which Lake Superior is notorious. Today it seems that Mishepeshu is only giving us a gentle warning, just swishing his tail.



Set along Superior's eastern shore, the 75 mile (120km) coastline of Lake Superior Provincial Park is an excellent kayaking destination for both day trips and multi-day trips. Accessible from Sault Ste Marie by Highway 17, the park stretches from the golden beaches of Agawa Bay to just south of the historical Michipicoten River. The captivating coastline alternates between tall forbidding cliffs, sheltered sandy bays, rocky islets and steep cobble beaches. Sharp-eyed paddlers may catch a glimpse of woodland caribou, moose, wolves or bear ambling along the remote shoreline.

The paddling season is short, with summer lasting from mid-June to late August. The average water temperature throughout the year hovers at a bracing 4.5 degrees Celsius, though in the late summer the water temperature can reach a comfortable 17 degrees Celsius in sheltered bays. Don't forget your woollies – even on summer nights, air temperature can dip down to zero degrees Celsius. Paddlers should plan to be wind bound one out of every four or five paddling days, bring many warm clothes and extra meals, and be aware of alternate take-out points. For kayakers looking for a good seven-day trip (or longer for those who like to explore and relax), paddling the full length of the park from the Michipicoten River to Agawa Bay is the obvious choice. In theory, travelling north to south slightly improves the chances of having a tailwind, but at times the prevailing winds change direction for weeks at a time.

The four most straightforward access points are the Michipicoten River, Old Woman Bay, Katherine Cove and Agawa Bay. These are clearly marked on the detailed and useful park maps that are available for purchase from Lake Superior Provincial Park. There are a few other possible access points along the way for those wanting longer or shorter trips, but these have fewer parking options or may require a short hike through the bush to get to the water.

Michipicoten River

Launching at the Michipicoten River may be the biggest challenge of the trip, because a series of powerful standing waves often form where the strong current of the Michipicoten River meets the prevailing westerly wind. These waves are ideal for kayak surfing, but can be intimidating when heading out on the first day of the trip with a fully loaded boat. Ferrying across the current and keeping to the river left (south) side will avoid most of the standing waves. Another option is to carry your kayak over the sandbar that forms at the south side of the river and to launch into the surf, which may be challenging in its own way, but will at least keep you away from the standing waves.

Paddling past the desolate sandy expanse of Driftwood Beach and Michipicoten Post Provincial Park, it's difficult to imagine that for centuries this was the bustling site of an active fur trading post. Strategically located at start of the Michipicoten-Missinaibi-Moose River route, this North West Company post was intended to intercept Ojibwe traders before they took their furs to the Hudson Bay Company Post in Moose Factory. Beyond the consuming quest for fur, the settlement at Michipicoten River saw a steady stream of miners, loggers, fishermen and independent-minded characters. In the 1880s, Canadian Pacific Railway banned the sale of alcohol within 10 miles of the rail line, inspiring head constable Charles Wallace, also known as "Montana Charlie" to open a lively bootlegging business. The rogue constable ruled the town with his shotgun until the long arm of the law reached up from Toronto and put him into prison. Today the coast looks peaceful and untouched, and though history proves otherwise, it would be easy to convince myself that we are among the first people to travel this rocky coast.

The northernmost part of Lake Superior Provincial Park is among the most rugged and remote sections of the park. There are few landing options along this coast, and paddlers would be wise to be highly aware of the weather and their level of experience. The first camping option, Smokey Point offers a sheltered landing in southwest wind and decent camping on the curving cobble beach. In case of a north wind, the next camp site at Noisy Bay is a better option. However, this site has a steep cobble beach with powerful dumping waves if the wind shifts to the south overnight.

The looming coniferous trees, craggy cliffs and twisted rock formations are enough to keep a kayaker craning their head upwards for much of the day. The jagged exposed ledges and crevasses of this extreme coastline are home to rare Arctic wildflowers that usually only grow thousands of kilometres to the north. On a clear calm day, the jumble of ancient basalt boulders deep below the surface of the water remains visible to breathtaking depths of 10m or more.

On a windy day, the sheltered coves of Brulé Harbour offer a welcome respite from the rougher conditions on the open lake. Named after Etienne Brulé, the first European believed to have set eyes on Lake Superior; the Ojibwe (also known as the Anishnaabe or Chippewa) previously used this bay as a summer encampment for thousands of years. In fact, traces of human occupation in this area have been dated back to 10,000 years ago. Today, the biggest campsite is in the southwest corner of the harbor and provides some view of the outside conditions – useful for making travel decisions in the morning, as Brulé Harbour can be deceptively calm compared to actual conditions on the lake.

After you pass by the giant-sized jumble of pink granite to the south of the harbor, you'll find several steep cobble beaches tucked back from the open lake. The distinctive levels of the stone terraces indicate ancient water levels from when the last glaciers retreated 14,000 years ago. Hiking inland across the lichen-encrusted terraces of rounded cobble stones, you may notice rounded hollows, around 6 ft in diameter, known as Pukaskwa Pits. These scooped out cobble pits exist in a number of locations along the coast and archeologists speculate that these pits may have been used as shelters, fire pits or sweat lodges.

Old Woman Bay

As you paddle into Old Woman Bay, the towering cliffs seem to dwarf even the gleaming expanse of Lake Superior. Carved by millennia of erosion, the gnarled and wise face of Nokomis, grandmother of the Ojibwe hero and demigod Nanabosho, looks out from the dark, mottled cliffs. Her face, with its jutting nose and dark pensive eyes, is best seen from the water in the centre of the bay. Literary enthusiasts may recognize this bay as the setting of Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, with its "shining big sea waters" and "dark enchanted forest."

The tall sides of the bay tend to funnel the wind and waves straight towards the shore, making landing and launching on the steep sandy beach at Old Woman Bay difficult in rough weather. However, being wind-bound here for a day or two is no hardship, with acres of soft sandy beach from which to watch the huge waves exploding skyward, splashing the bleak cliffs with streaks of white foam

Easy access to Highway 17 makes the north end of the beach a popular day-use area, but the sole campsite is located across a small stream at the southernmost end of the beach and is fairly private. For paddlers seeking to stretch their legs, the Nokomis Trail overlooking the bay offers an eagle's view of the bay and coastline.

As you paddle south from Old Woman Bay, the carved cliffs continue to loom overhead, with only infrequent small coves and creek mouths offering possible landing spots. Wide-eyed river otters may pop up from the icy water, and often come closer to kayaks. Occasional pale, polished boulders the size of elephants contrast sharply with the dark twisted rocks of the cliffs; "erratics" carried here by glaciers. Don't be fooled by the deceptively small trickle at the mouth of Till Creek – higher up the steep creek, the narrow gorges and cascading waterfalls offer deep, swirling swimming holes and challenging cliffs to explore. Looking out from the top of the final waterfall, shadowy Michipicoten Island hovers 30 miles (45 km) off shore, believed to be home to the underwater Manitou or spirit Mishepesu.

A few miles to the south, the cliffs near Bushy Bay hold a cave so deep and dark it's impossible to see where it ends. In fact, the entrance is also nearly impossible to see – I paddled past it half a dozen times on different trips before one day I stumbled across the entrance. As you enter the tall open chasm in the cliff, a smaller dark passageway turns to the right. Complete darkness hides the cave's shape and the echo of uneasy waves creates an eerie atmosphere. While the cave feels endless, a few cautious paddle strokes will make the nose of your kayak tap the hidden walls with a gentle thump, and a few cautious reverse strokes will bring you back into the bright daylight.

As you paddle southwards, the tall pyramid-like tiers of cobblestones past Grindstone Point mark the last landing options before Cap Chaillon. Centuries of pounding winter storms have created hidden caves and even the occasional navigable archway or tunnel in the cliffs that soar hundreds of feet above the lake. Be aware that wind and waves can differ dramatically on either side of this point and rough conditions can be significantly magnified when rounding the rocky, exposed tip of Cap Chaillon.

Approaching the large bay south of Cap Chaillon, you'll see miles of glistening sand strewn with smooth, multicolored cobblestones at the water's edge. This remote beach is a popular campsite among sea kayakers to spend one or more relaxing days. Departing this slice of paradise may be difficult; particularly as the 8km shoreline of the curved bay is deceptively long and offers countless other tempting spots to spend a few leisurely hours. However, eventually the shoreline returns to the familiar pattern of alternating steep cobble beaches and rocky outcrops such as Ryan's Point.

If the weather report calls for a few days of wild winds the sheltered campsites at Chalfant Cove make a good base from which to explore the protected islands and inlets of Indian Bay. In August the small, rocky islands are dripping with mouth-watering wild blueberries. Chalfant Cove marks the northernmost point of the park's challenging 40-mile (65 km) Coastal Trail, and you may encounter the occasional hiker.

After you've paddled around the exposed, blunt rock fortress of Cape Gargantua, the water is sheltered by a scattering of shoals and islets. The distinctive rock formation known as Nanabosho's Chair, later named the Devil's Chair by misguided missionaries, shows the site where the Ojibwe trickster spirit Nanabosho rested after jumping across the lake from his home in Thunder Bay (a leap that would make anyone tired!). As son of the north wind and a human mother, the heroic demigod Nanabosho bridged the human and spirit world.

Many travelers still follow the Ojibwe tradition of stopping here to leave offerings of tobacco and ask for safe passage, though the waves soon sweep away any trace. As a non-smoker, I've also left offerings such as chocolate wafers and maple cookies, and based on the smooth passage we were granted, it seems that Mishepeshu approves of these alternate offerings.

Gargantua Bay

Tugboat Channel offers a protected passage southwards toward Gargantua Hill, whose bald 314m-high peak dominates the coastline. Named by intrepid voyageurs after a character invented by 16th satirist Francois Rabelais, the giant Gargantua was famous for his gluttonous feasts. The slender Pantagrue Bay was named after Gargantua's son. The neighboring Warp Bay, with its sheltered sandy beach, is a popular campsite among boaters and kayakers alike.



The cliffs of Devil's Warehouse Island are streaked vivid red with the ochre which the Ojibwe collected here to use for body paints and pictographs. The secret caves on the island housed sacred birch bark scrolls which belonged to the Midéwiwin, the Ojibwe spiritual healing society. Leaning into the clean, strong west wind coming across the silver water and feeling the ancient stones beneath one's bare feet, it is easy to feel the raw spiritual power that radiates from this island.

Accessible by winding gravel road, Gargantua Bay and Harbour offer a range of established camping sites. Commercial fishing industry once made this a lively community from 1871 to the mid-1950s, but now only a skeletal fishing shanty and crumbled docks hint at the village that curled around the sheltered cove. The wreck of the 139 ft steamship *Columbus*, cut loose from her moorings when she caught fire in 1909, is clearly visible in the shallow water at the north end of Gargantua Harbour. Bring a diving mask and snorkel to explore the well-preserved wooden hull of this century-old shipwreck.

A quick hike up the steep hill to the northwest corner of the harbor offers clear views of Gargantua Hill to the north, the islands and open lake to the west and the sheltered bay to the southeast. The lighthouse on Gargantua Island, first built in 1889, comes with its own fantastic history. In 1940, November storms swept the lighthouse right off the island. Fortunately, the assistant lighthouse keeper and his 12 year old daughter were taking shelter in a shack 50 m away from the shore, but the waves from the storm reached so far that their door froze solid and they were unable to leave until people from the mainland chipped away the ice.

As you head southwards from Gargantua, the red crumbling layers of rock at Rhyolite Cove mark a dramatic encounter between ancient 2.5 million year old granite and molten 1 million year old volcanic rock. Rock lovers can find further distractions – and many camping options – among the finely tumbled stones on the cobble beaches near Telegraph Rock. As waves shatter up the beach they'll deposit ever-changing arrangement of shining, irresistible pebbles at your feet.

The sheltered sandy horseshoe of Beatty Cove offers luxurious camping in an almost tropical atmosphere with icing sugar sand and relatively warm turquoise water. A short paddle to the south, the Orphan Lake Trail, accessible from the highway, makes the area around Bald Head popular among day hikers. Tackling the trek up Bald Head will be rewarded with a preview of the coast to the south and clear views of Leach Island and the Lizard Islands, home to a long-lived commercial fishery and the site of numerous shipwrecks. Perhaps the most famous Lake Superior shipwreck of modern times, the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, lies just south of the park near Whitefish Bay where the huge 729 foot iron ore carrier sank suddenly in a 1975 November storm.

Katherine Cove

The gentle beaches of Katherine Cove provide an easy access point for daytrips to the north or south. A short paddle to the north, Robertson Cove offers a unique campsite on a miniature rock peninsula, while traveling southwards will lead you to miles of smooth sand beaches. At this point, the highway is quite close to the shore, but the sound of the waves often overpowers the rumble of 18 wheeler trucks.



Perhaps centuries ago, tired voyageurs at Sinclair Cove watched similar waves and thanked *dieu* for a safe day of travel. The cove of “Saint Clair”, as it was originally named, was once an established overnight stop for voyageurs after crossing the rough open water of Agawa Bay. Paddling 18 hour days in large birch bark canoes and carrying *two* hefty 90 pound packs each on portages, these tough determined men traveled far across the Canadian north in their search of valuable furs.

The 100 foot tall granite cliffs at Agawa Point feature one of largest collections of rock paintings in Ontario. Deep chasms cut through the cliffs in this area, formed by the rapid erosion of younger softer rock. The area is accessible by visitors on foot on calm days, but some pictographs are visible only from the water. Likely painted by Ojibwe shamans in the last 500 years, the red ochre images depict scenes such as the horned spirit Mishepeshu dwarfing a nearby canoe, a horse and rider, and totem animals leading a group of canoes.

Agawa Bay

Sprawling Agawa Bay marks the southernmost body of water of Lake Superior Provincial Park. The gentle sandy shores have attracted people for thousands of years: First as a summer fishing and hunting camp for the Ojibwe, later as a fur trading post of the Hudson Bay Company, then as a fishing lodge in the early 1900s, and now as the popular Agawa Bay Campground. This large, sprawling campground stretches between the huge beach and the highway, and the popular lakeside campsites offer perfect paddling access. Other campsites are only a short walk from the lake, but the rumble of trucks on the highway may leave you sleepless at night. The excellent interpretive centre at the campground features artifacts such as the hand-powered railcar used by the Group of Seven painters for their first forays into the Algoma and Lake Superior region. Kayakers seeking further information or back country camping permits should stop by here to talk with the knowledgeable staff before embarking on their journey. Backcountry camping permits are available at the park office. There are fire pits and ample driftwood at most backcountry campsites. A good day trip option is to paddle northwards to explore the pictographs and islands at Agawa Point. As you lower your paddle at the end of your journey, countless experiences and images of Lake Superior will stay with you. Whether you're battling powerful swells or exploring ancient cliffs, this lake will challenge and expand your kayaking skills. Days of exploring crumbling shipwrecks, ancient spiritual sites and evocative pictographs will connect you to the people who paddled



these shores long before us. Relaxing on a remote sandy beach after a day of paddling, watching the sun sink below the silver horizon, you'll feel a deep sense of peace and calm. Though the paddling season comes to an end early on this mighty northern lake, the winter storms offer long months for dreaming and planning. When summer returns to the rugged cliffs and sheltered bays, you'll find yourself longing to return to the powerful shores of Lake Superior.

Trip Planner

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Outfitters

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Superior Outfitters (several hours away from the park – but a potential option for paddlers heading north on a longer trip)

Box 88
Rossport, Ontario, Canada, P0T 2R0
Phone (807) 824-3314
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www.superioroutfitters.on.ca

Some interesting books:

- Chisholm, Barbara. *Superior: Shadow of the Gods: A Guide to the Canadian Shore of Lake Superior.*
- McGuffin, Gary and Joanie. *Superior: Journeys On An Inland Sea.*