

# Retracing Mackenzie

Slipping back **200** years  
in **2,000** miles

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photos by Norm Miller

**A**t first glance, eighteenth-century explorer Alexander Mackenzie and twentieth-century canoe enthusiast Norm Miller have little in common. They were born 200 years apart, Mackenzie in Scotland, Miller in Michigan. Mackenzie had never used a zoom-lens, transported his canoe by car, owned a headlamp, or gleaned information from the Web. Miller had never been the first white man to explore anywhere, had no fear of smallpox or arrows, doesn't own a fur hat, and as far as he knows, there are no mountains or rivers named after him.

But at second glance, they do have something in common. Both shared the same fluid path for some 2,000 miles through Northern Canada. In June 1789, Mackenzie was hired by the Northwestern Fur Company to find a water passage leading to the Pacific Ocean. At the ripe age of 25, he and 12 others pushed off from the shores of Lake Athabasca in four birchbark canoes. Mackenzie's knowledge of the area would come from two sources: trial and error, and an Indian scout named English Chief, who accompanied the expedition group. Miller, on the other hand, would push off in June 1998, solo, from the shores of the Athabasca River with 50 topographical maps and knowledge gleaned from Mackenzie's journal. His put-in point was a couple hundred miles south of where Mackenzie put in.



A Mackenzie moment: Norm Miller on the edge of Great Slave Lake.

