

Four days on New England's idyllic waterways. Is it enough to win a father's blessing for his daughter's new life?

## Testing the Waters

by Majka Burhardt  
photography by Rob Bossi

PADDLE THERAPY: THE AUTHOR AND HER FATHER FIND THEIR RHYTHM ON UMBAGOG LAKE.

## My second thoughts

about the wisdom of embarking on a four-day, father-daughter paddling trip start at the Magalloway River put-in outside of Errol, New Hampshire, before our canoe even gets wet. I set my water bottle in the stern and throw Dad's in the bow. He walks over immediately and looks at his bottle. "That's the front," he says. ¶ "You're right." I stand closer to the stern. ¶ Dad shakes his head. "But that's the, the... *girl* place."

In the silence that follows I debate my options. This trip, timed for July, the state's best month, is an attempt to win my dad over to New Hampshire—rugged, rural New Hampshire, where I have just decided to live. The campaign started on the wrong foot: On what was supposed to be a proud tour of the home my fiancé and I are buying in North Conway, Dad almost passed out from the mold-remediation chemicals. And now, calling him a chauvinistic jerk (or telling him the weaker paddler sits in the bow) will not move us along our trajectory of love and understanding. I sigh. "Really,

Dad?” I wonder if four days will be enough—or too much.

When I first pitched the idea of this trip a year ago, I told my father that it was a present in honor of his 70th birthday, but we both know it’s an olive branch. Though he’s lived in Minnesota since 1965, my dad grew up in Poland, and like most immigrants, he’s always dreamed that his children would follow in his hardworking footsteps. In his case, that meant earning a Ph.D. in engineering, then becoming vice president of two Fortune 500 tech companies. I knew this growing up—I just ignored it. Instead of his career advice, I focused on his passion: spending time skiing, paddling, and windsurfing. More than 15 years ago, I followed that lead to become a full-time climber and author, but he still holds out hope I’ll change careers. When I first told him I was thinking of permanently moving to mountainous northern New Hampshire, he emailed me links to the local rural poverty index and unemployment numbers.

At 35, I’d like to pretend I’m mature enough that my dad’s opinion of me doesn’t matter. But instead I concocted a scheme to strand us in a canoe together for four days—to get him to understand why the outdoors rule my life, why New Hampshire makes sense, and that I really am carrying his dreams forward.

Maybe someday I’ll grow out of this need for acceptance, but right now it’s not looking good. I’m not sure any of us ever stop wanting our parents to turn to us and say, “Good job, kiddo! You’ve done exactly what I’ve hoped. Let’s go celebrate your good choices.” Right now, I’ll just be happy if he lets me choose where to sit in the canoe.

“I HAVE NOTHING AGAINST GIRLS,” Dad allows as he settles into the bow and we push off onto the 30-foot wide, mushroom-brown Magalloway. I take my place in the stern, and my seven-month-old standard poodle puppy, Ptarmigan, is in the middle, straddling a dry sack on his gangly legs. It took us all of 20 minutes to leave the outfitter’s in Errol, drop off my van at the Errol Dam, and get a shuttle to our put-in; now we have 6 miles to our first camp.

Our route starts by following the Magalloway’s course as it tucks back onto itself, lazily dipping between Maine and New Hampshire. Around us, steep dirt banks give way to a dense red spruce and Belgian fir forest. A flock of Canada geese clusters in the shade around the second bend, strung together next to the riverbank with their heads peeking out like Christmas bulbs. We see an otter and a belted kingfisher, and almost capsize twice, from Dad spiraling his whole torso toward the stern to talk to me. We’re the only ones on the river—which is good

because no one sees us zag along, trying to find our rhythm as Dad rudders in the bow.

We finally spot our camp—Diamond Peak—by a half-submerged wooden dock. We’re the only party, and we survey the dozen sites before settling on the one closest to the water, out in a slight bend in the river so we catch the breeze. We unload and set up our tent by 6 p.m., and by 6:20 it’s clear I didn’t pack enough wine and cheese to give us adequate rations of either. We decide to salute our first night in full style anyway. Dad holds forth his plastic cup and offers a toast: “To us, to a great trip, to the poodle, and to the mosquitoes staying asleep.”

I raise my cup to meet his. “And to New Hampshire.”

My dad cocks his head. “Possibly. But aren’t we sleeping in Maine?” I roll my eyes, and concede the point. Our glasses make a *thunk* as they touch.

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**DAY TWO IS A MULTISPORT DAY:** We’re going hiking. The 2,000-foot Diamond Peaks we’re aiming for poke out of the dense forest like giant Chia Pets. We have a short paddle to get to them—or at least that’s what the map says. Though we can’t see the peaks from our camp, they were hard to miss on yesterday’s paddle, their distinct shape both augmented and softened with full evergreen vegetation. We leave our tent standing and set off in the canoe with daypacks and the poodle, backtracking 10 minutes on the lazy Magalloway to the Diamond River junction. An hour later, we’ve forded three low spots (a move consisting of Ptarmigan standing regally in the canoe while Dad and I seek footing on slippery rocks and try not to let go of the boat) and reversed from two dead-ends. Dad patiently allows me to spin him around each time I reset our course and then offers to take over in the stern while I mutter about needing a better map. I resist the urge to assure him I know what I’m doing—that would make me look even less sure of where we’re going. We reach the trailhead shortly thereafter.

Within an hour of hiking on the Diamond Peak Trail, the loamy peat footing and hemlock canopies turn to a granite ridge. We pop out on Alice’s Ledge, with a view of 2,818-foot Mt. Dustan crowning a range of purple-mountains-majesty to the south. Dad whistles in appreciation.

“You do have nice mountains here,” he admits.

I smile and feel proud of my adopted landscape. “Yes, we do.”

Dad puts his arm around me for a sideways hug. I realize these mountains—ones I think of as small compared to the Rockies, my local range until recently—might manage to have a big impact.

We stand together and admire the peaks in silence, and then are soon admiring the thunderhead growing to the west. We still have 8 miles to paddle to our next camp, so we forgo the summit and head back to the canoe we’ve tucked in the weeds at the trailhead, 2 miles away. It’s our third time into the boat and this time we

fall into an easy rhythm. Well, mostly. Dad tosses in the occasional rudder by flattening his paddle against the canoe’s side, and I gently suggest that this method of steering doesn’t work in the front. He lets me teach him how to draw (pulling the paddle perpendicularly in toward the canoe), but, I tell him, the move is usually used only for rapids and quick maneuvers. He nods and says he knows it’s best to just have even strokes when you’re in the front. “Besides,” he adds, setting down his paddle, “the bow is actually nice—I’ve never before not had to worry about where I am going.”

I smile and keep paddling as he watches for ducks. This lazy ease of paddling and togetherness is exactly what I wanted. Then my dad sighs. “Now, Majka...”

I pause my stroke. It’s a bad sign when he starts this way.

“Have you really considered all of your options?” He goes on without my input. “Portland [Maine] seems like a great city.” I don’t point out that he’s only been to the airport there; a few months ago he was on a campaign for my new fiancé, Peter, and me to live in Boston. Though he’s still focused on metropolitan areas, I consider it an improvement that at least he’s moved geographically closer to where we’re actually buying a house.

“And there’s Boulder,” he continues. “Are you 100 percent certain you should leave Colorado?”

In fact, I’m not. Is anyone ever 100 percent sure of getting married, moving to a new state, and buying a house—all at once? Last month, I left a stash in Boulder, including my guitar, a climbing rack, and a coffee table. I weigh the items and my own doubts and arrive at 93 percent confidence that I’ve made the right choice.

With others, I can hide that troubling seven percent. I’m sure my dad senses my uncertainty. But I prefer to leave it unspoken—to both of us. It’s the way I can move forward. I just wish he wouldn’t see right through it. I’m reminded again of how parents can make a grown-up feel like a little kid.

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**THE MAGALLOWAY FLIRTS** with NH 16 en route to Lake Umbagog. I prepare my argument for New Hampshire and almost on cue we pass a mix of dilapidated and renovated “camps” (cabins). A *For Sale* sign adorns one with a rotting, half-submerged dock that matches its rotten siding.

“Or what about this house?” Dad says. “You could buy this one instead and live here on the river.”

It’s taken me my whole life to truly learn how to resist rising to my father’s bait. The first time I broke free of a reactionary response, he’d suggested we celebrate my high school graduation at McDonald’s. I was a vegan and had disdained fast food for a good three years by then, but in a seminal moment of clarity, I swallowed my hysterical defense. I suggested Wendy’s instead, and I’ve been working to perfect this strategy ever since. It makes our banter more enjoyable, and signals to Dad that I’ve made a choice he’d better learn to accept—and maybe even (I hope) respect.

“I’m not sure that house would have the mold problems we have in ours,” I say.

I can almost feel my father smile in response even though I can’t see his face. “Or this one.” Dad waves his paddle at another structure missing its windows. “Maybe you can get a two-for-one deal and Peter could work as a carpenter instead of amountain guide.”

I choose not to say things like, *Dad, you are being annoying. Dad, can it just be OK that I am living where I live?* Instead I focus on being patient and on the repetitive pulling and feathering of my paddle. We move through the water and just as my resolve is about to cave, my dad picks up his paddle again and looks back at me. “Oh well,” he says. “At least in North Conway you have access to three airports.” I’m not sure if this is some odd mathematical sign of acceptance, but I decide it means progress because he’s actually referencing where I live instead of trying to convince me to change.

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**UMBAGOG LAKE** is the 12.3-square-mile heart of its namesake 20,000-acre National Wildlife Refuge. The lake and surrounding terrain are chock-full of wetland and upland habitat for migratory birds and endangered species like the northern harrier and great blue heron. Within our first two days we’ve seen loons, eagles, and ducks galore and know there are moose, osprey, badgers, and mink hiding just out of sight. The lake itself is partly a flooded-over field that used to serve as the timber industry’s connection between the northern waterways and the southern paper mills. It’s eerily shallow—that’s what the name means in the Abenaki language—with an average depth of 14 feet and the opportunity to often see straight down to the rock-covered bottom.

By the time we take the narrow channel to the lake from the Magalloway, the sun is starting its descent and the wind has kicked up from the south. We dig in to cross the 2-mile-wide northern neck of the lake to reach our reserved campsite on the eastern side. Conversation is pointless in the wind and even the poodle has enough sense to stay low and not rock the canoe. I keep us heading straight for a point on the horizon,



FAMILY DYNAMICS: THE AUTHOR’S DAD PLIES PTARMIGAN WITH A TREAT ON DAY ONE, MEANWHILE DESTABILIZING THE BOAT BY SPINNING HIS BODY AROUND TOWARD THE STERN (TOP); THE TRAIL TO DIAMOND PEAKS; FATHER AND DAUGHTER PADDLE IN SYNC ON DAY TWO.



and when we finally break around it, Dad tells me I did a good job.

We spend night two where the Rapid River spills into Umbagog. A dozen kayakers join us in the maple-canopied campsite; they're here for one of the four annual releases that help the normally languid Rapid earn its name once again.

Earlier in the day, I learned that Dad grew up kayaking—the boats were easier to come by than canoes. When I was a child, his tales of Poland always painted a land with endless wilderness to explore, dense forests where friendships could be tested and secured, and lakes and rivers on which to paddle, swim, and sail into adulthood. It wasn't until I was older that I realized that 1950s and '60s Stalinist starkness, artistic repression, and ongoing stringent socialism were the untold foreground in each story. Tonight, over couscous and salami, I ask my dad if he felt lucky to have the outdoors when he was growing up. He shrugs and says, "I suppose we went there to escape the reality of the gray life."

"Did you ever think the outdoors could *be* your life?" I ask.

Dad laughs. "I thought it would be nice to live in the mountains, sailing every day, skiing every day." He pauses with a faraway look in his eyes as if imagining it. "But I had this as a dream—not something I would actively pursue." He didn't know anyone who made a living in the outdoors and besides, he also had a dream to be a business success. "But I kept it as my passion, and shared it with you."

I survey our campsite, layered with state-of-the-art sleeping, cooking, and outdoor living gear, all of which I use constantly. I look back at my dad. "So," I say. "What you're telling me is that your outdoor recreation was a direct result of Soviet control of Poland, which means I, in turn, owe my professional life to Eastern European communism?"

We're sitting side-by-side in camp chairs, rocking in tandem. My dad pauses his movement, looks at me, shakes his head, and smiles. "Now, Majka..."

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**WE SPEND OUR LAST FULL DAY** hiking 6 miles along the Rapid River. We leave the camping area on foot and head east on a rocky path. Within a mile, we're on an 8-foot-wide swath with as much grass as rocks—exactly the width to accommodate a tenacious kayaker with a pickup. (We're outside the refuge, and paddlers use the "road" to access play holes.) Our goal is the former home of Louise Dickinson Rich, author of the 1942 bestseller *We Took to the Woods*, a treatise on simplicity and awakening in the outdoors. A half-dozen other dwellings now surround Rich's home, but hers is preserved, museum-style, to look as it was in the 1930s when she raised her family here. Dad and I walk through the home and he asks me if I could see myself living like this. I consider the giant, woolly long underwear and wood stove and envision the now-empty larder fully stocked. I tell my dad that I'd like to think that if I were a woman in the 1930s, this is what I'd have chosen.



HARMONY RULES: THE AUTHOR AND HER DAD FINISH BREAKFAST ON THEIR LAST DAY.

"Maybe what I'm trying to do is my own modern-day version," I say.

"With ice picks?" Dad asks.

"Ice axes," I correct him. "But yes."

"You lead quite a life, my dear," he says. He's said this to me before—many times—and I've always heard judgment in his tone. Today I hear appreciation.

We're back at our tent by 2 p.m., disassemble camp, and canoe a mere 15 minutes across the Rapid's mouth to a rocky point for our final evening out. (I was lucky enough to get the coveted single site when I made our reservations two months earlier.) Ramrod-straight red spruce canopy our tent site and water surrounds us on 270 degrees. We agree it's time to teach the poodle to swim. Dad scoops him up and carries him squirming into the water, holds him in place where it's just deep enough so Ptarmigan can't touch the bottom, then releases him to gasp and flail his way to shore. I watch and tell Dad it's just like the toughen-up-Majka campaign he launched when I was five—when he forbade me from shoes, showers, and my tiara and made me eat any unfinished dinners in the garage instead of at the table. "Careful it doesn't go too far," I tease him. "You did that to me and look what happened."

The swimming experiment works so long as the tripe treats last, but once they're gone Ptarmigan refuses the water and chooses to gallop in fervent circles around camp, trying to shake off the various near-drowning experiences. Later, in the tent consumed with wet-dog smell, Dad assures me the poodle will swim when he's ready. "You just have to keep taking him deeper and deeper." He pulls Ptarmigan close so they are spooning with both of their faces toward me.

In four days Dad has already started bonding with Ptarmigan. The poodle, for his part, does not seem confused that my dad can both adore him and push him. Maybe he understands the pushing is often a sign of the love. I recently read of a dog that swam 3 miles across Lake Michigan, but I just want a good, affectionate poodle that likes to splash in the water. "Maybe I don't need to toughen him up," I say.

"Of course you do," Dad answers. "How else will he become a mountain poodle for my mountain daughter?"

I reach across the gap between us in the tent and find his arm and give it a squeeze. The darkness covers my tearing eyes.

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**OUR FINAL MORNING** dawns with a cloud-coated sunrise and crystal-clear, barely moving water. The Rapid has quieted from the recent release and the transition zone to Umbagog proper is eerily still. We retrace our path from two days before and are back on the lake itself in an hour, recrossing it to the west—this time toward the Androscoggin, just south of where we exited the Magalloway. "Do you know where we're going?" Dad asks me when we enter the bigger water.

I pull a wide C-stroke, moving the bow of the canoe until it's facing a bluff-topped mountain straight ahead. "See that?" I say to Dad. "That's our goal."

We paddle together expertly. Whenever it's time for a change I say, "switch," and we both arc our paddles momentarily skyward. Our maps don't do the rolling, rock and tree-topped peaks around here justice, so I don't have answers when Dad asks for their names. "I'd like to come back and hike some of those," he says. "We should find out their names."

We leave the wide, glassy lake another hour later, crossing an acre-wide section of lily pads to enter the 30-foot-wide Androscoggin. For the

next two hours, we glide in silence past reed groves and giant submerged deadwood, making fast time in the moderate current. It's just noon when we pull into the boat ramp, 6 miles from last night's camp. We unload the canoe and fill my van, leaving the boat for the outfitter to pick up later. As Dad shuts the back after the final load, he pauses and looks at my Colorado license plate. "Shouldn't this say *Live Free or Die*?" •

*Majka Burhardt (majkaburhardt.com) beat the mold, married Peter, and still favors climbing over engineering. Ptarmigan has yet to become a swimmer.*

**GET THERE** Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge is due east of the New Hampshire town of Errol (4.5 hours north of Boston). From Errol, head south on NH 26 for .5 mile to Northern Pond Rd. and then east for 1 mile to the boat launch at the Errol Dam. Drop your vehicle here, then shuttle (see below) to the Wilson Mills put-in on the Magalloway River, 13 miles away.  
**SEASON** June to September  
**MAPS** USGS quads *Wilson Mills, Umbagog Lake North, and Umbagog Lake South* (\$8 each;

store.usgs.gov)  
**OUTFITTER** Northern Waters Outfitters in Errol provides canoes (\$30/day; includes paddles, life jackets, maps), access to privately owned campsites (including the Diamond Peaks sites), and shuttle service (even if you have your own boat).  
**CONTACT** Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge (603) 482-3415; fws.gov/northeast/lakeumbagog  
**PERMITS** None necessary for non-motorized travel. Camping

allowed only at designated sites, and must be reserved in advance (see below).  
**RESERVATIONS** NH Parks and Recreation: bit.ly/reserveNH; Umbagog Lake State Park: 603-482-7795.  
**GEAR UP** LL Cote in Errol (25 Main St.; 603-482-7777; llcote.com) has a good selection of camping and hunting supplies, but for food and lightweight equipment, stop en route in North Conway, Berlin, or Littleton (depending on your driving route).