



FEATURE
**A SCARY
RIDE DOWN
CANADA'S
LONGEST
RIVER**

**CRUISING AMENITIES
I WILL NEVER TAKE
FOR GRANTED AFTER
A TRIP DOWN THE
MACKENZIE RIVER**

BY PETER A. ROBSON

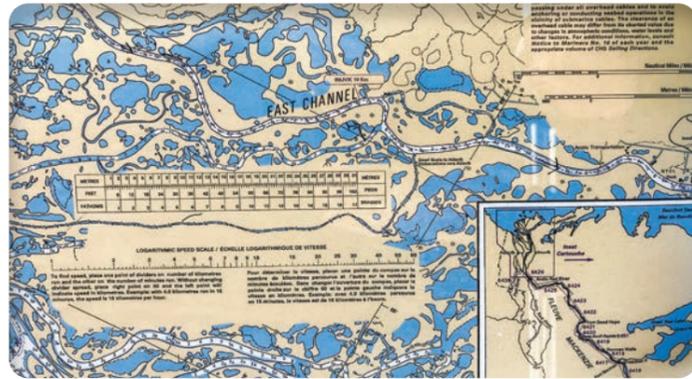
Larry Graf and I were drifting 10 feet of water in a finger of “deep” water that emptied from the massive Mackenzie Delta into the Arctic Ocean. The warm, sunny blue sky contrasted sharply with the muddy brown water. I took off one of my shoes and socks and dipped my foot in the 56-degree ocean. It was one of the most rewarding moments of my life. We shared high-fives, whoops of joy and some photos. We were both wearing silly grins of happiness and accomplishment. It was an enormous relief just to be alive.

Six months earlier, Graf, founder of Washington-based Aspen Power Catamarans had approached me with the idea of taking his prototype 34-foot outboard powered catamaran 1,200 miles down the Mackenzie River. He wanted to prove his boat’s capabilities and also do something really adventurous. I thought it was a weird idea.

The Mackenzie flows north through one of the largest wilderness areas in the world. It is frozen solid from October to May. During the ice-free months, pleasure vessels—other than the occasional canoeist—simply don’t “do” the river. The river has strong currents, a constantly shifting bottom and is only navigable by vessels with a maximum draft of just over four feet. The only commercial vessels are a few tugs towing barges that deliver equipment and supplies a couple of times a year. The



Left: Larry Graf (on right) and Peter Robson (on left)
Below: Larry Preparing for launch



few small isolated, mostly Inuvialuit and Gwich'in native villages, are typically hundreds of miles apart, many without road access. In between there is little evidence of mankind's presence. More black, grizzly and polar bears, along with caribou and muskox, inhabit this region than humans. Hungry hordes of biting insects can reportedly drive a person insane. Sound like fun? Despite all the dangers, I, like Graf, felt the need of another big adventure and this would certainly fit the bill, so, I signed as crew. It would just be the two of us.

THE BOAT

Graf's 34-foot Aspen was ideal for the expedition. Unlike other catamarans with both hulls the same size, Aspen's full displacement power catamarans, capable of speeds of up to 30 knots, are unique in that they are proas, with one hull 35 percent narrower than the other. This slim profile requires less propulsion (and therefore less fuel) when compared to a regular catamaran—and about half of a similar-size planing monohull. Excellent fuel economy would be vital because there was no guarantee we would be able to obtain fuel at the few tiny communities on the river. Our fuel economy would be slightly reduced

by the more than a ton of spares and emergency equipment, but with a combined capacity of 170 gallons in the main tanks and jerry cans, we estimated we could travel 300 miles at about 16 knots.

Our shallow draft was also crucial. Our draft would be 31-inches with the outboards fully down and 21-inches at half-tilt.

The redundancy of twin outboards was another plus. The Aspen was equipped with a 200 hp Yamaha on the wider starboard hull

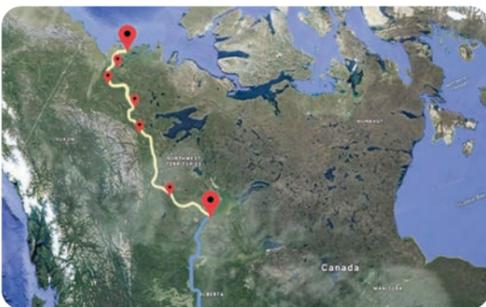
East channel south to Inavut; navigation would be a challenge!

and a 70 hp Yamaha on the narrower port hull.

Lastly, Aspens are designed with what Graf describes as a soft-lift suspension system. The two knife-like, hulls generate 1,170 pounds of buoyancy for every inch of immersion below the resting waterline. This gently lifts the boat as it passes over and through the waves. On a shallow, fast flowing river—especially in strong wind-against-current situations—we could expect short, steep waves and a significantly more comfortable ride than a monohull on the plane.

Our Aspen was an open, center-console model with a Bimini top and radar arch. To equip it for our adventure required a number of additions. A galley/seat module was designed and added aft of the two helm seats. A head was built into the port hull. We'd sleep on the two linear settees in the bow, behind the chain locker and windlass. A low-slung canvas cover was fitted over the sleeping area to keep us dry and protected from biting insects (but not so much from bears). This undertaking would be more camping than luxury cruising.

Below left: screen shots
Arctic Adventure map;
Garmin chip map



This undertaking would be more camping than luxury cruising

The idea was to tow the boat 1,200 miles north from the Aspen factory to Canada's Great Slave Lake. We'd launch, say our prayers to the river gods and hopefully make it to the Arctic Ocean in eight or 10 days. It wouldn't be a leisurely cruise as Graf wanted to be on the move every day, stopping only to refuel and to sleep.

We knew navigation would be a challenge. There are no electronic charts for the river. Our only aids consisted of a depth sounder, 26 paper charts and a 10-year old Garmin Topo map chip for our plotter. It showed only the outline of the shore and islands as they were at that time (but was the best available option) and it would at least allow us to lay down a GPS track.



Below: on the road, good shot of draft, Above: launching boat (at Ft Providence) and helm shot





Above: shot of river, fueling, **Below:** We could 'scroll down the river' using the DIY chart roller

UNDERWAY

After three days on the road, we crossed the Mackenzie's only permanent bridge at Fort Providence. Below us the wide, muddy,



whitecapped river appeared a powerful and intimidating force. A storm that had produced gusts to 60 knots the previous evening was still honking upriver at more than 20. I didn't want to be here. The river was ugly and menacing. I was stuck here in the middle of nowhere, and I couldn't bail out.

We launched the Aspen safely and, cringing at the constant bumping of our outboards on the rocky bottom, we mounted the canvas and loaded our gear. At 4:30 p.m., after putting the truck and trailer into storage, we cast off. Like it or not, we were on our way.

Locals instructed us to head straight out from the launch ramp, then make a right around a red can buoy into the main channel. Sounds easy, but before we got to that channel, we found ourselves in less than three feet of water twice and were forced to tilt the outboards—wide eyed and unnerved—and guess our way into deeper water. It was a worrying beginning. Once in the main channel, we breathed a little easier and began to follow the cans downriver.

For eight days, we were severely challenged by the dangerously shallow and shifting river. It was almost impossible to find a protected overnight stop, and when we did, we were conscious of visits by bears. We were always anxious about our fuel situation and of course there was the constant fear of running aground and being stranded. Tension over the many potential dangers was a constant all day every day and never allowed us to fully relax.

We made it 50 miles that first evening and tucked into a backwater just out of the main flow of the river. Here we reorganized our piles of gear and spares.

Prior to the trip, the 104 lineal feet of river charts had been trimmed, taped together and mounted onto rollers inside a box with a Plexiglas lid. This would allow us to "scroll" our way downriver. This is the only practical system for river tugs and the Coast Guard.

We soon settled into a routine. Graf would drive while I'd stand behind him at the dinette studying the paper charts. I'd shout out and point to where to expect the next buoy. When confident of the depth and our course, we'd travel at about 20 knots, with the aid of an average 3.5 knots of current. Although the temperatures were mild, travelling at 20 knots with a frequent 20-knot headwind forced us to bundle up in our heaviest gear—including wool hats and gloves. At times we were flying downriver and careening around the buoys so quickly, it was like skiing a slalom course—never knowing when the snow would run out. One moment we'd be in 30 feet of water and the next we'd be in eight feet. We had to constantly scour the horizon with binoculars to search out the next red or green can—often miles apart—or to spot range markers.

Each morning we'd get up, eat breakfast (cereal and

sometimes an egg or two), get underway and spend up to 10 hours on the river. When we'd had enough, we'd look for protection alongside the main stem, behind a sandbar or shallow island or, on occasion, tucked inside a river mouth. Boat chores, a simple dinner—ham and potato salad became staples (we didn't want to cook meat as that could attract bears), a cocktail, some conversation, then coat ourselves with bug spray, light a citronella candle in the bow shelter than climb in and wonder if we would have any nocturnal visitors. However, near the Arctic Circle, there is no real night. We were in the land of the midnight sun.

Navigation was the most challenging and dangerous aspect of the journey. There are 700 or so unnumbered can buoys on the river and many are half submerged and trailing frothy white wakes from the unceasing current. Our paper charts were of limited use as they only showed the position of the previous year's buoys. Those buoys are removed before the river freezes and reinstalled after the ice melts. Placing and maintaining the river's navigation aids is a daunting, almost impossible job for the two shallow-draft Coast Guard buoy

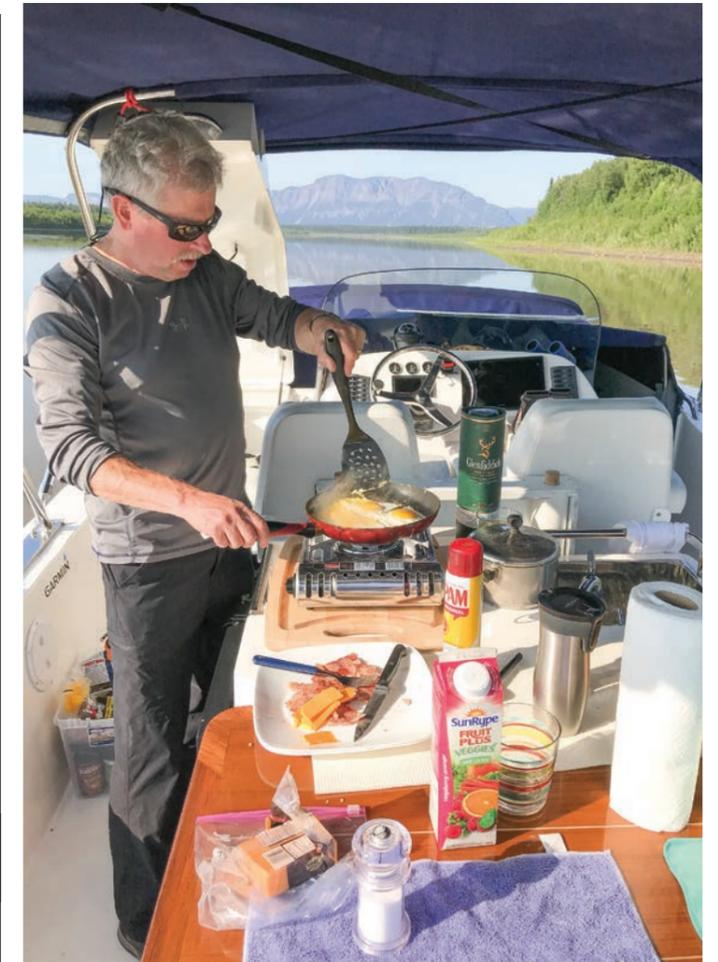


tenders that work the river heroically. Because the river channels are constantly shifting due to siltation and scouring, each spring they must first find, then buoy that year's deepest channel. Throughout the season, they must reposition the buoys as the channel changes and also replace buoys that break free or are dragged out of position by debris.

This means that the channel shown on paper charts can differ significantly from the actual buoyed channel. This isn't a real problem as long as the new channel is buoyed.

The most dangerous section of the river is the Sans Sault Rapids. The sailing directions advise that they should only be navigated with extensive local knowledge. More than 20 people have died here. However, we white-knuckled it, slaloming through the well-marked channel safely. The river level must have been ideal as the two- to three-foot rapids were outside the main channel and not quite as frightening as we were expecting. It is interesting to note that in high current areas such as this (where the current runs to about six knots), the underwater portion of the buoys are torpedo shaped in order to lessen their resistance to the powerful current.

For the most part, we found the scenery along the river to be almost endlessly the same; low and monotonous and lined with willow and spruce. However, at times high bluffs and distant blue-tinted mountain ranges framed the river. The most dramatic scenery was at The Ramparts. Here the entire river, which is up to



Above: breakfast, lookout had to constantly scan, **checking charts** **Left this page:** bear panels and bears. *Nem fugiam qui as voleni temqui te volorro con num dolorum sum et aspedi doloreium diae endignis assitatur, quo offic te di audi essinn qui de volut evelest ism eaque verae. Epreici aercia vent eate re*



four miles wide in places, is funneled down to just over 500 yards. It runs through a seven-mile-long vertical-walled canyon hemmed in by striking 200-foot-high limestone cliffs. Despite the strong current there was plenty of depth, so navigation was thankfully straightforward.

After the rapids and The Ramparts, the bottom structure transitioned from mostly rock to mostly silt. The winding river was about two miles wide and the narrow, charted channel had us almost continuously crossing from one side to the other. Outside the narrow channel the charts showed a maze of low-lying islands, sandbars and shallows, often with marked depths of less than three or four feet. It was here where things started going sideways.

At times, we'd be steaming along in the channel and suddenly there would be no buoys in front of us.

Once the shallow water alarm started screaming, we'd be forced to stop, backtrack and hunt for deeper water. We'd tilt up the outboards and scour the horizon, hoping for some hint of a navigable path back across the river. We'd be forced to "feel" our way across the river, backing then going left or right while trying to keep in at least four feet of water. Our biggest fear was being swept sideways onto a shoal or sandbar, pinned in place by the unceasing current, stranded with little hope of rescue. When we did spot buoys, we could not always be confident of their position. At times, we'd spot one only to be



We'd be steaming along a channel and suddenly there would be no buoys.

forced to come to a sudden halt when we realized it had drifted out of position and was aground or in too-shallow water. We even came across red and green cans tangled together. If we weren't wearing gloves, we'd have bitten our nails down to the quick. The odds were stacked against us for the two days we ran this stretch of river, but someone up there must have been looking out for us. As an aside, the Coast Guard buoy tender, *Eckaloo*, which we'd met up with earlier, had warned us what to expect. They were in the process of repositioning the buoys in this troubling section of river, but they were a day or two behind us.

On day seven, we made it to Inuvik, the largest commercial center in the north, with a population of just over 3,000. Here we were informed that the channel through the winding maze of the Mackenzie Delta had not yet been buoyed by the Coast Guard. This almost forced us to end the trip here. The route on the paper charts

Tiny Villages

The smallest villages we stopped at, Wrigley, Fort Good Hope and Tsiigehtchic had populations of between 120 and 500. Other than the occasional pick-up truck driver passing by, they seemed almost deserted; we never saw more than a handful of people. Each was dominated by an aging white-painted church with a tall spire, an eclectic mix of housing and the essential Northern Store which has its roots back in the fur trading days. Without industry or commercial activity, there are few jobs in these villages, and many must rely on hunting and fishing to survive.



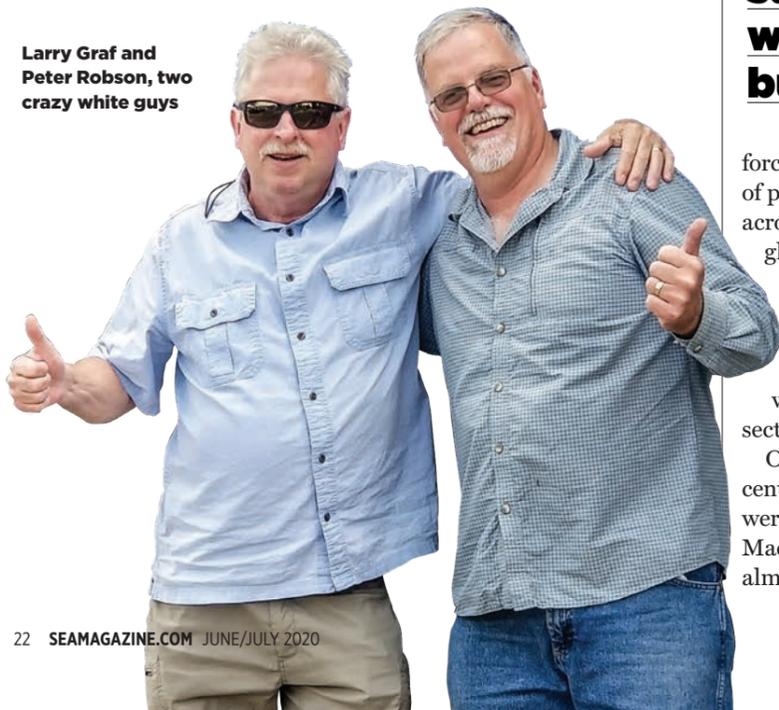
looked to be almost impossible without any aids, and we'd already come far too close to disaster. We attempted to hire a guide, without luck. Fortunately, at the last moment, a local tour operator emailed us a screen shot of his route. So, on day eight, we set out on the final 90-mile run to the Arctic Ocean. Although we almost grounded several times, we were delighted to pass north of the tree line where we were surrounded by lush, green, flat tundra. A few patches of snow remained in the shadows. We strained to see polar bears, but they were elsewhere.

So much could have gone wrong over the past eight days while we raced downriver at 20-plus knots through one of the world's largest wilderness areas. However, we'd made it 1,200 miles without grounding or equipment failure, and the Aspen proved itself, answering to everything we asked of it. The trip back upriver would be much easier as the autopilot would be set to follow the track we laid down on our trip downriver. One thing for sure, it was a hell of an adventure! 🍷

Fueling up

We were lucky in that we were able to obtain enough fuel to make it the entire way—though getting it was interesting. Due to the river freezing, there are no permanent docks. Steel-hulled supply barges are simply pushed onto a community's gently sloping beach. Twice we too were able to drive our boat up onto the beach (protected somewhat by stainless keel shoes) to fill our jerry cans. Thankfully, there was always a local with a pickup truck who offered to drive us. At the larger communities of Fort Simpson (pop 1,200) and Norman Wells (pop 775) we were able to organize tankers to deliver gas shoreside. Seeing a relatively large, modern pleasure boat always drew a crowd. The locals must have wondered about those two crazy white guys.

Larry Graf and Peter Robson, two crazy white guys



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