

AVERAGE JOE

FALL TWO THOUSAND EIGHTEEN

Mike Guetter:

His incredible story
of survival

Josh Linn:

Hunger for
the hunt

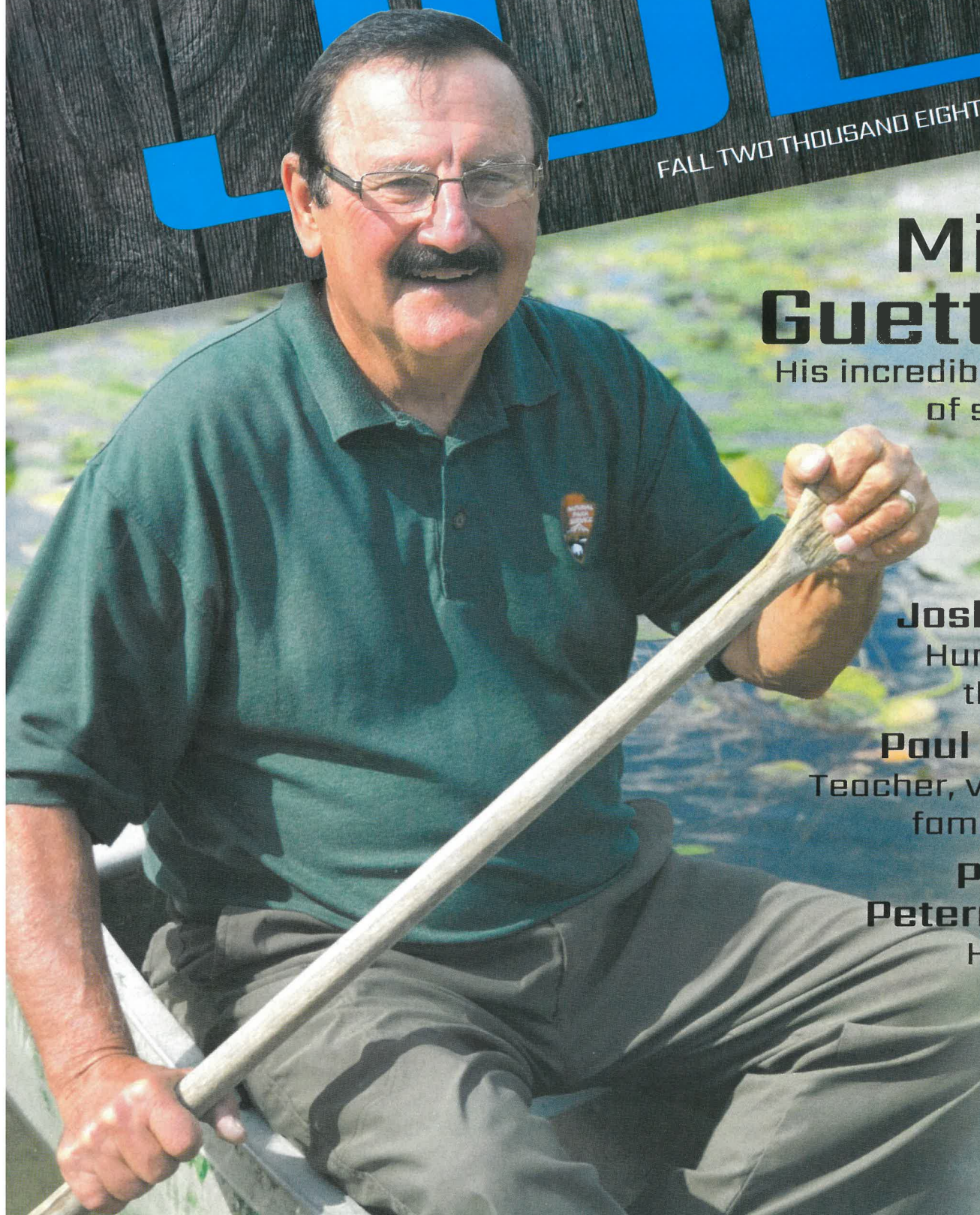
Paul Lakin:

Teacher, veteran,
family man

Patrick

Petermann:

Heart of
gold



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Dick Kopel, left, Mike Guetter and their faithful companion Sam, with the backpack that was all they were able to salvage from their ordeal in the Canadian wilderness, 41 years ago this September. (Submitted Photo)

Mike Guetter holds up the Bic lighter that helped light the campfire that saved their lives, after their canoe capsized on the Churchill River 41 years ago.



A dream trip turned nightmare

DL's Mike Guetter and friend once survived 16 days stranded in the Canadian wilderness

STORY & PHOTOS BY VICKI GERDES

When Wabasso, Minnesota native Mike Guetter and his friend Dick Kopel — along with their faithful canine companion, Sam — set off in a 1963 Chevy pickup from their home near Park Rapids, headed for Leaf Rapids in Ontario, Canada, they were very excited.

After all, the August 1977 road trip was the start of a seven-week idyll in the wilderness that had been more than a year in the planning — though as any outdoorsman will tell you, Mother Nature doesn't always cooperate, even with the best-laid plans.

From Leaf Rapids, the intrepid trio would journey by canoe up the Churchill River to Hudson Bay — an epic 500-mile outdoor adventure that was to be the focal point of a year-long hiatus from Guetter and Kopel's budding careers in the corporate world.

"We were roommates in college (at Mankato State University)," Guetter says, "and we both started working for General Mills in Minneapolis the same year, in 1972, so we roomed together there, too."

The two came up with the idea for the trip while having drinks together one night during the fall of 1976, at a bar in Minnetonka: "As soon as the snow



Using a map of Manitoba, Canada, that he has on the wall of his rural Detroit Lakes home, Mike shows the distance between where he and friend Dick Kopel copsisized their canoe on the Churchill River to where they would have had to hike to reach the rail line.

leaves next spring, we're going to do it," they promised each other.

On March 1, 1977, both men handed in their resignations at General Mills, and one month later, they packed up and headed to the rural Park Rapids home they had rented for the summer to start planning the details of their trek.

The two men spent months researching everything about their route — the same route once used by Canadian fur traders to bring hundreds upon hundreds of animal pelts out to Hudson Bay for shipment overseas.

They also made the decision to bring along a third companion: A 130-pound golden Labrador named Sam. The dog had accompanied them on previous outdoor adventures, so they simply added dog food to their lengthy list of supplies for this trip. Sam had a canine-sized backpack to carry his own provisions,

just as they would carry theirs.

"We picked up several good sets of maps, clothing, food and other outdoor gear," Guetter says. "We figured the trip would last about seven weeks, so we had to take enough provisions with us to last the whole way."

"We put everything in plastic bags in case the packs got wet, then packed and repacked everything — in fact, we probably overpacked a little," Guetter admits — though they also had to make sure they weren't carrying more weight than they could handle.

They did some test runs around lakes in Park Rapids to make sure they were comfortable with their gear.

In short, they did everything they could think of to prepare for their journey. Little did they know that an unexpected mishap would turn their dream vacation in Canada into the stuff of nightmares.

Canada, here we come

On the morning of Aug. 12, 1977, Mike and Dick packed up their small pickup truck, attached the canoe to a rack on top, called for Sam to get inside and headed north into Canada.

Upon their arrival in Leaf Rapids, Manitoba, the two men unloaded the vehicle near the Churchill River, which would be their home for the next seven weeks.

"Dick went to visit the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and ask if we could park our vehicle there (outside their headquarters)," Guetter says. "He told them we would call back in seven weeks, and asked that if they didn't hear from us to please notify our parents so they could plan our rescue."

Ultimately, that lifeline wasn't needed — though it would end up being a pretty close call.

The early part of their journey was

difficult at times, with a lot of wind and rain, and unexpected obstacles in their way. At one point, about halfway through the trip, the winds got so bad that the three explorers were stuck at a camp for three days, unable to travel further.

Eventually, however, the route got easier — and they thought the worst was behind them.

“The river was narrowing, we had the current with us, so the weather didn’t affect us as much,” Guetter says. “We were on the ‘downhill’ side of the trip.

“We’d get up in the morning and start paddling, stop at noon and have lunch... it was so peaceful,” he continues. “There were no cars, no houses, no people. We didn’t see anybody at all. You were literally out there by yourself, hundreds of miles from anyone or anything, except nature. There was so much wildlife, so much life, all around us.”

When the explorers got to Billard Lake, they noticed what appeared to be some abandoned buildings, which they later discovered to be the remains of a small native fishing village.

“We ended up camping overnight at Billard Lake,” Guetter says. “I remember that night the Northern Lights were absolutely fabulous. Dick and I sat up until about 2 a.m., just watching the lights move around in the sky, like a continual kaleidoscope.”

Because they had been up so late the night before, the two men didn’t break camp until about 10 a.m. the next day.

“We were in super spirits,” Guetter says. “Billard was our last lake, so we wouldn’t have to fight against the wind so much. The canoeing would be easier from this point, and we didn’t have very many portages ahead.”

They were also looking forward to the nice treat they had stowed away in their canoe for later — a goose they had shot down earlier that morning and planned to roast for dinner.

‘Dream vacation’ swept away downriver

The two men knew they were coming up to a difficult portion of the river, with some rock rapids leading into a waterfall. After walking around the river and surveying the path ahead, they decided they would canoe through a smaller section of



Mike holds up the fishing hook that he tried to fashion from some rope and a couple of nails after he and his friend lost their fishing poles when their canoe overturned.

rapids, then portage around the rest, past the waterfall, and continue on their journey.

“We took off and made it to the main channel,” Guetter recalls. “All at once, our canoe started to tip. There must have been a submerged rock shelf or something beneath the surface that we couldn’t see. We lost our balance and capsized.”

At first, they thought everything

and so on. The food pack went second to last.”

Down to just one backpack and a waterlogged canoe, the two men tried to push their watercraft to shore, but were unable to stop it from going over the falls. Mike was able to keep hold of their one remaining backpack, which because there were two sleeping bags stored inside, remained buoyant enough to help keep him afloat.

We were in the water up to our necks, and the canoe was about 80 percent submerged underwater... We got around the bend (in the river) and couldn’t see water ahead, so we knew the rapids were coming up...

– Mike Guetter, recalling the moment before he and his travel companion were swept over a waterfall during a canoe trip in Canada

would be alright. Their canoe was still right there beside them, and Sam was a strong swimmer, so they thought they could just make their way to land.

“We were in the water up to our necks, and the canoe was about 80 percent submerged underwater,” Guetter says. “We thought we could start swimming and pull the canoe to shore.”

Unfortunately, the current was so strong, and the canoe so heavy with equipment and extra water inside, that “we couldn’t maneuver the canoe at all,” he adds.

“We got around the bend (in the river), and couldn’t see water ahead, so we knew the rapids were coming up. We started to untie our packs from the canoe... the cooking pack, the clothes pack,

“We spotted a rock about 20 feet from the main channel of the river,” Guetter says. “Dick (who had kicked off his boots by this time) said he was going to try to swim for that rock, while I kept hold of the backpack.”

The current was so strong that after about 30 seconds of trying to swim away from him, Dick had only managed to move about five feet.

“I said, ‘Dick, get back over here and hold onto the backpack with me,’” Guetter says — which he then did.

Caught in the current, the two men were inevitably swept over the falls and into the water below. They were fortunately able to escape a swirling eddy and find their way back to the main current, with the backpack still between them,

helping to keep them afloat. "About 2 to 3 minutes later, we found we were able to touch bottom," Guetter says. "The river kept getting shallower, so we were eventually able to stand up and walk to the shore, where we both collapsed."

By this time, Sam had been lost — though they both thought they had spotted the dog swimming to shore on the opposite side of the river, they were unable to see or hear him when they called.

"We must have been in the water about 10 minutes," Guetter says. "The water temperature was about 40 or 50 degrees. By the time we got out, my legs were numb from the knees down and I was shaking so hard. We just laid there for a while."

Eventually, Guetter could feel his companion shaking him, trying to get him to start moving around and get the circulation going in his limbs once again.

"Dick asked if I had a lighter in my pack (the only bag they were able to salvage)," Guetter says. "I had a Bic lighter in a plastic bag, so we quickly found it."

Dick was able to get the lighter to work, so Mike went into the woods to try to find some kindling for a fire. Their axe went down the river with their canoe, so he had to make do with whatever he could gather with his hands.

"We were able to get a small fire going around 9 p.m.," Guetter remembers. "It was getting dark, and cold, and we were both completely soaked to the skin — but we realized that if we could get a fire going, there was a chance we might make it out of this alive."

They stockpiled as much wood and kindling as they could forage without benefit of axe or saw, and settled in for a long, cold night.

"We spent all night sitting around that fire, trying to dry out our clothes and sleeping bags, and whatever provisions we had left," Guetter says.

It wasn't much — though both men were immensely cheered when they spotted the goose they had shot earlier in the day, floating slowly down the river nearby.

"I went out and grabbed it, then



This is the original Cheez Whiz jar from the abandoned fishing cabin where Mike and Dick lived for two weeks. Mike filled the jar with dried mussberries, which were a staple of their Canadian adventure-turned-survival tale.

just left it lay overnight," Guetter says. "About 2 or 3 in the morning, everything was dried out and we were warm, so we crawled into our sleeping bags and went to sleep."

Taking stock

When the two men woke up the next morning, they did a quick inventory of what little they had left.

"We had a set of maps, some clothes, two sleeping bags, and one set of boots," Guetter says, noting that he had managed to keep his on his feet. "Dick was bare-foot."

Hoping that some of their lost provisions had washed ashore or gotten snagged on some branches along the river, the two men spent about half a day searching, without success. Sam, too, had apparently been lost to them. There was no sign of him anywhere.

After taking stock of where they were and how few provisions they had left, the duo found themselves with two options: The railroad tracks, about 60 miles straight east, or the abandoned fishing shack they had seen a few miles back, on Billard Lake.

"Dick had no shoes, and we had no tent," Guetter says. "Plus, because we were closer to the North Pole (than back home), the effect of the magnetic (field) variations on our compass would mean that true north would be about 10-15 degrees off."

Faced with such adverse conditions, the two men decided that the closer option was better, so they headed back toward the fishing shack.

"We knew the fishing village was directly under a plane route," Guetter says, "so we hoped we could flag down an airplane."

Because Mike still had his boots, he was the one tasked with carrying the backpack — though Dick did attempt to

fashion leggings out of some of their remaining clothing, to protect his feet as much as he could.

"We started walking along the shoreline, and came up to this tributary that was about 30 yards wide," Guetter says. "We had to get across, so we stripped naked, put our clothes in the backpack and swam to the other side."

The air temperature was about 50 degrees, and the water about 40 degrees — so needless to say, the swim was not a pleasant one.

"We got to the other side, put our clothes on, and kept walking," Guetter said. "We had to cross three or four of those (tributaries) before we got back to our old campsite on Billard Lake — the same one where we had watched the Northern Lights a few days earlier."

They spent the night at the campsite before taking off for the fishing shack; unfortunately, there were "another 4 or 5" tributaries along their path.

"The water was really cold!" Guetter exclaims, noting that to this day, he has a lingering aversion to swimming as a result of that experience.

Finally, the two men arrived back at the fishing village.

"There were three buildings there," Guetter says. "One of them was an 8x10-foot shack, with two spring beds and a little stove in it. That became our home for the next 14 days."

One of their first projects was to salvage enough tin to make a large "SOS" sign and place it along the lakeshore.

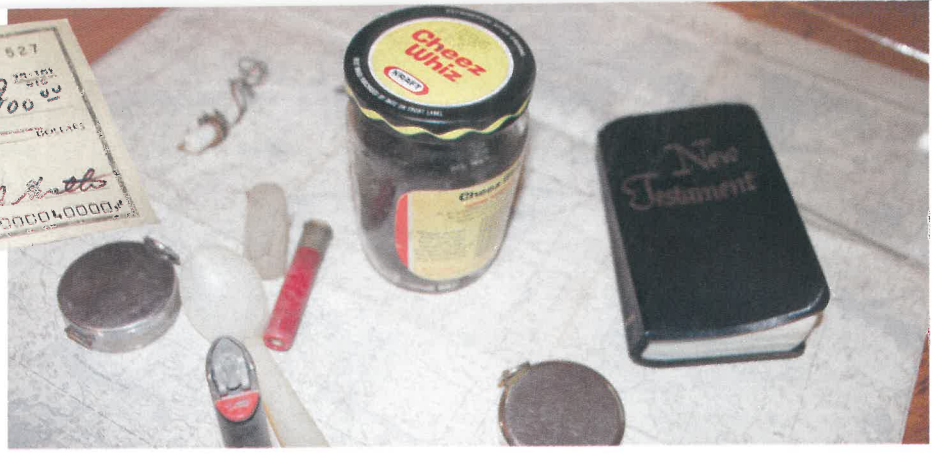
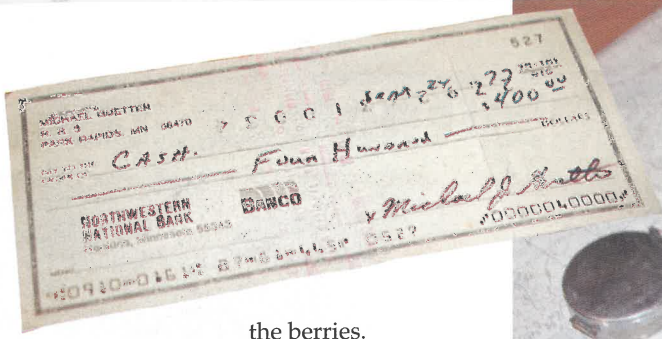
"We made it as big as we could," Guetter says.

Then they began to forage for food. Having managed to salvage the goose from their impromptu hunting trip, they smoked the bird and made the meat last for the first few days.

"We also found a half a jar of Cheese Whiz, and a small berry patch," Guetter says, noting that they later determined they had found some mussberries.

"Every day, we'd each pick a pop can full of berries and heat them up over the stove," he adds, "and we'd get one spoonful of the Cheese Whiz."

First the goose meat ran out, then the Cheese Whiz, until all they had left was



Mike has retained a small number of souvenirs from his Canadian wilderness adventure 41 years ago, including a compass, plastic spoon, prayer book, Bic lighter, and of course, the Cheez Whiz jar. He has also kept the voided check that he cashed at a bank in Thompson, Manitoba, to help him and his friend get home after being rescued.

the berries.

"The longer we were there, the more we had to expand our picking area, and as it got colder, the more the berries would just explode — so even our meager food supply was dwindling," Guetter says.

Though they saw at least 2 or 3 airplanes passing overhead every day, none of them stopped.

"The planes would come directly over the top of us, and we'd run outside, running and screaming and waving our arms," Guetter says. "Our days were pretty much spent conserving our energy (for these efforts)."

They also "spent countless hours talking to each other," he adds, "about family and friends, and all the things that were near and dear to us."

Unexpected blessings

On the seventh day of their life on Billard Lake, at about mid-afternoon, the two men heard something rattling around outside the shack.

"We thought it might be a beaver or a muskrat," Guetter says. "But we opened the door — and there was Sam! How he managed to find us, I'll never know. It had rained for several days, so he could not have followed our scent. It's a complete mystery."

Somehow, some way, their faithful companion had managed to find his way back to them — though he hadn't gotten by unscathed in the days since they'd seen him last.

"As bad a shape as we were in, I think he was worse," Guetter says. "He would just eat, and drink, and lay on the floor in front of us. He was probably near death — but having him back sure did lift our spirits for a couple of days."

On Sept. 24, 1977, at about 5 p.m., the two men both heard a helicopter flying directly over the fishing shack. Once again, they went outside and began waving their arms, jumping up and down and yelling.

"The helicopter turned around and

came back toward us," Guetter recalls. "It set down on the shore, and two guys got out. We told them our story, and they said they hadn't seen us — they saw our SOS, and thought they'd better stop and check it out." After leaving them with the lunch they had packed for the day, the guys headed back to the helicopter.

"They told us, 'as soon as we get high enough in the air to transmit, we'll radio Thompson (the nearest city) to send a rescue plane out and pick you guys up,'" Guetter says. "And that's what they did."

The rescue plane arrived later that evening.

"We had to pick Sam up and carry him — he was so weak he couldn't walk down to the plane," says Guetter, tearing up a little at the recollection.

When the plane arrived back in Thompson, they were greeted by a medical team. Both men had lost around 30 pounds during their ordeal, so the doctor cautioned them to restrict their diet to soup, ice cream and other easily digestible foods for the first few days.

A gentleman who lived in Thompson, Al Wiggins, heard their story and offered them a place to stay for the night.

"He said we should come spend the night with him and his wife, Gillian," Guetter says. "We had nothing — no I.D., no cash — so we were entirely dependent on the kindness of others. Al took us back to his house, Gillian made us some soup, and we stayed up all night talking, telling them our story."

After spending a couple of days recovering at the Wiggins' home, Al took the two men back into town and stopped at the bank.

"I was able to write a \$400 check and

cash it right there in Thompson," says Guetter, noting that the Wigginses had probably intervened on their behalf and offered to cover the check if it didn't clear. "I'm still in contact with Al and Gillian."

After they returned home, the two men were a bit of a media sensation for awhile: They were interviewed by Jim Klobuchar of the Minneapolis Star Tribune, a reporter from a Winnipeg television station, and just about every other television, radio and newspaper outlet in the region.

After spending a couple of months recovering and enjoying the holidays with their families, the two men headed to Mexico to finish out their one-year hiatus with some serious beach time, as they had originally planned.

"After our year off, Dick and I went in separate directions," Guetter adds, a note of sadness creeping into his voice as he admits that they lost touch.

As for Sam, "I knew Dick was more attached to him than I was," Guetter says, so he surrendered full custody of the dog to his friend. "Sam lived for another 7 or 8 years after that."

Beyond that, Guetter says he still doesn't know Dick's ultimate fate, having tried to reconnect with him multiple times over the years, without success. It's his one regret from that chapter in his life.

"It was an adventure," says Guetter. "It was a tremendous opportunity that we took advantage of, and we were fortunate enough to do it and never look back. We learned so much about ourselves, and about nature... I never had a day of regret about it."