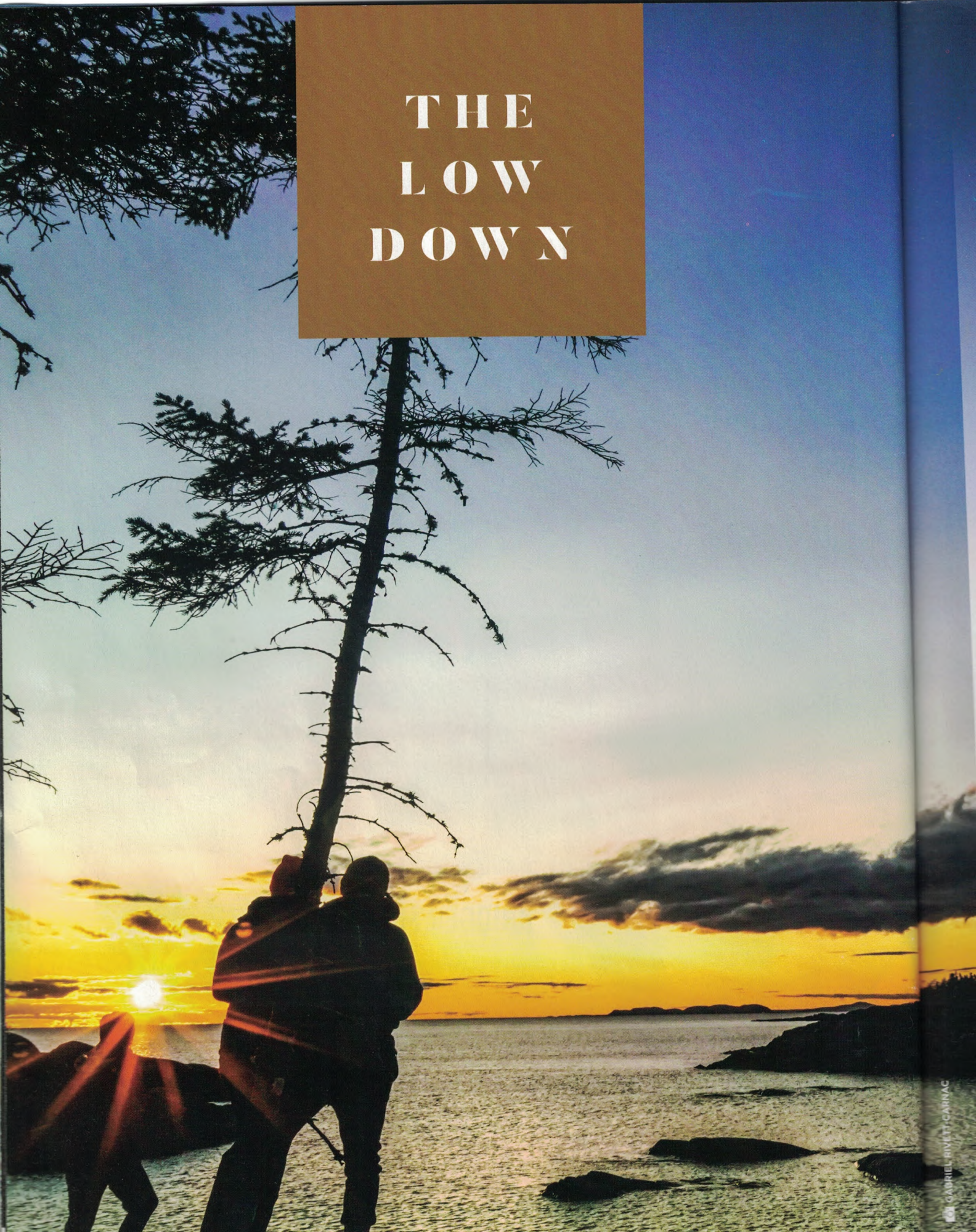


THE LOW DOWN



PUKASKWA NATIONAL PARK, ONTARIO

Hiking *Mdaabii Miikna* along Pukaskwa's hauntingly beautiful coastline

BY JAMIE ROSS

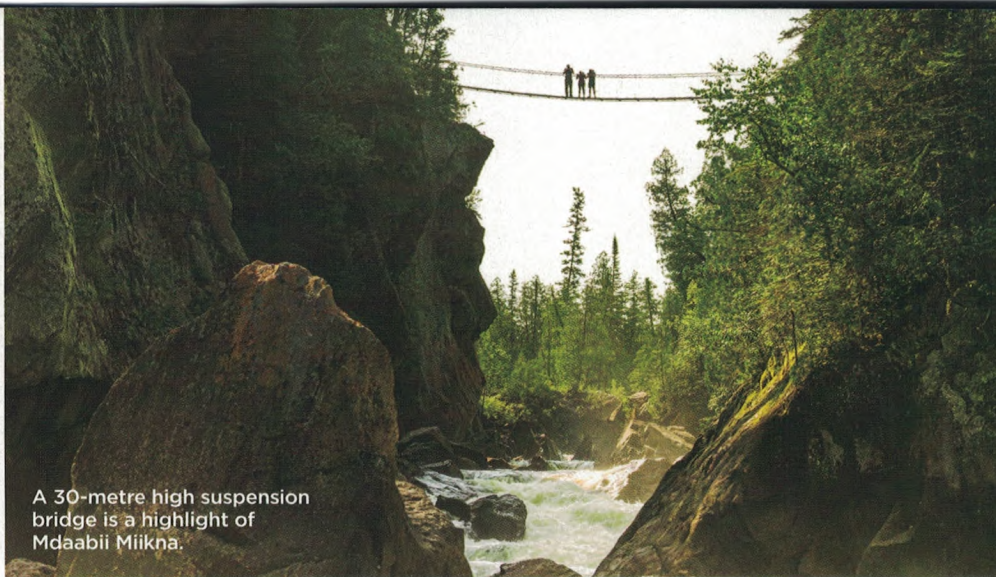
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The dawn light breaks through a cottony grey shroud that blankets the bay. It is an enchanting morning scene, with mist breaking up in swirls over the water and the rising sun slowly lighting up the ragged rock outcrops in the bay. I sit on the edge of my tent-deck with a mug of coffee clutched in my hands, looking out at the rugged shoreline landscape of Lake Superior. The world around me gradually wakens, including my hiking companions. Gulls circle above the river mouth, while grebes, mallards and mergansers swim in the protected cove. A lonely beaver circles our camp, dipping and diving in the clear water, watching us curiously as we finish breakfast and break camp. We hoist our packs and trudge off into the dark forest. The previous day we had marched over from Hattie Cove, winding through woods and up and down gullies and rocky ridges. We are hiking a freshly cut trail called *Mdaabii Miikna*, meaning "go to the shore" in *Anishinaabemowin*. This 24-kilometre three-day loop delivers everything that Pukaskwa has to offer in a fraction of the time it takes to complete the park's epic 60-kilometre Coastal Hiking Trail. The footing is spongy moss, not yet packed hard. We stepped carefully over exposed roots and followed rock cairns assembled to guide us across the bare summits. We are a group of four hikers being led by Lyn Elliott, our guide and Parks Canada interpreter. Our camp that first night was beautifully situated and well-organized, set on a smooth granite promontory that jutted into a sheltered cove. Tent platforms sit

high above the lake and a short trail leads to protective food boxes and outhouses. We dove off the rock for a refreshing dip in chilly Superior, watched a huge blood-orange sun slowly sink into the lake, sat around a driftwood campfire on the rocky point under a blanket of stars and then fell asleep to the sounds of the night—the lapping of water on rock and the crackle of dying embers. Created in 1978, Pukaskwa National Park sits at the northeast corner of Lake Superior, 25 kilometres from the town of Marathon. It is Ontario's only wilderness national park, protecting 1,887 square kilometres, including 120 kilometres of undeveloped coastline. It is a landscape that is big, rugged and dominated by the endless spectacular vistas of the great lake and the Canadian Shield. This is a remote lake-escape of stunted jack pine, balsam fir and birch trees; of delicate songbirds, pine marten, grey jays, moose, woodland caribou and peregrine falcon; of storm-beaten granite and hidden cobblestone beaches. This is Superior's wildest shoreline, a temptation for the adventurous. Our trail hugs the shore, dropping down onto crescent beaches choked with scattered, sun-bleached timber. We teeter across the logs and then dip back into the trees. We climb up to a bald summit, a sweeping plateau of exposed igneous bedrock that provides a picturesque view down to the impressive coastline of Picture Rock Harbour. Gnarled jack pines find root in the minutest patches of soil. I feel like I've stumbled into a Group of Seven painting, with the twisted





A 30-metre high suspension bridge is a highlight of Mdaabii Miikna.

pine sprouting from rock and the rugged islets and islands of Superior in the background.

Narrow wood bridges cross huge crevasses, fissures in the bedrock that fall away into darkness. Then we are winding down again, trekking carefully between huge rocks. I squeeze myself through a narrow boulder-strewn archway called “Tall Man’s Misery,” or what our spry and tidily proportioned guide proudly refers to as “Short Woman’s Glory.”

Our camp for night two is set in another picturesque location, a rock outcrop just above a gently sloping sand beach looking out onto Picture Rock Harbour. That evening, as we sit around the campfire and toast the splendour of our predicament with a dram of single malt, the flicker of Northern Lights glows faintly at the horizon.

On our last day, the Mdaabii Miikna Trail reconnects with the Coastal Hiking Trail and we’re soon plodding along underneath a heavy

forest canopy. The sky turns black and the distant rumbling of thunder echoes over the lake, chasing us through the shadowy depths of the boreal forest. We can hear the sound of Chigamiwinigum Falls ahead, like a strong and steady wind. The fierce cascade cuts a deep gorge along the White River. Spanning its breadth, a 30-metre cable suspension bridge sways 24 metres above the raging torrent. I step with trepidation onto the swinging bridge, but when lightning flashes in the dark sky above, I decide it might be prudent to hurry across.

Our group just makes it to the other side when the sky opens up and we are pelted with driving rain. We slip and slide down the steep muddy slope towards our endpoint and our rendezvous with a shuttle boat below the falls. The landing craft’s running lights appear out of the mist and rain, a welcome sight. The heavy downpour had quickly dampened our clothes but not our spirits—a storm is always more welcome at the end of a hike than at its beginning.

Boat pilot Brian Gionet greets us at the helm and then guides the vessel down the White River and onto the rough chop of Superior, while a thick coastal fog settles in, hiding the rugged landscape we have just hiked. Gionet knows the contours of land and water from memory and navigates through the treacherous shoals which reach up like hidden claws beneath the surface.

I am struck by the dramatic contrasts of Pukaskwa. Contrasts of power and fragility—the immensity of the landscape juxtaposed against the astonishing resiliency of the delicate plant and animal life we have witnessed on route. Weather-beaten granite is home to fragile and colourful lichen. Storm contrasts with calm. We had departed camp this morning in a light breeze that hardly ruffled the water’s surface, and a

swell which curled only a thin lip on the sand. Now, in mid-afternoon, we ended our trek in a furious storm that has whipped the lake into a frenzy.

I understand better how paddling the temperamental waters of the coastal route along Pukaskwa’s dramatic shoreline can be a challenge. This 135-kilometre section is reputed among kayakers to be the lake’s most scenic and most difficult to paddle. Massive shore-pounding waves are roiled by prevailing west winds pushing across the longest open stretch on the lake. You must plan for the unscheduled.

Well, we will leave that paddle for another time—and I promise myself I will also return soon to tackle the full 60-kilometre length of the Coastal Hiking Trail. This has been a taste only—the beautiful, awesome and haunting Superior coastline leaves you wanting more. ✕



TRIP PLANNER

Getting There: Pukaskwa National Park’s remote location makes it a bit harder to access, but this adds to the quiet and charm. It takes about 12 hours to drive to Pukaskwa National Park from Toronto. Alternatively, fly into Thunder Bay or Sault Ste. Marie and then rent a car for the four-hour drive. The route along Superior’s north shore from either direction is spectacular. Thunder Bay-based Animiki Tours can also arrange transfers.

Where to Stay/Camp: Hattie Cove offers 67 campsites and several comfort stations. Reserve front-country and backcountry campsites at reservation.pc.gc.ca. (Note: Our fantastic on-trail campsites were PH3 and PRH4.) The Marathon Harbour Inn (807.229.212) in town offers well-equipped rooms.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Join park interpreters at the **Anishinaabe Camp** at Hattie Cove, with its new wigwam and *jiiibaakwegamig* (cook tent), to explore the rich cultural, spiritual and historical heritage of the Anishinaabe people. Warm up for your hike by trekking some of the park’s 11 kilometres of front-country trails and take in the beautiful lake views.

Hike or Paddle: Marathon’s McCuaig Marine can arrange boat shuttles if you’d like to be dropped off or picked up along the trail—inquire when booking the hike. If planning to paddle, canoes and kayaks can be rented in Thunder Bay (wildernesssupply.ca) or Rossport (kayakrossport.ca) if coming from Thunder Bay or Wawa (naturallysuperior.com) if driving from Sault Ste. Marie.

For more information: pc.gc.ca/pukaskwa.