



An estimated 2,000 established outdoor and adventure sport operators in Canada, and plenty more micro-businesses, offer surf and turf adventures ranging from mild to wild. Each year, locals and tourists from around the globe flock to our country's majestic rivers, mountains, beaches, parks and trails to temporarily ditch their jobs, email alerts and stresses in order to unwind.

No wonder a 2014 CBC Marketplace survey determined that 58 per cent of Canadians have tried outdoor adventure sports at least once, while a 2012 Canadian Nature Survey report showed that 89 per cent of adults in this country engaged in nature-based activities.

Not exactly small change, which is exactly why Costco member Jeff Jackson, an industry veteran and coordinator of Algonquin College's Outdoor Adventure program in Pembroke, Ontario, maintains that while a love for the great outdoors is often what drives entrepreneurs to open their companies, running them requires understanding business basics. "You have to look at it through a business lens," he says. "If it's going to be sustainable, there's got to be a business backbone there."

That means dealing with challenges specific to the industry: the need for specialized equipment, hiring properly trained staff with credentials, obtaining special permits—and, yes, the impact of bad weather.

But it's the perks of the job—glorious sunsets, the stillness of a trail at dawn or the excitement of an approaching storm—that keep outdoor business owners in the game. Here are a few real-life Canadian action heroes—and Costco members—who are geared up for adventure. —Kira Vermond

# When work is play

## The joys of making a living in the great outdoors



A polar bear near Churchill Wild's Seal River Heritage Lodge.

ROBERT POSTMA / CHURCHILL WILD

## Churchill Wild offers close encounters



Mike and Jeanne Reimer

OWNER-OPERATORS of Churchill Wild's four eco-lodges, Mike and Jeanne Reimer have been leading 16-person polar bear viewing adventures for 23 years. Three out of their

four lodges are on the shoreline of the vast western Hudson Bay in subarctic Manitoba. Jeanne grew up in the town of Churchill, 60 kilometres from the couple's Seal River Heritage Lodge.

The couple met and married when Mike worked as a guide for her parents' fishing and hunting lodge, and together they founded the Churchill Wild adventure company ([churchillwild.com](http://churchillwild.com)). "Being able to meet guests from around the world, and to share this uniquely beautiful area with them and see them experience something that is so special, inspired us," says Jeanne.

One of few tours in the world that approaches the Arctic tundra on foot rather than in all-terrain tundra vehicles, Churchill Wild greatly lessens the carbon footprint and impact on the bears and other wildlife, explains Mike. The lodges are in a wildlife corridor with stunning vistas, he notes: "Location, location, location! We are living in the polar bears' front yard."



### OUR DIGITAL EDITIONS

Click here for a video about Churchill Wild's polar bear photo safari. (See page 7 for details.)





Christie Mitchell, left, with sons Drew, middle, and Jayce on the Powell Forest Canoe Route.



JAYCE SHELTON

## Different strokes for rugged folks

IF YOUR idea of outdoor adventure is huddling around a fire waiting for fancy cuisine or booking up-to-the-minute itineraries, Christie Mitchell's expeditions along British Columbia's Sunshine Coast are not for you. But if you're a DIY-er like Mitchell—inclined to savour nature on your own terms—her no-nonsense introduction to the Powell Forest Canoe Route might just be the trip you've been pining for.

When she started Mitchell's Canoe, Kayak & Snowshoes, Sales & Rentals ([canoeingbc.com](http://canoeingbc.com)) more than 20 years ago, the Powell River, British Columbia, resident and single mother of two envisioned guided tours that would appeal to fans of five-star catered kayaking trips. But her research suggested a worldwide longing for the great outdoors on the cheap. The answer was perched in Mitchell's backyard: a nearby paddling and hiking route she'd traversed since childhood, featuring eight picture-postcard lakes, five portag-

ing trails through lush Crown land and free camping amenities.

"What's more darn Canadian than beavers and canoes?" says Mitchell, whose father was an avid outdoorsman. "It's like I'm fulfilling this massive romantic vision about this country."

Mitchell's role in the no-frills experience is to haul vacationers who want to live that vision along a bumpy logging road for about 25 minutes in her '97 Ford van, to the Lois Lake launch spot. Typical costs for a five-day trip are \$380 per couple; the fee covers drop-off and pickup, a lightweight two-person canoe, expert trip preparedness, tips for luring lake fish and shunning bears, and a promise to intervene should things go awry. This includes asking clients to hike to the highway and flag down a passing driver in an emergency—not a problem in a community that's known and respected Mitchell and her family for decades.

Mitchell's sharpest business sense, she says, comes from her entrepreneurial parents, who taught her to make her customers' vision her own. "They both put their best into their endeavours," she says. "It paid off." —Dana Tye Rally

Churchill is the polar bear capital of the world, with about 1,000 bears arriving there from late June to autumn. In semi-hibernation, they've fasted for months, waiting for Hudson Bay to freeze so they can hunt for young seals and beluga whales on the ice. Nearly 15,000 tourists from all over the world converge on Churchill during polar bear season. Most tour in tundra vehicles, while about 600 view the bears on foot, venturing out from the cozy, well-appointed Churchill Wild lodges. During the summer, visitors can view thousands of beluga whales, as well as spectacular hot pink fireweed blossoms.

Every day in summer and autumn, the lodges offer two guided wildlife treks through the Arctic landscape and tidal flats, and over the bay's rocky coastline, under a sky filled with shimmering light blues, grays and golds. The aurora borealis often appears at night.

In 2015, Seal River Heritage Lodge and Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge became part of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World collection, a highly sought-after and respected distinction. Mike notes that the National Geographic affiliation is a "validation that everything we do is right."

—Irene Middleman Thomas

## Back to Nature

BEAR AND DIANE Baker spent decades living on the land and working with horses. Opening a horse and guest ranch seemed like the logical next step.

In 2002, the Bakers opened Wildhorse Ranch ([wildhorsecamp.com](http://wildhorsecamp.com)) near Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, which offers equine and adventure programs for children, teens and adults. Diane leads empowerment programs for girls and women, while Bear heads adventure programs for boys and girls and post-traumatic stress disorder programs for men.

Bear says it took years of experience for them to get to where they are now and to develop the programs they offer. He advises, "Before you start an outdoor business, do your research, because it's very challenging, with hard physical work, but the rewards are worth it. You must be a jack of all trades, very self-sufficient, and be prepared for the unexpected."

Bear, of First Nation ancestry, says his path took him from trapper, hunter, cowboy, guide and outfitter to police officer and fire chief and finally to sharing his life experiences and knowledge with others. Diane gets her love of the land from great-grandparents who were Alberta pioneers. She has owned horses all of her life. A teacher by trade, Diane loves to share her two passions—the outdoors and horses—with others.

Wildhorse Ranch is home to 60  
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COURTESY OF WILDHORSE RANCH







*Wildhorse Ranch offers day, over-night and weeklong equine programs.*

DIANE BAKER

## WHEN WORK IS PLAY

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horses that act as facilitators to help build participants' leadership skills, confidence and self-esteem.

"We help them find their voice and power. After completing tasks in the outdoors, through working with horses, they gain inspiration and confidence to help them realize their potential," says Diane.

Bear adds, "At Wildhorse Ranch, we help others touch the earth, connect with themselves and all living things, and just live. It's also an opportunity for us to share the outdoors with others who are programmed to survive in a city where they live a life of technology. The accommodations offered at Wildhorse Ranch are rustic cabins or canvas tents, there is no electricity or running water and we ask that you leave your cellphones at home." —*Diane L.M. Cook*

*The St. Lawrence II outside Gaspé, Quebec, in 2014.*



FRASER MCCAULEY

*Chris Chafe*



COURTESY OF SHADOW COONEY

## Charting a new course

FOR ABOUT EIGHT months of the year, Chris Chafe lives in what he calls a "normal house" with "normal rooms" in Cobourg, Ontario. He conducts business out of a "normal office" too.

But those other four months? Let's just say his job can be a little rocky at times.

Chafe is the captain and program manager for Brigantine Inc. ([brigantine.ca](http://brigantine.ca)), a non-profit company that sails the *St. Lawrence II*, a tall ship docked in Kingston, Ontario. The organization runs two programs for youths: one that runs all year and a summer camp that sails to Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and Georgian Bay.

If motivating teens on a tall ship seems to be a tall order, that's because it is. Although

there are the tranquil horizons, wide-open blue skies and the soothing lapping of waves against the hull, part of Chafe's job involves encouraging even the most tentative sailor to come out of his or her shell.

"I get these reports from parents saying, 'My teenager came back and now they want to do the dishes all the time and help out. I don't know what you've done to them,' " he reports, laughing. "But when you're on the boat, there's no one to do the dishes for you—and it's not fair if you don't pull your own weight."

He learned those same lessons of discipline, self-reliance and leadership when his own parents packed him up and put him on the *St. Lawrence II* for camp back when he

was 15, in 1995. They didn't want their son hanging around the house all summer.

It paid off. Chafe eventually sailed along the shores of Canada's Maritime provinces, down to the U.S. and even around Europe. He became program manager in 2012.

Despite living in a cabin the size of a closet for months at a time and training hundreds of youths, Chafe, who has worked in traditional office jobs but felt stifled, is eager to get back out on the water. This year, the ship will sail to Quebec City as part of a tall ship regatta for RDV 2017, a Canada 150 event. The crew will then head to New York City. "This career definitely fulfills a spirit of adventure and my need to get out there and wander," says Chafe.—KV