

# Condé Nast Traveler

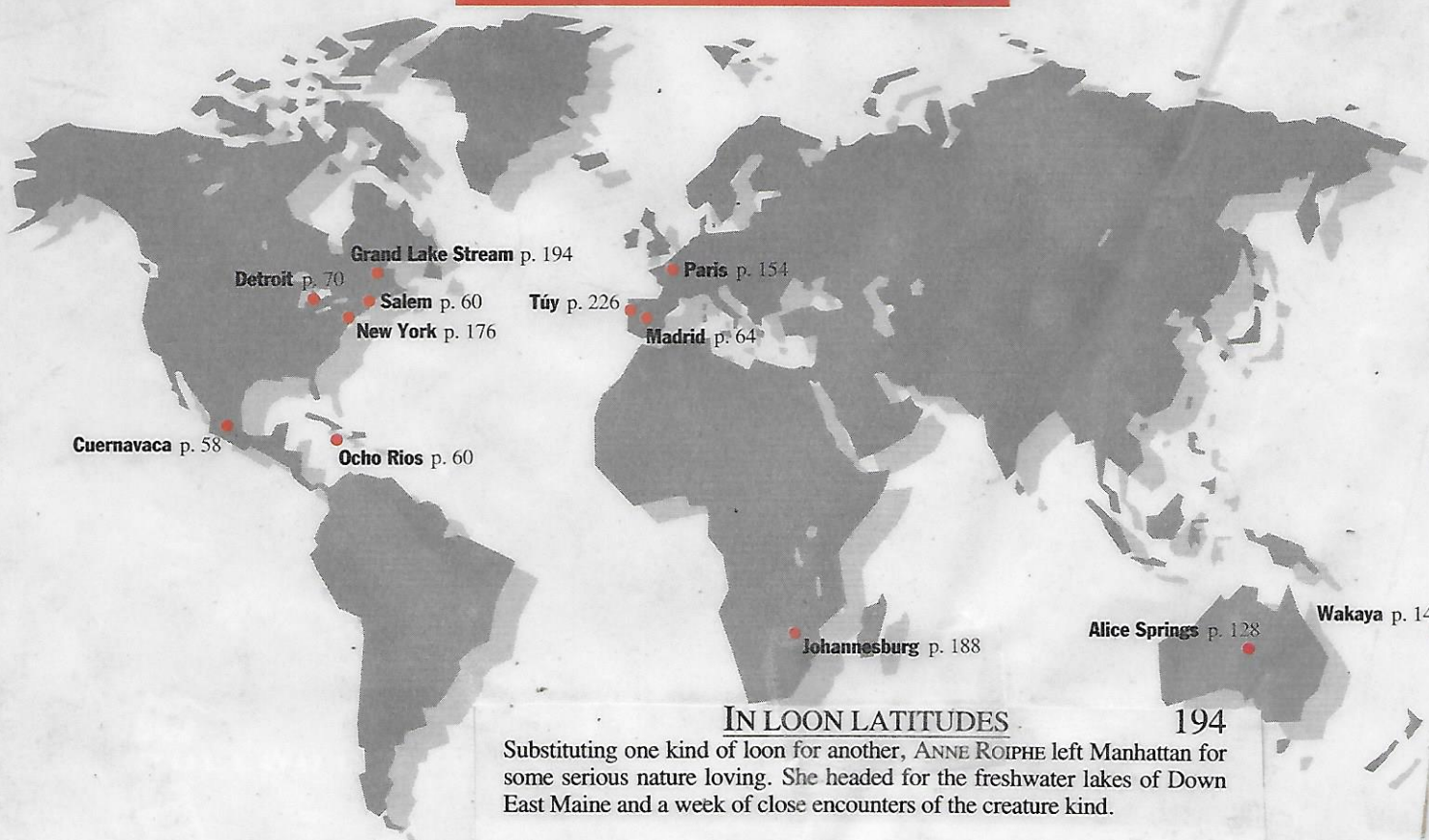
GREAT NEW  
SOUTH PACIFIC  
HIDEAWAY

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

September 1990 \$2.50

## Condé Nast Traveler

TRUTH IN TRAVEL



### IN LOON LATITUDES

194

Substituting one kind of loon for another, ANNE ROIPHE left Manhattan for some serious nature loving. She headed for the freshwater lakes of Down East Maine and a week of close encounters of the creature kind.





New England cozy: A sun-drenched knotty pine bedroom in one of Weatherby's sixteen cabins.





# In loon latitudes

**I**T WAS RAINING HARD AS WE drove north on Interstate 95 out of Bangor. We were headed for Grand Lake Stream, Maine, a dot on the map surrounded by lakes—a town that holds a general store, a salmon hatchery, and a few lodges for anglers drawn to the tall pines and the still, clear lakes carved by glaciers twenty thousand years ago. We were on our way to a two-week vacation at Weatherby's, a lodge selected for us by our son-in-law's brother-in-law, who is a forest ranger in Maine. And so does kinship prove its worth even in these fragmented times.

As we drove virtually alone through towns that passed in the blink of an eye and by road signs that advertised live bait and campgrounds, I felt far away, perhaps too far away, and already nostalgic for the sound of salsa that thumps through our New York City windows in the heat of summer. I regretted so easily giving up the comforts of city streets.

We were given a cabin with a fireplace and a stack of wood, bare pine walls, old vinyl rocking chairs, a screened porch against which the pine needles scratched and the wet leaves dripped. On the walls were written in faint pencil marks the names of previous tenants and the number of

fish they had caught: twenty-five smallmouth bass on this lake, fourteen landlocked salmon on that. We lit a fire and listened to the rain and prepared our fishing rods and talked about the children and the work we had left behind. It takes a while to start a vacation.

After breakfast the next morning, we went with a guide, Chris, for our first day on Big Lake. The sky was overcast. The motor on the end of the canoe seemed to be the only sound for miles around. As we pulled farther and farther away from the shore, more islands appeared, each with rocky points, tall pines, and sandy beaches. I couldn't see the shore or the way back to the landing. We heard the trilling of a loon on the left side of the canoe. He came within five feet of us, and as a streak of sun broke through the clouds,

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the black color on the loon's curved neck turned deep forest green. We fished for bass. We caught some nine- and ten-inch ones and released them for next year. We moved from spot to spot across the vast lake; the islands changed their shapes as we moved around. The loon appeared and disappeared. We threw him a fish and he came closer. His red eyes were as empty as glass. In the gray sky above our canoe we saw two bald ea-





**Take your pick: More than a dozen lakes, each with a surprise.**

gles, and they were joined in their slow circles by a fish hawk. We saw the eagles' nest, out on one of the far islands, huge, hanging onto a tall bare tree, a home to return to season after season. We went in close to see one of the pair perched on a low branch. Suddenly, it hunched its shoulders and opened its wings and was gone, reeling backward into the sky. The sun came out, and we leaned back in the hot haze and talked about bass: how big they grow, what feed they prefer, their wily habits, their liking for deep pools off rock beds, and their fondness for weeds in which the baitfish swim in the moving shadows.

We pulled the boat up onto a sandy beach, lit a fire, and cooked the fish we had just caught, walked on the pine needle floor of the island, and drank

lemonade and ate cookies packed in the straw picnic basket we had been given by the Weatherby's kitchen. I swam in the water, cold and clean. We returned to the lodge nine hours later. It seemed as if we had journeyed a thousand miles. We stood on the dam, listening to the roar of water, looking at the fish ladders that spilled water down, and waited as the sun set over Grand Lake, turning it silver as the shapes of the shore became silhouettes and the ducks and cedar waxwings became black with night.

On the following days we explored other lakes. We rode to them in our guide's truck along dirt roads that wound through lumber-company land and endless acres of forest. No one lived there or left his mark, with the exception of a few uninhabited cabins

tucked away behind the trees. We went to Third Machias, to Fourth Machias, to Pocomoonshine. Each lake is different—like a human face, each has a surprise, a character, a smell, a depth, a texture of its own. We caught four two-and-a-half-pound bass on Third Machias, and we also got caught in a squall and sat huddled under our ponchos as the black clouds streamed across the sky. We landed twelve white perch for lunch at Fourth Machias, and at Pocomoonshine we had our triumph. Together, the fish taking first my husband's bait, then mine, we pulled in a three-and-a-half-pound bass. I watched him swim on the stringer that Chris had placed him on and saw the delicate brown mottling on his fins. We brought him back to the lodge for dinner. Catching a bass, let-



ting it run with the bait, and then pulling it in as the rod curves and bends into the water causes an electricity through the body, just like falling in love the first time.

**I**T'S EASY, OUT THERE ON THE lakes, to imagine the Penobscot Indians who first brought their canoes to the shore and who must have belonged to the curve and wind of the water in a way that we, with our minds so full of other images, could not. Chris took us to a small island that belonged to another guide and described how, in the wintertime, the guide trapped fox and beaver on the ice. One January he had found a man in his cabin who turned out, after a chase through a snowstorm, to be an escaped inmate from a Canadian hospital for the mentally ill. Chris showed us two small islands on Fourth Machias that had been consumed by a lightning fire, which, jumping from one island to the other, had brought them both—log, flower, and berry—completely to ash. But now, twenty years later, the green had pushed its way up through the charred ground, and although not as tall or as lush as the others, the two burnt islands were alive with birds and mountain laurel and pine and maple. On the far side of one of

## YANKEE HOSPITALITY

Weatherby's, open May through September, has 16 cottages at \$60 per person (double occupancy), with two meals. Picnic basket lunches range from \$5 to \$13. Guide service by canoe for two people is \$120 per day, and flat-bottomed boats, motor- or oar-driven, can be rented for \$38 per day. Grand Lake Stream is two hours from Bangor; contact Weatherby's for precise directions (Box 69, Grand Lake Stream, Me. 04637; 207-796-5558).

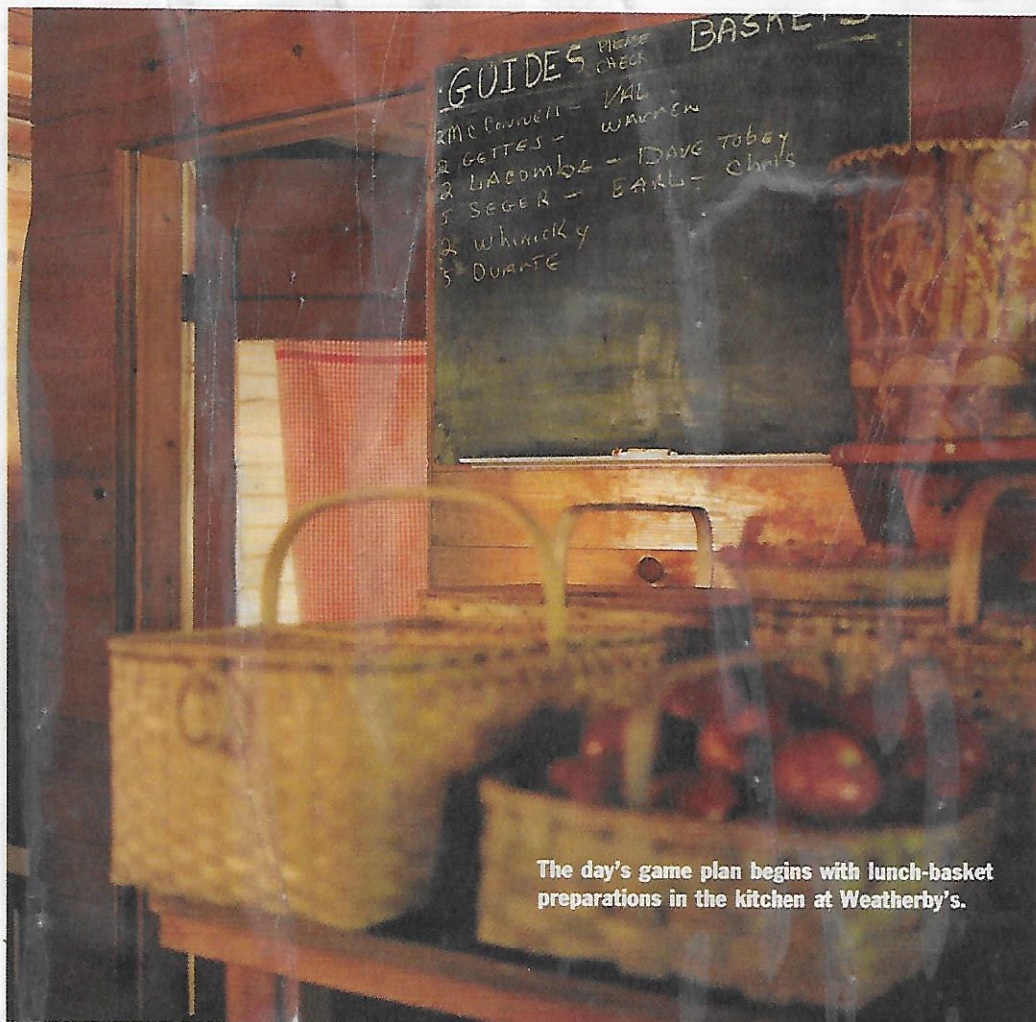
On the walls in faint pencil marks were the names of previous tenants and the number of fish they'd caught: twenty-five smallmouth bass, fourteen salmon

those islands, we startled a blue heron bathing in the weeds. She spread her great wings, stretched out her neck, and fled.

KEN AND CHARLENE SASSI RUN Weatherby's with a friendly approach and some of the best home-cooked food I've ever eaten: muffins and breads, hams and turkeys, soups and pies, Yankee relishes, and pancakes

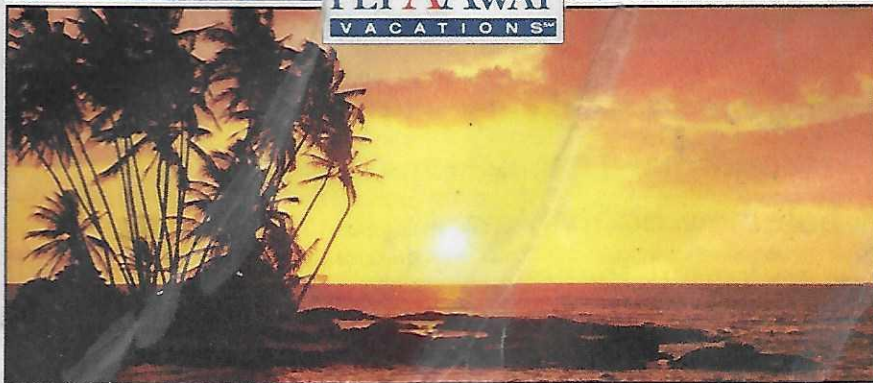
and picnics. The guests at the lodge talk some, about fish mostly; the walls of the dining room have fish on plaques. The sitting room fireplace crackles, the cushions are hand embroidered. There are bird and flower books and a tree with a feeder that has attracted about twenty frenzied hummingbirds. Many guests come back season after season, and I can understand that.

Salmon fishing in the stream is only good in June and September, when the water is cold. The salmon in Grand Lake are not as plentiful as they once were, because the state, in its wisdom, has decided that the salmon industry will prosper if the salmon are limited to one per acre. The salmon, after twenty thousand years of being landlocked, have now been offered a passage out to sea through the St. Croix River, and proving that instinct doesn't dim with time, they have taken it. The Canadian fishermen snatch the salmon once they are in open seas, so few are returning to use the fish ladder and wait in Grand Lake for the tourist season to begin. This was told to us by Chris, who believes that *(Continued on page 212)*



The day's game plan begins with lunch-basket preparations in the kitchen at Weatherby's.





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## Loon Latitudes

(Continued from page 197) the state biologists are as effective in salmon management as cloistered priests are in the art of sex therapy.

**G**RAND LAKE STREAM WAS FIRST settled in 1850, when a tannery was set up by the side of the water on the site that now holds the fish hatchery. The first inhabitants were trappers and tanners and men and women of the woods. When the tannery gave way to newer methods, the town's population dwindled, and now there are only old men and a few young guides and some folks who work in the paper mill up at Woodland. Georgia Pacific seems to have turned this part of Maine into company country. They own the roads where the steeplebush and bunchberry grow, where meadow parsnips bloom. They have flown a burned child into Boston on the company plane, but they have also spilled fumes into the air so that Woodland smelled as if a giant cesspool had leaked across the landscape. "Jobs," say people if you ask them about the odor, reminding us that the glory of the land is not enough to sustain human life. Inevitably, we change the way things are and convert them to something else. I sniff the air at Woodland but remember that I don't intend to write on a stone tablet. I make my peace with the paper companies.

**W**E GO OUT OURSELVES ON BIG Lake, renting a boat on the stream and riding it through a passage thick with high weeds, low water, ducks, and white and yellow lily pads till it opens onto the lake. As soon as we are out on open water, the channel back to the river disappears to the naked eye, and it looks as if a solid bank of weeds lies behind us. We explore carefully so as not to get lost. We catch bass, we almost hit some large rocks. We nearly fall asleep as the boat gently rocks in the sun. Between two discreet Clorox bottles floating near the weeds, we find the channel and feel—as we move slowly back up the river to the dock where we rented the boat—like old hands, like water people, like characters out of *The Wind in the Willows*, where everything that happens is serious, even when nothing at all is happening. An anxiety comes over me as the motor chugs and our stringer clanks against the side of the boat: What if I am never so happy again? Then I am reassured. Thank God, I have not forgotten how to worry. □