

Seeking refuge in a teepee

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Freelance

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EDMONTON - "An owl has left me a feather," says Jerry Wood, as he bends down to scoop the single gray and brown feather off the concrete floor of the cook house.

The winds have started to blow, the evergreens are bending slightly, but the peace that is Elk Island Retreat is not disturbed.

"In the evenings, the moose and deer come out of the forest," he says.

The "forest" is located three kilometres from the west gate of Elk Island National Park. This stand of evergreens is one of the largest remaining in the province. Hiding among the branches and near a lake are five large teepees, two of which are winterized with linings, and two trappers' cabins.

About seven years ago, Doug Heckbert and Rick Hannamum decided to start a refuge close to Edmonton -- but with a twist. While neither man is aboriginal, the suggestion to offer teepee camping along with parking recreational vehicles on the property took off.

Two years later, Wood and wife Gisele joined forces with Heckbert and Hannamum to offer a full aboriginal experience for campers. The Woods operate Eagle Spirit Cultural Programs Inc., based in Edmonton.

"We've changed our program quite a bit from the one we started with.

"We've fine-tuned it to what people wanted," explains Wood.

Families, school groups, youth groups, church groups, businesses and organizations can all handpick their program, ranging from teepee setup to drum making to a medicine wheel workshop to native games.

"Finding your animal spirit is very popular," says Wood.

This "guided journey" helps participants make contact with their animal spirit, a journey which takes about one and a half hours.

"They don't choose the animal. The animal chooses them."

After that, they are invited to paint their animal and the positive characteristics of that animal on a rock.

Drumming circles are also popular, allowing participants an opportunity to relax and go on a meditative journey.

"A lot of companies use that for stress relief. It helps in healing and sickness," says Wood, adding that he and his wife are working on a two-day course for both the

drumming circle and the medicine wheel journey.

The latter journey is a trip toward personal improvement and healing. Erecting the teepee, which is situated around a wooden platform, is also a popular activity.

But teepee work goes beyond simply the structure; it's an opportunity for Wood to explain how each pole has significance -- one pole stands for honesty, another for respect, another for love, another for cleanliness, another for good child rearing and so on.

When the nomadic tribes moved from one camp to the next, the women of each family carried the teepee.

"The teepee represents the ultimate protection of the woman. The teepee is the woman's skirt," says Wood.

The teepee camp, along with its cultural programs, has increased in popularity over the years. Wood notes that while Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) have brought a decline in international tourism, it has presented Eagle Spirit Cultural Programs Inc. with an opportunity to share the Woodlands/Plains Cree culture locally.

"There has been an increase in local interest. People are always amazed at what they get out of a program."

He adds that while non-aboriginals are "very open to learning more" about the native culture, it also gives native people an opportunity to learn about themselves.

"Our culture is re-emerging. Aboriginal people have a sense of pride about who they are. People who were hiding it have come out of the woodwork," observes Wood, a Cree Indian from Saddle Lake First Nations, northeast of Edmonton. Gisele is French Metis, of Montagnais native ancestry.

Elk Island Retreat is well-balanced with its canvas teepees and trappers' cabins, shower house and flush toilets, and propane barbecues in the cook houses. Trails snake their way through the trees along the lake's edge, and participants are taken on walks to identify medicinal plants and bannock is cooked on the campfire, served with bison stew and muskeg tea.

"People say there is something about this area that is relaxing," says Wood.

He also points out that people don't have to drive for hours to go teepee camping.

Elk Island Retreat is located 40 minutes east of the city just off Highway 16. It's one of a handful of aboriginal experiences offered north of Red Deer.

(Elk Island Retreat offers four teepees seven metres in height and another stands about 5.5 metres tall. Each teepee has a wood-burning stove.)

BACK TO EARTH

Eagle Spirit Cultural Programs Inc.

- Operated by Jerry and Gisele Wood.

- Offered at Elk Island Retreat, a private campground located about 40 minutes east of Edmonton.

- Teepees, which are on-site, have wooden floors, but you need to provide your own bedding.
- Programs are individualized to suit families, groups, businesses and organizations.
- There are a number of programs to choose from: teepee teachings, discovery of your personal animal, Aboriginal and Metis games, drumming, Mother Earth teachings, smudging ceremony, and sweat lodge.
- You can provide your own food or partake in bannock and pemmican making, bison stew or bison burgers.
- Reservations for programs must be made and can be done by calling 485-2497.
- Reservations for Elk Island Retreat only can be made by calling (780) 998-0708.

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