
CANADA CAMERA

Michelle Wiebe

Fresh from a Sunshine Coast pineapple patch, I was eighteen years old when a good-looking guy with a gentle Canadian accent, and a beat up Nikon Camera, captured my heart.

Twenty years later, the old camera still works, but has been replaced in everyday use by a shiny new F100 - complete with a compact but comprehensive range of lenses. Mountains and snow have replaced my life of sunshine, surf and tropical fruit. My world now revolves around the man with the sexy voice and his talent for taking arresting photographs.

My role in Canada has become that of a 'Photographic Companion'. It's an important, but often overlooked position in the Photographic world.

A P.C. is someone who totes and carries, shares early morning alarms, moves the branches spoiling a perfect shot or holds an umbrella over the camera. I married that photographer. This is how I know the P.C.'s way of life.

Abnormal becomes normal in our strange world of Photography. Dawn is now a frantic struggle to get that shot in the fleeting morning light. Snug and warm by the shore of beautiful glacier-fed Floe Lake, our well-earned sleep is shattered by a 4.30 alarm. Groaning, I crawl out of the tent to be greeted by darkness. Bear bell in one hand, flashlight in the other, we set out to the ridge top. It is disconcerting to behold bear sign, picked out in the feeble beam of a flashlight. Thank goodness none of the piles of bear scat steam in the cold mountain air. Uneasiness dissipates as the hike continues and the bear does not appear. The alpenglow does, and the photographer gets some wonderful shots from the pass.

I have a theory that the chemicals from skin contact with film produce selective amnesia. My photographer and I both remember our Floe Lake trip vividly. For him, it produced the 'biggest' sale of his career, as one of the shots from that early morning is now displayed as a 20' by 8' mural at the Calgary International Airport. He remembers the lenses, film type, exposures, and thinks about how he could capture some even better images next time. He forgets that the hike was 10.5 kilometres long with a vertical gain of 715 metres. I remember with pain-etched detail the last kilometre of constant, killer switchbacks, and my pack so heavy I could barely lift it from the ground. I was wondering how my body would be recovered from such a place if I gave in to the urge to die right there on the trail. If the photographer feels any pain it is forgotten by the time the tripod is set up.

Lugging around a mountain of gear causes much of the pain of photography. When on paddling trips, my photographer's equipment is stored in a waterproof Pelican Case - big enough to double as a life raft. This case doesn't fit anywhere in the kayaking world with ease. It's too big to fit into any of the compartments in a kayak. Instead it's strapped over the rear hatch cover – adding ballast to the top of the boat.

We became intimately acquainted with this pelican case on a 1300 km journey from Vancouver to Ketchikan, Alaska. My photographer wanted to go on an expedition. Kayaking, he thought, was the mode of transportation for the management and toting of all that gear. No portaging and no backpacks – it will be easy! Twenty-foot tides showed us the folly of that thought. Technically, carrying to and from these distant tide-lines may not be a portage. Practically, that was little consolation. And hauling gear in a backpack sure beats using dry bags.

In fact, when hiking, the backpack is an essential tool for the work of a P.C. Not for expensive camera gear - that is the jealously guarded privilege of the Photographer. The P.C. carries the practical, boring, heavy things: clothes, sleeping bag, sleeping mats (yes both of them), cutlery, dishes, pots, stove, fuel, and ALL the food.

Lone wolf photographers may now see one benefit of a P.C.'s attention. But how to go about finding one? A personal ad may help:

Wanted: Photographic Companion. Looking for someone to share my hobby. Should be energetic, cheerful, and love the outdoors.

A more accurate translation:

Wanted: Sherpa. Looking for someone to share my hobby (and help me carry my stuff). Should be energetic (able to carry lots of stuff), cheerful (doesn't complain when carrying all that stuff) and love the outdoors (likes to carry stuff outside).

The P.C. has other functions beyond that of Sherpa. Environmentally sensitive landscape modification can be extremely valuable to the photographer. Here is how it works: the shot is all lined up, looking good, and then the photographer spots some mouldy leaf stuck in a corner, a branch hanging down where it isn't supposed to, an unattractive rock butting into a mossy bank shot. Off the P.C. goes, to do the dirty work. I have crossed creeks, crashed through thick forest, and laid on wet grass to reach down a creek bank to remove an offending piece of debris. To move a dead branch out of frame, I have stripped off my jeans and waded thigh deep

through icy water into the middle of a swift flowing creek. Anything to make that good shot even better.

Not all assistance a P.C. gives is out of frame. You may be asked to don your best red jacket and gaze wistfully across the waters of a lake. How about being comfortably relaxed in camp after a big days paddling? The sun is setting. Up you get and back into the kayak. Paddle from left to right, right to left, out to the point, sit up straight and smile. A P.C. can paddle a long way and never leave the waters in front of camp.

Knowledge of your place within the photographer's hierarchy is an absolute necessity to be a good P.C. The shot always comes first, then equipment, then the Photographer - the P.C. comes last. With only one umbrella and a downpour, the umbrella gets held over the camera (and coincidentally the photographer). It makes no difference that rivers of cold water are running down the P.C.'s neck. After all, Benadryl Cough and Cold medicine is much cheaper than a new camera.

Hopefully, as a consequence of talent, hard work, and luck, some fabulous photographs are produced. The P.C. can be of help in this situation too. While photographers love taking photos, the business of photography isn't nearly as much fun. A P.C. can take care of the mundane tasks while the photographer spends time planning the next excursion. The Fine Art side of the photography business involves running around to production labs, framing studios and galleries. For stock photography agencies, the selected images need to be labelled, packaged and delivered. Magazines stories need to be written.

It is often difficult to sell individual images to magazines. They prefer a photographic/manuscript package. It is a true bonus for a photographer if their P.C. can write marketable stories. In our case, it took five years of rejection letters before our first story package was published – and after all that effort, payment was a one-year subscription to the magazine. Years later acceptance letters are beginning to outnumber rejections. As my photographer is constantly working to improve his photographic skills – I, as a P.C., am doing the same with my writing. It has been a long, but interesting and rewarding journey.

Why would anyone want to become a P.C.? I do not photograph the dawn from the ridge top as my photographer does. However, I do experience dawn's peace and beauty from my own personal perspective, and then have the added pleasure of seeing that dawn frozen on film and sometimes displayed in coffee table books, calendars or magazines. I get to spend lots of time in fabulous places - helping, exploring and scouting different angles for photography and for writing. Always I am involved in the outdoor experience. It's good for the soul.

My life in Canada has been good for my soul. I do miss the beach and the sound of cricket on the radio on a sultry summer afternoon. And of course, I miss my family back home in Australia. However, I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to live the life that I do. Working with my photographer husband I have experienced some of the best that Canada has to offer - dawn on a mountaintop, sunset at a lakeshore, the sound of a loon calling in the distance as a fire crackles and wraps its warmth around us. Yes, it is a long way from that pineapple patch, but if we had to live anywhere other than Australia, I'm delighted it's Canada.



Michelle Wiebe left Australia in 1986. After a year in England and Europe, she arrived in Canada. The friend I came to visit is now my husband. 'Canada Camera' is a look at the life she shares with her Photographer husband. It is a light-hearted piece, detailing her role as his 'Photographic Companion'. The setting is Canadian wilderness – a big change from the Australian pineapple farm she called home. She has had her writing published previously by several magazines. Her husband's images have also been published in magazines, coffee table books, calendars and advertising.

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