

Life on the Loose

My journey from suburban housewife
to outdoor guide

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Prologue

The woman seated next to me held her hand over her mouth. “I’m terrified,” she moaned. “I feel like I can’t breathe.” She looked pale, pasty white, with beads of sweat on her forehead.

“You might be hyperventilating,” I said. “Try to breathe into this bag and you’ll feel better.” She grabbed the lunch bag and took a deep breath. If only that was me. If only a bag could contain my projectile vomit.

I was too busy throwing up to speak coherently, not into a brown paper bag, but all over the deck of the *Isle Royale Queen* as we pushed through fourteen-foot waves on this five-hour journey from Copper Harbor, Michigan, to Isle Royale National Park. With the exception of one woman we named “Chatty Cathy” because she chattered nonstop to anyone who would listen, everyone on the boat had varying degrees of nausea. Fortunately, those giant waves washed away the remnants of our breakfasts, keeping the deck clear for anyone brave enough to stand.

I was the guide on the way to escort eight backpackers on a week-long trip along the Greenstone Ridge. I sat, glued to a wooden bench on the back of the boat, and asked myself, “What am I doing here?” Puking for five hours had not been my plan when I’d started this adventure travel business. This was my dream, the fantasy that carried me away from suburbia where I was an outsider, and on to

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adventure that would leave me fulfilled and wanting more. If this was adventure, I preferred laundry.

I ran outdoor trips for thirty years. When I started in 1982, I came up with a motto, a tag line for Venture West, my new business: "Complete Carefree Adventures." That's how I envisioned the business and the trips I planned to guide.

"*Complete*" was the easy part. I scouted new trips, arranged transportation, drove the vans, wrote, designed, and mailed six thousand yearly catalogs, answered the phone, and prayed to the weather gods.

But "*Carefree*?" A responsible guide creates a carefree experience for the customers. I had to forgo my carefree to ensure the safety and satisfaction of those customers.

Venture West had a perfect safety record, but that didn't mean there weren't close calls. I lost people: I lost Delores twice, once in Zion National Park and once in the Three Sisters Wilderness. I made wrong turns, like the time I turned left in Canyonlands and led the group six miles in the wrong direction until we were lost at sunset, four miles from the van. And I, the trusted guide, made an occasional bad judgment call, or inadvertently twisted the truth when I said, "No tick has ever been seen here," just as one dropped from a hemlock on to my shoulder.

Nor did I anticipate a steep learning curve in the guide business when I set off on a trail with my first four paying customers in 1982. That's why I've written *Life on the Loose*, not to rave about the joy of adventure travel, but to tell back stories, escapades not to be revealed until I shut down Venture West.

When I took six, eight, twelve people into a wilderness, the success and safety of the trip was up to me. It's not easy to pretend that everything will be fine when you're exposed on a rocky trail, you see lightning flashes in a black sky across a valley, and you're

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five miles from your campsite. When that happened in the Alaska Basin in the Tetons, rain turned to hail, sleet, and snow before we found shelter in our tents.

You will read about the challenges, the struggles, and more than a few surprises in *Life on the Loose*. There were also many glorious times. Grab your backpack and join me on the trail.