

# WILD WOMAN

A pregnant first-time mom goes on an all-women's wilderness trip and contemplates the changes that are ahead in her life.

By Johanna Gohmann

The night before the trip, I am feeling rather anxious. It's ninety degrees F in Brooklyn, and even though the AC is going full blast, I am still coated in a sheen of sweat. I'm hovering over a carry-on suitcase, one hand trying to hold my swaying belly in place, while the other tries to jam a pair of hiking boots in next to some thermal shirts. It's mid-June, and I'm prepping to go on an all-women's "outdoor adventure" trip to Newfoundland, through a company called Wild Women Expeditions. And I'm doing so while five months pregnant.

I've never been to Canada before, and I've certainly never been there toting a fetus. This hadn't been my original plan, of course. Originally, when I'd decided to take the trip, the idea of a baby was still just some hazy, talcum-scented daydream. Back then I'd eagerly signed on for seven days of kayaking, whale watching, and

mountain hiking with a group of strangers. I'd never imagined that when the trip finally rolled around my packing list would include pre-natal vitamins and belly butter.

I mean, the pregnancy wasn't exactly a surprise...we had hoped and tried for it. But it was a bit of a shocker in that my husband and I hadn't really anticipated it happening so – eh – quickly. All of the scary fertility reports I read online made it sound like at thirty-six, I practically had tumbleweeds blowing through my uterus. So we were both rather taken aback when that pinkplus sign appeared.

We know how fortunate we have been to have it come so easily, and that isn't something either of us have taken lightly. The first few weeks, we spoke of the pregnancy timidly, as if I were walking around the apartment balancing a Faberge egg on my nose. Only



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after the days became weeks, and finally months, have we allowed ourselves to talk with more excitement. Now, we’ll be watching Game of Thrones or walking to the grocery, and one of us will suddenly look at the other in wonder: We’re going to have a baby! A baby boy, in fact!

As my Canada jaunt drew closer, my husband began to frown whenever I mentioned the trip. He’d call me over to Google maps, and point at the rather remote smudge of Newfoundland hovering in the Atlantic.

“Are you sure this is still a good idea?” He’d ask, casting a sidelong glance at my belly.

Of course!” had been my standard reply. Even though I wasn’t really sure at all. Sure, my OB has given the trip the okay – has told me to have a good time, just not to ride any bikes or horses. I have her blessing. But as I struggle to pack my bag, I’m all jittery. It isn’t the traveling alone bit. I’ve traveled on my own many

times, and it’s something I love to do. Other than my husband and my family, I’d probably rank plane tickets among my greatest loves. I’ve even occasionally been billed as a “travel writer” in my work life. So traveling solo isn’t the issue. Rather, it’s this new idea of traveling for two that has me biting at my cuticles. On this adventure I’ll be toting a wee passenger, and I’m discovering that this carries a whole new twist of emotions.

Partly, I feel anxious for the baby’s safety. I know, I know, I’m just going to Canada! It’s not like I’m heading off to cover the Syrian conflict. But as a first-time mom, I am still getting used to treading through the days with such care and concern...with dealing with the odd, rubber-bandy abdominal sensations, and suddenly eyeing soft cheeses like my salad has been sprinkled with arsenic. Every day now feels like it brings a whole new host of dangers. Under normal circumstances, I would

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not think twice about kayaking. But pregnant, I suddenly have visions of capsizing and being chased by Jaws.

Along with this general anxiety, I have another thread of thoughts that keeps tangling in my brain. The fact is, I am well aware that this wilderness adventure will be the last time I ever take a trip like this again, pre-baby. While I generally glow with elation whenever I think about my little son, another, quieter part of me has been sifting this shift in my freedom and identity over and over...staring at it like some strange, alien substance.

This doesn't feel like the most flattering thing to admit. Again, I know how fortunate I am, and because of this, it sometimes feels as though my concerns for My Changing Life are rather precious, if not borderline obnoxious. But I've been doing what I want, when I want, for quite a long time, and this sudden new “life of limitations” is a bit of an adjustment. It would be great if we all turned into selfless insta-earth mothers the second the sperm met the egg, but alas, that doesn't appear to be how it works.

It's not like I haven't considered any of this stuff before. Prior to getting pregnant, my husband and I talked at great length about what it would mean to have a child, and how our lives would change. We didn't just jump into bed naked and say, “Tiny socks sure are adorable!” We discussed it. But the emotional difference between chatting about a kid over a glass of merlot, and then actually knowing that there is a tiny human growing inside of you, is like the difference between having someone show you a picture of Paris scrawled in crayon, and actually standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Now that I was really having a baby, all of the things I thought I'd thought through – the shift in my identity, my sudden loss of freedom, and of course, the brain-exploding idea that I was now responsible for another life – well, it was all hurtling towards me in full color, IMAX 3-D.

I know I'm not alone in this anxiety. I've certainly had friends admit to similar, 3 AM inner monologues.

Recently, I even heard about a film that's in the works, where a woman finds out she's pregnant, but doesn't want to give up her identity as a wild child, so she keeps the pregnancy secret, and pretends to continue to be a party girl. It's a goofy concept, but it makes me laugh – the idea of pulling on a baggy blouse and saying “Hey guys! Look! I'm still loads of fun!” while throwing a shot of Patron over your shoulder.

What can I still do as this new “mom” person? Who am I as “Mom”? And what is it going to be like to actually slow down, and let this new, very tiny guy in my life call the shots? In a small way, this trip seems a kind of test of this new me.

And all of this is swirling in my mind as I try to pack.

I'm supposed to bring a bathing suit, and I try to stretch an old one piece over my sizable bump. For one triumphant second I think it fits, until I try to move, and the material feels like it's going to pop off of my body like a party balloon. Wonderful. I sit and take a breather. If I'm sweaty and exhausted merely from packing, how am I going to manage a wilderness hike? I give my belly a pat. Come on now. We can do this. I rise, and get back to trying to jam twelve Luna bars into the front of my suitcase. Just in case. In case of what, I'm not sure. The trip promises three full meals a day, and it isn't like we have to spear halibut for our dinner. But my stack of Nutz Over Chocolate bars (packed with folic acid!) lends me some kind of comfort.

My flight from Newark to Halifax is without incident, and I'm touched by the men who seem to puff up with gallant pride whenever they help lift my suitcase. The flight from Halifax to Deer Lake, however, is on a tiny puddle jumper, and while the propellers roar outside my window, I quietly pray the vibrations aren't putting my amniotic fluid on spin-cycle.

Finally on the ground, I scan the tiny airport for the women I'll be adventuring with. I have no idea what to expect. Will they be twenty-three-year-old tri-athletes with spirit animal tattoos? Or lean retirees carting bottles of back pills? I take a seat near a cluster of three



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forty-something women all clad in hiking boots. Seems a safe bet. I watch as a smiling woman with close cropped blonde hair bounds over to them, hand outstretched.

“You must be my wild women!” She beams. “I’m Ally, your guide.”

The women all rise to shake hands, and I shyly creep closer.

“Hi! I’m a wild woman too.” I smile awkwardly, feeling everyone’s eyes drop from my face to my swollen abdomen. Yes. So very wild indeed.

The hiking boot women are two Canadians – Nancy and Sandra – and one fellow New Yorker, Rhonda. Coincidentally, Rhonda lives three blocks from me in Brooklyn, which amuses us both. The women all offer friendly hellos, then we gather our bags and make our way to the mini-van that will shuttle us throughout the trip. Small talk dominates the drive to our cabins, and I gaze sleepily out the window – the shock of so much deep green startling my city eyes. I suddenly feel weary surrounded by these strangers, and I have a bit of longing for my own bed, and the floppy embrace of my enormous pregnancy pillow. I can’t imagine what my week with these women will be like, or what the trip will hold.

Turns out, it will float by as a slideshow of breathtaking vistas, tear-inducing laughter, and some welcome, but surprising discoveries. (And maybe a tiny bit of nudity.)

I spend one afternoon with Nancy, a Canadian woman on the cusp of fifty who sports spiky gray hair. It’s the feared kayaking day, and Nancy ends up acting as my own personal gondolier. Nancy is a mother herself, as well as a curler, and one afternoon she shows off her impressive upper body strength by powering the two of us around the crystalline ocean in our red

two-seater boat. I paddle when I can, but when I get tired, Nancy clucks at me to rest. I sit with the paddle sit across my lap, and Nancy rockets us forward... so close to some minke whales, that at one point I actually wonder if we’re going to pull a Jonah. I’m so overwhelmed with excitement, I want to call down to my stomach, Did you see that!? Did you see that!?

Never in a million years would I have imagined that Ally would end up snapping some nude, a la Demi Moore maternity shots of me on a deserted beach. But that is what happens. Normally I’m not really one

for stripping down for a lens, but that afternoon I happily kick my clothes into the sand. Later, I gaze at the pictures – at my round stomach and full breasts, the wind rattling my hair – and I’m amazed at how beautiful the images made me feel. With a smirk, I email one to my husband with the subject heading: “Hope you don’t mind. These were taken by some local fisherman.”

Hilariously, the activity on my Wild Women adventure that ends up feeling the most treacherous isn’t kayaking or hiking, but a game of charades. Rhonda, a



Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland

Photo © Tango7147

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Woody Allen-esque intellectual, and Sandra – a gentle, soft spoken woman with a bone dry wit – end up making me laugh so hard on games night that I wind up doubled over, blotting tears from my eyes, and fearful for my bladder. I apologize to my son for so much jostling...wondering if he is feeling the rush of endorphins brought on from my cackling. I promise myself I’ll do thousands of kegels in the morning.

I never would have imagined that my first ever baby purchase would be in Newfoundland, Canada...but it is. One day I’m strolling through a tiny fishing village, and I pass a handwritten sign in front of a house that promises baby blankets and “slippeys.” (That’s Newfie-speak for slippers.) I stand in a little old woman’s kitchen and sort through her Tupperware bin of handmade blankets. I select a soft yellow and white number that I think looks cheerful and happy – like I can swaddle my boy in a big, sunny ray of hope.

The last day of the trip we head to The Tablelands – a haunting, billion-year-old stretch of the earth’s crust that was pushed up during the continental drift. Reaching the lookout point means a long walk up an incline, with strong wind and pellets of rain blasting down into your face. But it’s a UNESCO World Heritage site, and I’m determined to see it.

So I go slowly. Very very slowly. And I end up straggling far behind the others, like the unpopular kid at camp everyone is trying to ditch. The wind makes it hard to get my breath, and several times I have to stop to rest and drink some water. But I finally make it, and I’m rewarded with a jaw-dropping view. The dramatic terrain resembles photos of Mars. As I gaze out at the landscape of mist and stone and catch my breath, it occurs to me that I’m not really going to miss anything as a mom. I’m just setting off on a different, sometimes more challenging path. But I know it’s a journey that comes with its own set of amazing, heartbreakingly beautiful views. I feel in my heart that I can continue to move through life as a wild woman. And I will have my wild little boy by my side.

There is one night of the trip that I know will stay with me for a very long time. We all go to a local bar to listen to traditional Newfoundland music, and at one point, the bursting-with-energy Ally leaps from her chair and begs one of us to dance with her. I love to dance, and my most standard move is to twirl about with reckless, better-hold-on-to-your-drink abandon. But that night I feel shy and awkward as I haul myself from my chair and follow Ally onto the floor. It’s the first time I’ve been dancing since getting pregnant. The music is a slow waltz, and as we join hands, I know we make a somewhat striking pair: me with my beach ball belly encased in a pink tee shirt, and Ally, with her buzz cut and a chain dangling from her jeans. We are the only people on the floor, and I feel the clusters of senior citizens gazing out at us – a sea of eyeglasses and poufs of white hair. In the background the band is singing mournfully of a sailor trying to get home to his girl, and Ally is gracefully swirling me around the room. I try as best as I can to keep up, occasionally bringing one of my swollen feet down onto her sandals. I wonder what the baby is making of these strange movements, and I imagine telling my son about this moment someday. I can’t wait to have him here with me in the world, dancing atop my own toes.

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I’m just going to be learning some new steps.

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