Anywhere and Everywhere

Growing up in Tobago, Terry Dennis spent all his time outdoors. But after emigrating to Québec, he lost his close connection with nature, until a mentor helped him revive his spirit of exploration.



TEXT Mark Mann
PHOTOS Drowster

Terry Dennis spent his whole childhood close to the sea. He was very nearly born in it: his mother's water broke one morning while she was swimming, and she only realized it when she got home.

"I've got that connection with the ocean and with my ancestors," he tells me, recalling his upbringing in the Caribbean and massaging his leg with a deer antler while we talk in his Montréal apartment. The walls are hung all over with rods and tackle, along with many mementos from a lifelong love of fishing. Terry is 60 now and a seasoned outdoorsman who's ventured far and wide across Québec's rugged landscape. He's devoted his life to helping others find a similar passion for the water.

As a child, Terry liked to hang around with the men who would gather by a tall tree on a hill overlooking the bay in his hometown of Plymouth, Tobago. There, they would talk and survey the ocean, until someone spotted a telltale sign of a passing school of fish. Then they'd run down and start pulling in a large net that had been hung in the water from buoys—a technique known as "seine fishing." Terry loved to be part of the group hauling in the fish, an enormous feat that could take all day to complete.

"My heroes were fishermen," he says. Even the grunt work appealed to him. He'd watch the men knitting nets all day, and he'd think to himself, "I want to do that."

His dreams were diverted, however, when he emigrated to Montréal as a young teenager, arriving during an ice storm. He got frostbite that first winter, but he quickly adapted, and he brought his spirit of adventure to the city's snowy streets.

"We built huge snow forts and had big snowball fights across the neighbourhood," he recalls with a laugh. When the snow piled up deep, he and his friends would jump off the balconies into snowbanks. When the roads were slick with ice, they'd grab onto the backs of city buses and ride down the street, sliding on their feet. But urban life slowly eroded his connection with nature, and by the time he finished high school, his journey had shifted in a different direction.

"There was a point where I stopped being in the outdoors," he says. "I lost that to different kinds of negativity."

He is candid about that period of his life. By his own telling, he became a gangster. "I was not a nice guy. I did everything that is associated with that life." He ended up getting charged for drug possession and narrowly avoided a long sentence.

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But looking back, he wouldn't change anything. "Yeah, there was a dark spot. But the negativity was good, because people can learn from my experience. I lived it, and I'm doing good today. God has blessed me."

In his forties, Terry started making his way back to the water, shore fishing in his spare time along the rivers that run past the Island of Montréal. He started connecting with a few fishing friends with similar backgrounds, and that's when he was introduced to Rusty, an older Black man who would change his life.

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Terry was immediately impressed by Rusty, who'd built his own home in the forest and who roamed freely in the backcountry on his collection of snowmobiles and ATVs: "He had it all." Terry particularly admired Rusty's willingness to travel, especially to obscure rural corners of Québec to fish and camp. "He taught me to go anywhere and everywhere. That lesson has stuck in my soul for the rest of my life."

The two friends started making expeditions together, often with no destination in sight. "We'd pick a road and take it, maybe for the whole weekend. Then we'd just go in the bush and chill." They'd walk around barefoot, or through the rain, sometimes stopping at campsites and meeting people. "We'd be sitting around at night playing *Lord of the Flies,* me and him," Terry tells me, laughing. "We were having a ball."

Until then, the overwhelming Whiteness of rural culture in Québec had been holding Terry back from following his instinct to explore. "There's a lot of suspicion because of your colour. It's real," he says, describing the sort of tension that can arise when walking into a rural gas station or meeting someone on the trail. "You're never going to understand that in a million years," he tells me, addressing my own whiteness.

While Montréal is one of the most diverse cities in Canada, Québec is still the least racially diverse province in the country, Statistics Canada reported in 2021. And the difference is only getting more stark. "The gap . . . has always existed, but in the last five years, it has widened in an unprecedented way," the demography researcher Jack Jedwab told the *Montreal Gazette*.

Rusty encouraged Terry to manage rural encounters with positivity. "Old boy," he would say, "you can go everywhere you want. It's how you carry yourself when you get there that's going to open the door."

This approach came naturally to Terry. He greets everyone he meets with a gentle-but-irresistible avalanche of charm. "When you feel that negative energy, you can let it control you, or you can flip it around," he explains, adding that it always worked well for the two friends: "We got love all the time."

In the end, Rusty helped Terry to change his mindset about being in the outdoors in Québec. "He taught me how to break down a wall I was living behind, a wall of self-segregation."

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Terry and Rusty began calling in more friends, many with shared roots in the Caribbean, to join them on their fishing adventures. Over time, they assembled an informal group that they called the SUA Crew, which stands for Suburban Anglers. While the SUA Crew is composed of men, the pair would also organize big family-style cookouts and camping trips at Voyageur Provincial Park just across the border with Ontario.

The SUA Crew mostly gathers on one of the small islands very near Montréal. They call it "the Spot." The 160-acre island is covered by a dense forest that has remained largely untouched for more than a century—a lush haven for those in the know. There, the crew can camp, host cookouts, go mudding with their trucks, and, most of all, fish.

As he leads me around the island, Terry points out some of the best places to cast a line. There's a spot where he reliably catches alligator gar, a pikelike fish with a long nose and a mouth full of spiky teeth. He also regularly pulls in smallmouth bass, musky, pike, perch, and more.

These days, Rusty can no longer be found at the Spot. He eventually moved to Nova Scotia, where he passed away from cancer on February 15, 2021. He never told Terry about his illness. It was a devastating loss.

"When I met Rusty, a lot of things started changing in my life. My whole mentality changed," Terry says, looking back on their friendship. "Just by being with him and going places with him, that was how he taught me."

Now Terry is playing that role for others. In 2018 he launched an outdoor adventure company, Kaya-Pêche, which he founded with his partner, Patricia Lindo. They had been high school sweethearts and reconnected later in life. She helped him buy his first kayak and became a sort of business coach. "She taught me a lot," Terry tells me, shaking his head in appreciation. "She's amazing."

When he talks about Kaya-Pêche, he describes it as a slow art of manifestation: the important thing is to carry a strong intention and take the opportunities as they come. Mostly, he's looking for an excuse to take people on the sort of kayaking and fishing adventures that have enriched his own life so much, especially those who might need help getting over the same hurdles that he did.

"You should never think that because of your colour you're not supposed to do certain things," he says. "Do everything. You may like it or not, but at least try." Then he adds, "So let's go kayaking. I'm here to take you."

Terry guarantees that everybody who goes fishing with him is going to catch something, whether it's a fish or, as he says, a meditation. "That's automatic, no matter what. There's a point where Mother Nature takes over." A slight grin sweeps across his face as he searches for the words. "You're in the zone when you're fishing. You think a lot and your mind goes." He pauses: "It's sacred." ►

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