

## It's a Trip!

By Ginger Kuenzel

It was a cold grey winter afternoon in Boston when my brother Ed called from Wyoming to tell me he'd won the lottery. He wasn't talking about winning big bucks. No, he was one of the lucky few who was being issued a permit to float down Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon River in a raft. Since there's only a one in 30 chance of having your name drawn, and he'd been trying for the past 10 years, he was pretty excited. And because I'm his favorite sister (okay, I'm also his only sister), he was inviting me to go along. How could I say no? As I looked out my window at the snow and slush on the city streets, five days floating a river in the scenic Pacific northwest in June sounded pretty good. I'm in!

The day before our launch, we arrive at the put-in at Boundary Creek in late afternoon and set up our tents. There are 15 of us in our group, with five rafts. We're at an altitude of about 6,000 feet, and the mountains around us are still capped with snow. After breakfast, we walk down to the launch site. People are milling about in colorful T-shirts and big straw hats, beers in hand, anticipation in the air, waiting with their rafts and equipment for their turn to launch. Seven rafting parties are allowed to launch each day. The ranger explains the rules of the wilderness: Take out everything you bring in, including human waste; all fires must be in firepans so they leave no trace; strain your dishwater to catch any food particles.

We load all the equipment into our rafts – tents, sleeping bags, drybags with our clothing, wetsuits, camp chairs, tables, camp stove, coolers, utensils, food, pots and pans, an extra oar (just in case), food for five days, cameras, drinking water. And oh, yes, beer. Many of the items are kept close at hand: Raft repair and first aid kit, throw bag for rescues, air pump and, of course, the beer. Each of us has a small drg bag with essentials like sunscreen, camera, insect repellent, trail mix. All the other gear is packed and strapped down tight, inaccessible until we stop for the night.

It's a steep drop down the bank to the river. One after another, crews slide the rafts down a long wooden ramp, using ropes. Considering the weight of the raft plus all its contents, it's not an easy task.

### **And we're off! Like a herd of turtles**

I don my wetsuit, lifejacket and baseball cap, the words "Boston" embroidered on it in big letters. I've brought it along to keep the sun off my face. But also to warn those around me: "This is a city chick. Do not expect a quick or rational response in case of any river emergency. Furthermore, she's not well-versed in pitching a tent, rowing a raft or making camp coffee."

From the put-in to the take-out, 100 miles downriver, there is no access to the river except via small plane. And there's no turning back. We'll be on our own,

seeing only an occasional abandoned mine or cabin and a couple of dude ranches, accessible only by plane. The Middle Fork flows through the largest wilderness in the contiguous United States, known as the Frank Church Wilderness Area. We'll pass through over 100 rapids while dropping a total of 3,000 feet in elevation. We're lucky on this trip -- the water is at an ideal level of about 3.7 feet. If it's higher, you're moving so fast that there's little time for correcting errors; if it's lower, you have to worry more about exposed rocks.

I'm getting the rafting lingo down. I've learned that the take out at the end of the trip is not a Chinese restaurant, that pitching my tent doesn't mean tossing it in the river when I get frustrated trying to set it up and that a standing wave isn't leaping to your feet and gesticulating at passengers in other boats.

For the first night, we've selected a campsite that's only about 13 miles down the river. This will give the oarsmen a chance to test the waters and make any necessary adjustments. The first part of the trip is technically the most difficult, Ed explains, since there are so many rocks in the river and an average drop of 41 feet per mile during the first 25 miles.

At 16 feet in length and heavily loaded, our raft requires a lot of strength to row and steer properly. I'm a bit nervous, but confident that Ed knows what he's doing. However, just in case, we have a nerve-calming liquid close at hand. We've put cans of beer in a net drag bag tied to the raft, and tossed it into the river to chill. Within minutes, it's the perfect temperature.

We pass through a number of Class IV rapids that day, including Velvet Falls, so named because you don't even hear it until you're right at it. By the time we arrive at our campsite, we're all ready for cocktail hour, followed by a steak dinner. We then hike to a nearby hot spring. After an afternoon of being constantly splashed by icy water, a soak in this natural hot tub is pure bliss.

### **Day two: Thursday**

Today is an easier one, with only a couple of rapids to pass through. One of them, however, is Pistol Rapids which shoots us straight toward a jagged rock wall. Miraculously, just before we ram it, the current whisks us away from impending disaster.

Ed asks me to take a turn at the oars so he can fish. Me? Remember, Ed, I'm from the city. And besides, it seems to me that there's a reason why they're called oarsmen. Note that the term is not oarswomen or even oarspeople. It's clearly oarsmen. No matter, this is an easy part of the river, he says. Since I want to do my fair share of the work, I climb back to the OARSMAN's bench and start rowing. I figure he wouldn't give me this responsibility if he thought even for a second that he might be putting his life, his raft, his equipment and his beer in danger. Things go fine. For about six minutes. Then I notice the ominous bubbling white water ahead.

“Ed! Ed!” I call. “What do I do here?” He appears to be more interested in casting his line off the back of the raft than what’s happening up front. He looks up. “Pull hard right,” he says calmly. Then, “Pull HARD right,” this time a little less calmly. Then, in a scream, “PULL HARD RIGHT!” I’m trying, but the raft isn’t responding. He drops his fishing rod and leaps onto the seat beside me, taking over the oars just in time. Strangely enough, I’m never asked to row again for the remainder of the trip.

A good part of the second day’s trip is floating through calm waters, steep forested slopes on either side of us. We have to go from mile 13 to mile 48, making it a long day. Late in the afternoon, we land at our campsite. After stripping out of our very wet wetsuits, we carry all the gear up to the site, pitch our tents and unpack our dry bags. I’m starting to master the art of how to properly seal my dry bag – my clothes and sleeping bag are somewhat less wet this evening.

### **Day three -- Friday:**

Jerren, Billy and Jay are in the raft ahead of us. I notice that we are getting closer and closer to their raft. In fact, they don’t seem to be moving at all. They’re stuck on a rock in midstream. Jay has one leg in the raft and one leg on the rock, trying to push off. Billy is pulling the oars trying to steer off. Getting stuck against a rock sideways is about the worst thing that can happen to you as the force of the river against the raft makes it extremely difficult to get free. It can sometimes take a whole day to get off, not to mention that it can also flip the raft. But we’re in luck. After a tense few minutes, they manage to free the raft.

Our next challenge is Tappan Falls. The guys had been talking about this falls last night and again this morning, so I’m thinking it’s obviously a major obstacle. We stop upriver of the falls to scout. We hike downriver, climbing over rocks, to watch the other rafts come through. Pete goes first, making it look ever so easy. The others watch carefully, memorizing his route. Finally, it’s our turn. It’s a rush coming through, like a very short and wet rollercoaster ride.

By day three, the oarsmen have found their groove, the rafts are lighter as we consume the food and water, none of us are strangers anymore and spirits are running high. We arrive at our campsite, unload the gear and set up the tents and kitchen area. By now I’m getting quicker at pitching my tent. And it’s a good thing since just as I get everything stashed inside, the skies open up and the rain begins. Chris, Pete and Gino have brought along a tremendous tarp which they rig up using oars as poles. It’s big enough that all 15 of us can gather under it for the evening. We have dinner cooking on the stove set up at the edge, a fire in the firepan for warmth, cocktails on the table and great company. Who cares if it’s raining!

As Pete passes around smoked salmon from Alaska, the talk turns to rafting, hunting, fishing and other western adventures, like firefighting. Out here, forest fires are a huge and constant threat. We've seen lots of large burn areas on our trip down the river. I listen as the group discusses the pros and cons of allowing forest fires to burn without fighting them, how fires can easily jump across the river, the elite group of smoke jumpers who parachute in to fight the fires. "Sure there's risk," Ron says. "But that's a big part of what attracts people to be firefighters. Hell, they could bag groceries if they wanted a job with no risk."

#### **Day four: Saturday**

This will be a short day, with just seven miles to cover. Terry, Melissa and I decide to hike most of the way. This will give us not only a chance to stretch our muscles, but will provide a different view of the river as the trail winds up and over the hilly terrain. We pass through all kinds of landscape – woods where fragrant chokecherries are blossoming, open meadows where the sun brings welcome warmth and along the edge of a cliff where we need to watch our steps to avoid sliding down the mountainside into the river.

Our campsite this night is at the mouth of the impassable canyon. The steep cliffs on both sides give this section of the river its name. We've arrived at camp early, so there's plenty of time to relax, read, nap, write, hike, fish or just sit around and talk. Dinner is elk chili. Meals on this trip have definitely been an interesting assortment of western cuisine.

#### **Day five: Sunday**

Our last day on the river dawns sunny and warm. Chris has told us that this part of the trip will be the most fun. There are fewer exposed rocks here, so the oarsmen have less maneuvering to do. As we move further downstream, we encounter huge rolling waves – or, in rafting terminology, standing waves. The water is washing over us and trickling down inside our clothes. I can see that this is payback time for Captain Ed as he decides with each wave whether to go over it or through it. He's in back, so he's staying dry. The canyon scenery is spectacular, with towering rock cliffs all around us.

We arrive at the take out point in the early afternoon, pull all the rafts out and load up the equipment into our waiting trucks, which an outfitter has shuttled over from the put-in. It's a long drive out on a dirt road before we reach the highway and start the long trip back to Wyoming. By the time we get back to the land of light switches, flush toilets, bathrooms with doors and hot water at Ed's house, it's nearly midnight. I'm hesitant to confront the mirror. Although I look like I've been in a barroom brawl, with scrapes, bruises and a jammed little finger, these are all injuries that have occurred on land. At least I have a tan, I think to myself. Until I get in the shower and discover it's only dirt.





