



Rafting the big water in Grand Canyon

Jerry Trottman of Ruch (in front) with Ashland friend. Photo: Marjan Barnes

BY TOM CARSTENS

Let's see...lazy days basking under sunny Arizona skies...floating idly...lightly dipping a big toe in the refreshing waters of the Colorado River...sharing the occasional paddling chores...anticipating yet another boring freeze-dried dinner. Yes, those were the images I conjured up when my Applegate friend, Jerry Trottman, notified me of a space that had just opened up in a 300-mile Grand Canyon rafting trip in April that he was organizing. I was quickly jolted into reality when he gave me a list of required items to pack. Wet suit and booties? Long underwear? Wool socks? Heavy fleece jacket? Dry top and pants? Three hats? Two cases of beer? Wait a minute! While I understood that last item, I was definitely not too sure about the rest! I was about to find out.

Jerry is an experienced white-water rafter with many Grand Canyon trips under his belt. He had waited 15 years for this particular trip to clear the National Park Service waiting list. He assembled a group of nine experienced rowers and seven others who would help with loading, camp duties, and raft stabilization. I was the only newbie in Jerry's mixed gender entourage. There were 16 of us in eight 16-foot inflatable rafts; we represented every age group from the 20s through the 60s.

Our 22-day trip began at Lee's Ferry, Arizona on the National Park ramp beneath the gorgeous Vermilion Cliffs National Monument. We spent all day carefully loading all the gear that we would need for the trip: aluminum raft frames, food, coolers (really big ones!), safety equipment, kitchen equipment, camping gear, tables, chairs, 'dry bags' with clothes and personal items and, of course that most essential element: beer. Each raft weighed about a ton when loaded. Each raft was so full of stuff that two people could barely fit! (See photo.)

On the river, I discovered that 90% of the trip is on fairly smooth-running water. What surprised me was how hard it is rowing all that weight on those placid stretches. Why is that so? You would think that the current in a river moving as fast as the Colorado would be sufficient to carry the raft with minimal effort. The trouble is that, because of the depth of the river, the surface flow can be much different from the undercurrent. The surface moves in funny ways: sometimes in roiling pillows of water that are difficult to row over, sometimes it doesn't move at all, and sometimes it even moves the wrong way! And the eddies can be powerful—some are almost impossible to escape. There was one time when six of our rafts got caught for 30 minutes or so in a large revolving eddy in the middle of the river; the rowers were helpless to overcome the surging surface water. We were giggling like kids in this "mad-hatter teacup" ride.

And then there's the wind! Who knew that the Grand Canyon winds blow mostly upstream? This means that the rowers are frequently (especially in the afternoons) trying to overcome the tremendous force of cold 20 mph winds racing through the canyon. There were several occasions when the rowers could barely make any progress at all. On these days we often traded rowing duties and even "double-rowed," which meant

that both rafters faced each other and worked the oars together. (Those were the days when you found out who was skipping their daily bath!)

Call me crazy, but I don't think river rafters live for those placid waters. I think they savor the rush of the big, fast, white-water rapids. There are close to 90 named big-water rapids and an equal number of lesser, but nevertheless challenging drops and riffles. These rapids are thrilling...especially if you are out in front trying to prevent flipping by leaning into the huge front and side waves that batter and drench the boat. Big rocks and sucking "holes" can pose deadly obstacles and challenge the skills of the best rowers. The most dangerous rapids require "scouting." That's when each two-person raft team puts ashore above the rapid and takes a look to chart a route through. However, when all is said and done, the river usually takes charge and often takes you on a completely different path than the one planned. (One of our best rowers told me that he just gives "suggestions" to the river.) Fortunately, all our rowers were excellent—we had only one flip and no injuries. As you can imagine, all the gear is tightly rigged. This is also where all that cold-weather clothing came in handy—there's no staying dry when going through the big waves formed by the rapids. And that water is *really* cold—about 50 degrees!

But it's not just about the river. We all enjoyed many side-canyon hikes, some which led to beautiful intermediate plateaus with gorgeous canyon and waterfall vistas, some that ended in Anasazi archaeological sites, some "slot" canyons that gave our rock climbers a workout, and some that were just fun for swimming and rock-sliding. And the views of the canyon were nothing short of spectacular as we descended through one colorful geologic layer after another. Every bend in the Colorado exposed yet another wonderful view or place to explore.

We camped on sand bars and usually slept under the stars. Jerry had us organized into scheduled shifts to prepare meals and other duties. Because every cook tried to outdo the others, our meals were scrumptious—cooked on eight big burners and, for all intents, gourmet. We were always able to squeeze in a well-lubricated happy hour before dinner. Sometimes we had a camp fire, stories and "singing." Everyone tended to hit the sack early. Every day was a full one and we were tired.

Because the bottom of the canyon receives 32,000 visitors a year, the Park Service requires all users to pack out *everything*. This includes trash, fire ashes, and human waste; no trace is to be left. So, when we finished up at South Cove, Nevada, our boats were almost as full as when we started three weeks earlier!

I think all of us cherished the trip in different ways. For me, it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience in one of the earth's truly beautiful spots. It was backed up by the camaraderie of a wonderful group of river pros who took me in as one of their own. I still dream of that trip every night.

Tom Carstens
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