

WHITEWATER, from E1

that during our trip, we would face 23 big rapids, with the river lowering a total of 80 feet in four miles.

With that in mind, we quickly realized that selecting a more conservative ride aboard a J-rig for our first whitewater experience was a great decision.

Due to a longer-than-normal winter, the snow melt from the Rocky Mountain areas of Colorado and Utah created water levels in the Colorado River that had not been seen for quite some time. Peak water flows in Cataract Canyon for this particular weekend were estimated to be approximately 68,000 cubic feet per second — the highest the flow had been since 1997.

We first maneuvered a few small rapids, starting with the "Brown Betty Rapids." The guides made a few scouting stops to work out their strategy for the upcoming Class IV-plus rapids.

The game plan was for the two J-rigs to go through the rapids first, ease out to the side into calmer waters, then turn and watch the oarboats to make sure they made it safely.

The guides told us that we would face "Big Drop 1," then go right into "Big Drop 2," the roughest of the rapids with drops up to 20 feet.

The rapids we prepared to face had intimidating names such as "Capsize," "Red Wall," "Little Niagara," "Ledge Hole," "Tailwaves," "Ben Hurt" and "Hell-to-Pay."

And if that wasn't enough, we also were comforted by the news that, due to the high number of boats that were capsizing in the "Big Drop" rapids, the National Park Service had its own jet-boat posted nearby to assist in any rescue efforts.

A little apprehensive but full of excitement, we sat back for a couple of minutes while the other J-rig went through "Big Drop 1" and "Big Drop 2" before we started our approach. Tejadas expertly maneuvered us into the chilly, rushing waters, timing each wave to perfection.

My husband, Mike, was sitting front and center, where he caught each big wave squarely in the chest. The water was cold and the force of each hit was quite hard. Mike had to remind himself to breathe whenever he could.

Meanwhile, I was sitting behind him, catching the wash of the water as it went over his shoulders and came in at me from all sides. When we weren't swallowing water — and that wasn't very often — we whooped and hollered.

What a rush! Tejadas eddied out of the rapids and turned our J-rig so that we could watch the oarboats. The first one, with only a guide and a guide-in-training aboard, flipped over sideways. The second, carrying a guide and four passengers, flipped end-over-end, quickly tossing all of the occupants into the river. The third oarboat, guided by the elder Tejadas, made it through the rapids without incident.

Tejadas, a true master of the river, was later told that his was the only oarboat to go through a particularly treacherous area of "Big Drop 2" without flipping over, earning him the nickname "Jedi Master" from his fellow guides.

From the side of the canyon, we watched the rushing water as it danced around with our friends before taking them swiftly down the river and through the next rapid. National Park Service personnel threw lifelines out from their boat as some of the rafters were being whisked by.

A few were rescued immediately,



IF YOU GO

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National Park Service:
 Canyon lands/The Rivers - <http://www.nps.gov/cany/river/index.htm>
Whitewater Utah Vacation Guide:
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diately, while the others were picked up down river by the National Park Service jet-boat or our other J-rig, which was waiting around the bend. One member of our group was even rescued by another outfitter, who had two J-rig boats going through the rapids behind us.

We went through "Satan's Gut," the smallest of the Big Drops, before finding a place to tie off to some rocks. A short time later, our camping gear was unloaded and a portable potty was set up in a discreet location with a nearby washing station.

The kitchen was set up, and water was put on to boil so the cold rafters could have hot tea and hot chocolate to warm up with. Chips and dip were set out while a gourmet dinner of salmon and couscous was being prepared, along with a huge pan of campfire brownies for dessert.

The rescue of passengers and boats took us a few hours past the lunch break, and everyone was hungry and ready to relax.

Tents, sleeping bags and sleeping pads were handed out, so we started searching for a place to set up our tent. Despite a light rain shower, it wasn't long before we were anchoring the corners, stowing our gear inside and making our way back to the main camping area to sit and socialize while waiting for dinner.

Once everyone was together, we were able to swap stories and exchange viewpoints on what had happened. In retrospect, the action in the rapids was intense and exciting. However, from our point of view, it was good to "see" the action and not "be" the action.

Camping along the Colorado River in such an isolated area as Canyonlands National Park was a treat we had not fully realized until the sun went down, the moon was up, and the stars came out in numbers a city dweller simply can't fathom. It was hard to believe, but as the evening slowly wore on, even more stars became visible.

We were serenaded by sleep by the chirping crickets and the dull roar of the river nearby, only to awaken hours later

to a cloudless blue sky that seemed to tell us that a new day had dawned and yesterday's troubles were behind us. The smells of fresh coffee and bagels warming on an open grill permeated our camping area. We were eager to get up, get dressed and get some breakfast before taking down our tents.

After a bit of shuffling, a few people were reassigned to other boats and we got under way for the last day of the trip. You could see a little sadness on the faces of those who had been traveling for several days as they realized it was getting closer to the time when they would be leaving the wilderness and heading back to the real world.

Back on the river, there was one small rapid to traverse before we settled down to motoring through the flat water, making our way past the boundaries of the northernmost end of Glen Canyon Recreation Area and into the upper end of Lake Powell. Below Imperial Rapid, the Colorado River flows from 4 to 8 mph all the way to Hite Marina and beyond.

Our guides stopped at the mouth of a side canyon so we could stretch our legs and hike for a while. We walked through a dry creek bed, where there were huge boulders that had tumbled down from higher places and a small stream that ran among them, creating waterfalls as it cascaded down into small pools.

It is hard to put it into words, the beauty of this remote wilderness.

After about an hour, we headed back to the boats and continued on our way. To give the oarsmen in the smaller boats a chance to rest, their rafts were tied to the J-rigs and

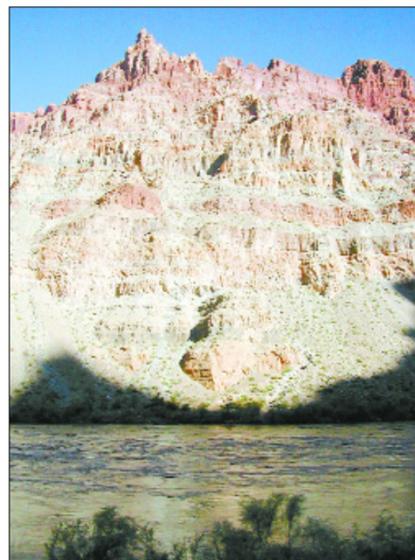
we floated lazily through some Class II riffles, braided channels and sand waves.

Since all of the camping and beach areas were now under water, it was difficult to find a place to put to shore for lunch. So, our guides mixed cans of beans, corn and salsa with fresh avocado and filled pita breads and tortillas for a cold lunch as we floated along.

I laid back on the boat to enjoy the sunshine as I watched 300 million years of rock history go by. The gigantic walls towering above us showed signs of the many changes the canyons along the Colorado River have endured.

Changing levels of the river left layers of sediment turned to solid rock. Wind and water cut the vertical and horizontal lines in the sandstone walls above our heads. Heat and cold made the sandstone spires expand and contract, causing sections of rock face to break away.

Our trip ended at the new takeout across the river from Hite Marina, near the upper end of Lake Powell in Glen Canyon Recreation Area. Once we climbed out of the river and helped unload our personal gear from the boats, we trekked up the hill to meet the bus that would take us to an airstrip on top of a nearby plateau.



Clockwise from left:

Rafters hike on a fallen ledge in a side canyon.

Riffles, braided channels and sand waves appear and disappear as the river continues south to Hite Marina.

The morning sun casts shadows on the canyon wall on the opposite side of the river.

Our adventure continued with a short scenic plane ride to Canyonlands Field in a Cessna single-propeller plane.

During the flight, we were able to enjoy a bird's-eye view of spectacular Canyonlands National Park and the rapids of the Colorado River we had just experienced.

As we looked back on the trip, we realized that the thrill of tackling the rapids was, indeed, quite addictive. And because of that, my husband and I already are counting the

days for a return trip to Utah and another "dance" with the river.

Patty Poupart is a freelance writer from New Orleans. She and her husband, Mike, enjoy many outdoor activities, including hiking and photographing the beautiful scenery of the southwestern United States. They kept a special place in their hearts for the Grand Canyon, where they were married in August 2000. You can send e-mail to Poupart at aggressive@belltech.net.

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