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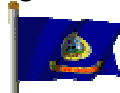
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Safari on the Salmon River

By Linda Ballou



We began our 86-mile float down the Salmon River, the longest free-flowing river in the lower forty-eight,

with the sun shining and snow-bright clouds mushrooming on the horizon. By the time we pulled into Magpie Beach for lunch the clouds had turned kettle black and let loose on our tostada salads.

Our caravan consisted of three oar-boats loaded down with camp supplies, one paddle boat manned by guests, a couple of two-man kayaks and two solo kayaks called "duckies." My fellow adventurers ranged in age from 14-84. Ben and Alex, teens with considerable canoeing experience, bobbed behind us in the "duckies" through waves that often took them out of sight. Seven of the guests were adventuresome women who do a different river every year and call themselves the "River Spirits." Their ringleader, Elaine, a plucky matriarch, told me that at her age (84) the river was the last best way for her to get outdoors. She rode the current, perched in the front of the oar

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boat like Cleopatra on her barge. Our group of seventeen also included a couple on their 25th anniversary and a pair of globe-trekkers from Phoenix.



"The next stretch of the river has the most intense rapids out of the forty we'll see on this trip. If you want to get the most out of them, you should try the kayak," Chris, owner of Silver Cloud Expeditions, told us.

" If I'm going to get wet, I want it to be for a good reason" I said.

I snagged Garret, young apprentice guide, to join me in the two-man inflatable kayak. After we navigated about a half dozen rapids, I was raucous and high-spirited. Then, I heard the rumble of big water and saw spray spitting over the rocks ahead. We slid over the top of Baileys, one of the few 3+ rapids on this run, with confidence. After surviving an assault of five huge waves, the sixth one rolled over our heads and flipped our boat. I came up squarely beneath the overturned kayak. No time for hysteria. I pushed up hard on the rubber kayak and got out from under it. I grabbed it and rode with it until I slammed into the paddleboat. Chris held the kayak while I hauled myself back in. Shaken, but good to go, I had a renewed respect for the power of the river. With a giddy rush of adrenalin that called for more, Garret and I paddled on.

Modern life is easy on the river, the big decision of day being; "Do you want to share the paddle boat with a guide at the



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helm, kayak independently or float lazily down the river in the dry "catbird" seats on the oar boat?" The weather here is riveting, compelling and dramatic, but Mother Nature's mood swings rarely last longer than a half an hour.

Darkening clouds mean you better paddle harder to reach the next sandy beach campsite in order to pitch your tent for the night and have time for a cozy afternoon nap. I loved listening to the grumbling clouds and patter of plump raindrops while our six guides set up camp and prepared another scrumptious meal.

What comes out of a Dutch oven on the river is nothing short of miraculous. Egg frittatas, cranberry muffins, rhubarb crisps, lasagna, chocolate pecan pie, prime rib and more. Evenings are spent in camp chairs about a warming fire counting stars and telling tales. I brought mosquito netting and bug juice for these occasions but never had to use them. I awoke each morning to the smell of fresh coffee and the lilting call of the shy canyon wren.



But for those who lived on the river before me, life was a demanding, isolated affair. Early homesteaders had to be independent, tough and self-sufficient. Buckskin Bill's reaction to the depression was to take up life where there were natural resources to defeat it. A sweet paranoid, he lived in isolation at Five Mile Bar for fifty years. He

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skillfully crafted his own tools, cooking utensils and guns. Like other river folk he had an orchard and vegetable garden to sustain him. His compound of cabins included a rock lookout tower in which he could spot unwanted visitors before they saw him.



Barth Hot Springs, a steaming rock pool forged into a mountainside that simmers at about 106 degrees, was

a favorite stop of the early scow captains at the turn of the century. These men brought supplies that included livestock in bulky wooden boats to settlers and placer miners who lived on the river. When the boats reached the end of their journey, they were broken down for their lumber and used to build cabins. The boats never made it back to their put-in points, which is why this stretch of the Salmon is called "The River of No Return."

We passed by the mouth of the famous Middle Fork of the Salmon that courses through the heart of the 2.2 million acre Frank Church Wilderness to join the main Salmon. It is rated one of the "Top Ten" white-water rivers in the world. Jagged spires hug the river forming a chute of over a hundred rapids in 125 miles.

We slid past a herd of mountain sheep munching peacefully on shore. Enormous swallowtail butterflies wafted on the gentle breeze. A big green dragonfly landed on my knee and stared at me with wide set eyes. I heard the cluck of the chukar on shore and spotted a merganser with six chicks floating behind her. One of our last road-less wilderness areas these rugged mountains

are home to bear, elk, deer, and the re-introduced wolf. Cougar and beaver were both hunted mercilessly by early mountain men, but both species have rebounded and live happily here today. Humans have shared this 45 million year old river canyon with animals large and small for 8,500 years.

Our peaceful glide was interrupted when Garret and I came around a big rock and I found myself facing a six-foot hole. The nose of the kayak was pointed straight down and there was literally nothing I could do, but to go down with it. I flew forward over the arc of a huge wave and sped down river in a frothy brew. Overcome by an insane exuberance, I gave way to uncontrollable laughter. When I hauled myself back on board to face the river once more, I felt light, energized and brave.

By the last day of our five-day trip, I yearned to take on the river alone. I settled into a solo- ducky and pointed her nose towards the "bubble line" paying strict attention to the movements of the water, swirling broils that tried to spin me in circles, deep holes behind boulders that threatened to suck me in, and the big waves that wanted to knock me sideways. I found the line of the current that carried me back and forth around the meandering bends and steered clear of backwater eddies. Though I was often submerged in foamy waves, the warm dry wind kept off the chill. What I learned in this conversation with the great river left me feeling young and powerful. The two teen boys on our safari on the Salmon scored a 9.50 on their high adventure scale. For me it was a 10.

Silver Cloud Expeditions offers personalized, top-quality river vacations on the Salmon. Rafting trip travel packages include local air and ground charters as well as all meals and equipment. Everything is

provided; tents, sleeping bags, pads and waterproof duffel. Owners, Chris Swersey and Mary Wright, both seasoned guides and longtime residents of Idaho, take pride in providing the best food, guides and rafting equipment on the river for their guests at a reasonable price.

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