

Step back in time on the Salmon River

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The Salmon River in Idaho is the longest free-flowing river in the lower forty-eight. It snakes its way 400 miles through the 2.2 million acre Frank Church Wilderness of "No Return" carving our nation's second deepest canyon, after Hell's Canyon of Oregon/Idaho.

In 1805 Lewis and Clark declared the river with its steep granite walls and foaming rapids unrunnable. Today it is a favorite destination for sport fishermen and hunters who fly into remote lodges and whitewater rafters who camp on sandy beaches nestled at the base of jagged spires shooting skyward.

To explore this region steeped in our country's history, I chose a ranch and raft combo that included three "sleeps" at Indian Creek Ranch followed by five "sleeps" on the Main Salmon with one of the oldest outfitters on the river, Silver Cloud Expeditions.

If you ever thought you wanted to experience ranch-life, but don't want to own one and work 24/7 to keep it going in rugged outback country, then Indian Creek Ranch is where you must visit. My pulse quickened at the sight of velvet green slopes plunging down to Indian Creek making its merry way to the North Fork of the Salmon. The sweet fragrance of mock orange blooming in white profusion was my first area greeting. Next, I encountered the friendly faces of Jerry and Terry Myers, both former river guides, whose only desire is to make your stay a special one.

Following the lead of early homesteaders on the river, the Myers have created a self-sufficient, secluded hideaway where the fetters of the modern world melt away. Luxurious log cabins with hand-hewn beams, wood planks and romantic rock fireplaces are scattered about well-tended grounds. A maximum of twelve guests gather in the cozy lodge for meals. Over filet mignon capped with Portobello mushrooms in béarnaise sauce, we discussed the plan for the next day.

Personalized service and flexibility in schedule make Indian Creek a cut above the average guest ranch experience. Activity choices include a full day horseback ride into the mountains with grand vistas of the continental divide, a float down a lazy stretch of the Salmon, a hike up a trail through a shady draw to Ulysses Gold Mine, a stroll on a well-marked nature trail, or a day trip to the new Sacajawea Center and Lemhi Pass where Lewis and Clark gasped at the sight of the Idaho batholiths, a series of mighty peaks that appeared to stagger to eternity.

"You want to do a little fly-casting in the trout pond?" Jerry asked. "No that's too stationary. I want to see as much of this country as I can." I told him. "How about we get up early and scout for wildlife along the river before breakfast?" he said with a smile. "That sounds great! I brought my birding glasses," and I was anxious for daybreak.

On our short drive we came across some mountain sheep that seemed to pose for photographs on the sheer rock wall beside the road while a herd of elk grazed peacefully in a meadow of knee high grass. A bald eagle wheeled high overhead as an osprey protecting her nest dive bombed a hapless great blue heron on the shore. Moose, deer, bear, wolf and cougar, along with the occasional angler, share in the bounty of this lush river valley.

History tells us that Chief Cameahwait of the Shoshone tribe informed Lewis that the Salmon River's waters and canyon were altogether impassable by any means. So Lewis sent Clark on a scouting trip down this valley to see if what he had said was true. Clark camped at Indian Creek and sent word back that the "embracing mountains were like the side of a tree – straight up." He further related that the canyon was, indeed impassable by foot horseback or boat, and that they must find another route to the Pacific.

Jerry accompanied me on the trail to the mine shaded by willow, cottonwood and ponderosa pine. Along the way he pointed out the many types of berries and plants used by the Indians, early settlers and Lewis and

Clark to survive. He loves to share the secrets of flora, fauna and the history of the canyon with guests. During 1895 – 1920 as many as a thousand people lived on Indian Creek and the lodge at the ranch was a watering hole for the miners. Soon we came to the remnants of the abandoned mine where we enjoyed a picnic lunch among the wooden structures shrouded in wildflowers and vines.

It wasn't until 1895 that Harry Guleke proved that what the early explorers had determined was not true. In a cumbersome wooden boat called a scow, he made the maiden voyage down the River of No Return, rocketing through rapids carrying food, farm implements and supplies to the river people. His success marked the beginning of commercial outfitters taking thrill seekers down the river just for fun. After being pampered at the ranch for three days, I was eager to be one of them.

We began our 86 mile float 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.

The next stretch of 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. An enthusiastic and competent river guide with an eye on safety for everyone, he always let us know what was up ahead so we could decide how we wanted to approach the day. "If I'm going to get wet I want it to be for a good reason," I told him.

I snagged Garrett, the 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 Bailey, one of the few 3+ rapids on the Main Salmon 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 boat and got out from under it. I then grabbed the boat 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. But, now we stuck close behind Chris in the lead boat.

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 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.

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 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 meant that you had better paddle harder to reach the next sandy beach campsite, In order to pitch your tent for the night in 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 were so tempting. 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. Eccentrics and outcasts who chose the perils of living in nature over the demands of society had made the river their home. We made a side hike to Jim Moore's place. After clearing a vast sun-splashed meadow, Jim built nine log structures hewn with a broad axe. He planted a vegetable garden, an orchard, and had a still hidden in the woods. For nearly 30 years he never left the river.

The trail through Jim's place was heavily used by placer miners. Jim claimed 1800 men came through between 1900 and 1902. He provided them with room and board and plenty of peach brandy. His homestead is one the few built by turn of the century "river people" that was not burned by the Forest Service in a zealous attempt to prevent uncontrollable fires.

A favorite stop on the river, Barth Hoc Springs, a steaming rock pool in the mountainside that simmers at about 106 degrees is worth the scramble up a steep slope. Another lovely spot is Rattle Snake Creek, one of the many sparkling tributaries tumbling over boulders to join the Salmon. It is named after Rattle Snake Sam who had a hard time getting a dance partner because he had the habit of keeping a rattler tucked in his shirt. The few folks who now live on the river year round offer rooms and guide services to guests and rely on jet boats to ferry in provisions.

Not wanting to go home without the full-on river experience, I settled into a solo ducky on the last day, I pointed her nose towards the "bubble line" paying strict attention to the movements of the water, swirling boils 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, powerful and energized. The two teen boys on the trip said the Main Salmon River scored a 9.5 on their high adventure scale. For me it was a 10.