
Three Generations

SUPing on the Salmon



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WE ARE, AT first glance, a motley crew. Tumbling out of five vehicles at the launching ramp for the Lower Salmon River, with books, cracker boxes and crossword puzzles spilling out the open doors, we rush toward each other with greetings and laughter, ending up in a tangled knot of hugs. Gear is everywhere—stowed in trailers, strapped to roof racks, tucked behind seats. Kids are hot and sticky, tired from the long drive to western Idaho. We have yet to rig the rafts, load the gear, and plan our itinerary for our river trip through rugged basalt and limestone gorges, but in our minds the hardest part of the trip is over. We have all made it to the launch; let the games begin.

Fourteen hours after our arrival at Hammer Creek on Idaho's Salmon River, we are afloat: four rafts, two SUPs, 10 adults ranging in age from 42 to 72, and seven kids ages 4 through 11. Just Grandma and Grandpa, their offspring, the spouses, the grandkids and eight cases of Sierra Nevada River Ryed IPA. Bright skies, warm water and 73 miles of Class II-III whitewater lie ahead. Bliss.

The idea for a three-generation river trip was conceived the previous year, when a select subset of the family reconnoitered the Lower Salmon with great success. "Wouldn't it be fun," we asked ourselves, "to radically complicate the logistics, belabor the decision-making process and necessitate the securing of larger campsites by doubling the number of people on the trip next year?"

The idea of quality family time triumphs over practicality, and 12 months later we find ourselves with 13 family members and an additional almost-family unit of four, wrestling a mountain of gear down to the river's edge—all we will need (and more) for six days on the river.

The jumble of dry bags we unload from the vehicles bely the tight organization that has actually taken place over the past few weeks. Thanks to Google, lists of personal and group gear are easily shared and meal sign-ups require little more than entering one's name in a cell. We have not only the essentials, but also such luxury items as a lime squeezer, oven mittens, poi balls and a ukulele. What might appear to be a yard sale is actually a fairly well-oiled machine of precision packing logistics. Or so we like to think, at least.

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While not quite an afterthought, the SUPs were not initially on the list of essential gear. A few of us in the group are whitewater kayakers, most of us have some expedition rafting under our belts, and nearly all of us were in our younger years either raft guides or Outward Bound instructors. We'd SUPed a little here and there — on the Pacific waters off Troncones, Mexico; on the lakes and flatwater stretches of the Northwest — but with kids, jobs and mortgages, none of us was exactly on the fast track to adopt new recreational activities like SUPing. But still, there was something compelling about SUPs, and since we had access to two of them for the river trip we decided to bring them along, just in case someone wanted to try them out.

The friendly competition for time on the two SUPs begins about five minutes after two of the more calculating adults on the trip secure them at the launch, and continues unrelentingly until the moment we pull off the river at Heller Bar on the Snake River a week later. With only two SUPs and a handful of rapids that can't be safely SUPed, even given our collective limited SUPing skillset, the SUPs are in high demand from dawn til dark. The kids commandeer them in the eddies at camp the moment we land and are out on them again as soon as they wake up the next morning. As we load the rafts, the kids holler "I call a SUP!" the way my friends and I used to call "Shotgun!" to nab the front seat back in high school. The adults try to be generous and let the kids have their fun, but darn it, we want our own fair share of SUPing time.

Subterfuge follows. We discover that the way to get the kids off the SUPs is to get them cold as quickly as possible. Thus we ride them on the bows of our SUPs through some of the splashy class II+ rapids and get them soaked, necessitating a warm-up ride for them on one of the rafts, which frees us up for some SUP alone time until the next kid begs for a ride. Had we possessed the skills to have the kids ejected into a safe-but-scary hole to take them off the SUP craze for a while and commandeer the boards for ourselves, we just might have done so.

The only person not clamoring for SUP time is Nino, the 71-year-old grandmother on the trip. Although Nino has since become a lake SUPing fiend, she spends much of the Salmon trip crouched in the stern of one of the rafts in what she called her "foxhole." With a foil-covered GoLite umbrella held over her head, Nino has her foxhole sealed up nearly watertight. No foot soldier weathered mortar attacks in a trench with more focus than Nino in her own little rubber pocket of emotional safety.

I SUP my first true rapid on the first day, a class II rock garden. It is exhilarating — a thrilling dance of maintaining my balance and trying to steer a safe line. At the bottom of the rapid, still upright and dry, I think to myself, "Hello, SUPing; where have you been all my life?" I then promptly capsize on an eddy line.

Three days pass in rafting and paddleboarding paradise. The white sand beaches beckon, the water is inviting, the food is superb and the kids don't fight. We row and SUP rapids called Rollercoaster, Pine Bar, the Maze and Bodacious Bounce. We see pictographs and mining remnants. We make Andy Goldsworthy-inspired temporary art installations with polished stones. The kids crack rocks open to reveal crystals inside. We crack beers open to take the edge off



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the afternoon heat. If heaven exists in river form it is here, along this narrow ribbon of geologic and human history.

It is on the river that we feel most like ourselves. Unencumbered by the small stresses of daily life, we are free to be our best selves. We're interested and interesting. We're patient, tolerant, generous. There are no to-do lists driving our agenda out here, no emails to check, no bills to pay. We're able to be the people we believe ourselves to be.

Back in the day, back before kids and mortgages, our lives were laced with seemingly huge swaths of free time, when we could disappear into the wilderness for weeks. We paddled the Grand Canyon in the winter, once going 23 days without seeing another party on the river. We hiked desolate stretches of Newfoundland coastlines. We climbed Joshua Tree's granite mounds until our fingers bled. This week on the Salmon reminds us of those days of unfettered freedom, of the discovery of wild places and, more importantly, the people we could be in those places.

Before and after this week we are, of course, fairly mainstream adults. We're parents and community members. We serve on nonprofit boards and volunteer at our kids' schools. We are acupuncturists, teachers, nonprofit administrators and small-business owners. We're fortunate; we all love what we do. What we do, however, is not who we are. Our jobs feed our families, but expeditions like this one feed our souls.

When Mike, who is allergic, gets stung by a wasp at lunch on the third day, we are reminded just how far we are from civilization. Although this stretch of the Salmon is not particularly remote, we're still pretty far from help by most standards. An evacuation would take at least half a day at best, and at worst might take too long to successfully reverse an anaphylactic reaction. We give Mike Benadryl and get an Epi-Pen ready, and he eventually recovers without incident. Still, it's an unsettling reminder that we have chosen to take precious cargo — our children and our aging parents—on an adventure that is not without potential consequences. It's a risk, indeed, but one we take without hesitation.

"What did one paddleboard say to the other paddleboard?"

my 8-year-old asks us one morning. Without waiting for our guesses, she answers her own riddle: "Sup, SUP?" It becomes the catchphrase for anyone on a SUP for the rest of the trip.

Four-year-old Una discovers that if Uncle Jon paddles a SUP and she hangs onto the back, she can cop a bit of a fast ride, a little like inner tubing behind a motorboat. "Paddle, paddle," she screams through her laughter, her tiny body nearly skimming the water's surface in the SUP's wake.

Although the Lower Salmon is a family-friendly river, there are a couple of rapids that give pause for scouting. We pull the rafts up on shore while we look for our lines, then attempt to replicate these lines once we launch again. Nino tends not to scout, referring instead to a copy of the river guide that is located on each raft. One formidable drop, Slide Rapid, looms legendary, as it becomes unrunnable at higher flows. No matter how many times we reassure Nino that Slide is going to be a breeze at 6,000cfs, she's not going to believe it until she sees it. Or rather, until she's safely through it, having not seen any of it from the foil-topped safety of her foxhole.

Slide Rapid is not only a breeze, it's almost disappointing. The monster wave train, ugly holes and boiling eddies that characterize it at higher levels are nonexistent. I SUP through Slide Rapid with a kid on the bow of my board. Never one to take chances, Nino crouches in her foxhole.

We camp one night on a sandbar that we come to think of as "the stinky spot," owing to the cloying smell of rotting meat that announces its presence only after we have unloaded all the rafts and set up the tents. Pack up and look for a better site downstream? Not a chance. Even the small rattlesnake we find coiled on a rock near the groover (a 5-gallon military surplus ammunition box outfitted with a toilet seat) can't persuade us to leave a site once we've moved in.

Near Coopers Ferry we visit an active archaeological site. A crew from the University of Oregon carefully excavates a Nez Perce summer camp and painstakingly sifts through the dirt, seeking artifacts that shed light on the culture and practices of these migratory people. I think of our conversations along the river after dinner, listening to the water's whispers, as we sift





through the stories of our family and friends and discover each other anew.

Four days into the trip the skies blacken and we see the first flash of lightning. Pulling over to a sandy beach, we set out lunch and wait for the storm to pass. Pass it does, but only after a menacing round of thunder and lightning and about 30 minutes of driving rain, with raindrops so big they hurt when they hit.

Two people take shelter under the lunch table, another dozen huddle under three sun umbrellas, trying in vain not to touch the central metal pole, and the stragglers hold the largest SUP over their heads, the way you see street vendors in the Third World hunched under sheaves of newspaper

during the monsoon season. "Ah well, those morons got hit because they didn't seek shelter during storms," we think, trying to convince ourselves that our flimsy patio umbrellas constitute "shelter."

Such storms usually scare the crap out of me, and although I am able to maintain bowel control during that one, two of my nieces and nephews aren't so lucky. My

brother's kids can't wait, so Zack has to unstrap one of the groovers from the raft and carry it up to the sodden beach so his kids can answer nature's call amidst what is most likely the biggest thunderstorm of their lives.

After 53 miles, the Salmon empties into the Snake River, which has more volume and more people. A typical weekend brings fleets of jet boats and weekend partiers roaring up and down the river, the sounds of their motors and music masking the trills of the canyon wrens we heard upstream. The storm seems to have kept the usual crowds away, however, and we are able to find a beach to camp on.

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Although we have to excavate a flat site in the sand for one of the tents, the effort is well worth it since we soon learn from the little girls on the trip that the Mossy Step Café is open for business. The café, which soon becomes renowned for its precarious location high on a slick moss-coated ledge and its aggressive sales tactics, offers an inventive menu of Yucca Poundcake, Slide Rapid Sliders, and Stickleberry Cupcakes. The 8-year-old girls run the café’s kitchen, while waitressing is handled by the 5-year-olds. When we tire (all too quickly for the café staff’s tastes) of the mind-numbing cycle of ordering and then pretending to taste a sand cake decorated with willow leaves we wander back to our camp, stuffed full of the contentment that comes from watching kids use their imaginations.

On our final night, we once again seek refuge under our inadequate shelters, as lightning dances on the ridgetops directly above us. The wind is so fierce that it threatens to lift our pop-up kitchen tent into the air, despite the big rocks anchoring it. We grab the tent to keep it from flying away as bright bolts of electricity that look as if they could have been created by the Disney special effects department somehow avoid striking the 8-foot lightning rods we’re grasping.

When the storm passes, the light is golden and almost electric, casting the dry hills above us in an otherworldly glow under a still-black sky. Our chests are tight—with relief, yes, but also with sentiment. I’ve had other moments like this before: on glassy lakes in northern Maine, in high meadows watching alpenglow blush and then fade, under velvety desert skies looking up at a carpet of stars. Always during the hush of sunset. At such moments I’ve felt an almost nostalgic ache as I wonder if life will ever be so beautiful again. Nights like this one remind me that yes, it will be, and it is.

The deluge has been long and prolific. Water begins to pool on the parched earth around us. Rivulets form and trickle down to nearby gullies, turning dry drainages into muddy streams, which surge down to the river carrying debris. Overnight, the water level rises by 1000cfs. Nothing dangerous, hardly even noticeable to the naked eye. But the river is now far more full than it was when we launched a week ago; it is completely replenished. And so, it turns out, are we. 