

Beginners Luck:

A Guides First Raft Trip

High Water Cataract Canyon

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My 11-foot oars are bent nearly in half on either side of my water logged 18-foot raft. Each one resembles a frown, not unlike the one on my face. Ahead, coming up fast, is the awesome sight of Big Drop 2. The ledge wave is massive and crashing, and the waves below are exploding fiercely; there is nothing little about Little Niagra. I'm pulling frantically towards the safety of the river left eddy above the drop, but I seem to be moving closer to the certain doom lurking downstream. Sweat pours off my brow like sheets of rain from a mountain thunderstorm. Veins are popping out of my arms where I never knew I had veins before; my strength is going fast. The raft behind me speeds past in the main current aimed directly for Niagra. I pull and pull, slowly and reluctantly the eddy accepts my raft. For now, I am safe. The other raft was not so fortunate. This is my welcome to Cataract Canyon at high water.

I have always been fortunate rafting and kayaking. I know there is a big thrashing waiting for me down a river somewhere but I've snuck by—so far. I was especially lucky my first raft trip down Cataract Canyon. It was towards the end of May 1998 and the rivers on the Colorado Plateau were rising daily. I was really strong that Spring, having completed a two month season in west Texas guiding on the Rio Grande and working for three weeks as a guide on the Salt River in Arizona. I'd been boating for three months when I showed up in Moab, while most guides here were still shaking off the cold of a good snow pack winter with the memories of fat powder days still fresh on their minds.

So I had just started with Sheri Griffith Expeditions that year and expectations of me were high. I did an upper Dolores river trip at 3,500 cfs with Dave Focardi and I guess I did well. Back in the office, after the trip, I was asked if I wanted to row high water Cat. My stomach immediately sank to my feet and my knee's became weak. "High water Cat—why that's certain death," I thought to myself. After a few moments of silence waiting for a response, Jose said, "Well, you

gotta do it sometime and high water may not come again for a few years." So I tried to sound confident, even with all the blood having run out of my face, and replied, "Sure, I'm ready." Of course I thought, "I really would rather be buried up to my neck in Ernie Country with honey poured on my head."

Cataract Canyon has been known as the "Graveyard of the Colorado" since the early 1900s. More people had disaster and death in the 49 miles of Cataract than the whole 216 miles of the Grand Canyon. It has a reputation to not take lightly, especially if you had watched the "High Water Episode 1997" video 58 times, like I had.

Night one on the five-day row trip: I was camped at Little Bridge with Dave Focardi the trip leader, Rob Ho the guide extraordinaire, Nancy Redfern my highsider/bailer/tubepuncher/balast and our guests. I did a nice hike up the canyon to relax, helped with dinner and then socialized until dark. It looked like rain but being a macho boatmun elected to sleep on my boat, exposed to the unsettled spring desert weather. I awoke about 1 a.m. to light rain and pulled my old worn tarp over my sleeping bag. I awoke an hour later with rain seeping through my ancient tarp and my bag wet, but I was still defiant. A half-hour later my hair soaked, my sleeping bag sopping, I decided to set up my new tent. As I walked past the kitchen, I spied Rob under a roll-a-table, with a tablecloth over him as a shelter (his tent was on his snout rig in the boatyard). He asked if I was putting up a tent. I said, "Yes." Then he said, "Do you need help setting it up?" Which really meant, "Can I share the dryness of your tent if I help you set it up?" I said, "Thanks but I can manage on my own." I assembled my tent and I started feeling guilty because it was raining even harder now. So, as I went to get my bag and pillow, I invited him to share it. "Although it's not very big," a hopefully discouraging remark. I crawled in with a few minutes passing by, and I felt relieved that I wouldn't have to share my tent, but then I heard the zipper opening and Rob oozed in. He was as soaked as I and our sleeping bags were equally saturated as well, so we each pushed our water laden bags aside and used rain jackets as blankets.

Morning came bright and sunny, and we emerged tired, with bloodshot eyes. I was glad I shared the tent with him. It had rained for two more hours that night and even though I had just met him I knew we'd be good friends, and he would be a valuable ally in the canyon. The next day of flat water passed and we camped under clear skies at the Loop. The Colorado River had risen about a foot during the day. It's a big wide river here and a foot is quite a lot.

The next day we emerged at the Confluence of the mighty Green River from Wyoming and our Colorado River that starts in Colorado. The river instantly doubled in size to about 100 yards across, swollen brown and

swirling with cold snowmelt water originating from hundreds of miles away. It was the largest river I had ever been on. The current was swift as we approached Spanish Bottom, where we pulled over for lunch and a lengthy safety orientation.

After lunch, we went into a 30-minute safety talk on what to do if (and we have a good chance) we flip a raft. How to self-rescue to a raft or to shore, and essentially how to survive your \$1000 vacation that you must be out of your mind to want to do. Life jackets securely tightened, everything double strapped, we enter the canyon with sour stomachs and heightened anxiety. Rapid #1, or Brown Betty, is first. A relatively straightforward rapid but now with 10- to 12-foot tall waves for a hundred yards. Immediately after is Rapid #2 with unpredictable building and exploding 15-foot tall waves into an extremely powerful eddy. It was the biggest waves I had ever seen, but I was feeling confident and strong. Rapid #3 is easy and insignificant, and #4 is big but pretty non-threatening. There are some large tail waves at the bottom, but the biggest challenge is catching the eddy for camp directly after Rapid #4 to camp at upper Rapid #5. Well, we all made it, and the world was warm and peaceful again. The sand at Rapid #5 is wonderful; light tan and soft. And there are some nice tamarisks for shade. We set up camp and then did a hike up Surprise Valley. I turned back early to help Rob with dinner. Of course we had to start with beers to get in the mood to cook. Then we prepared a wonderful dinner of steaks and potatoes, salad and corn and a cake for dessert. That night we drank gallons of Sangria wine after dessert around the campfire as we told stories and Dave played his banjo.

I had a theory that I'd do better in the hard rapids if I was hung over, or maybe I was just quite nervous and figured putting on a drunk would unfocus my mind from the perceived terror that was looking down in canyon below. Well, either way I got hammered. I was severely hung over **the next day**, and the sunlight and any movement made my head throb like from the hit of a sledgehammer. I emerge from my tent like early life emerging from the primordial sea—slow and reluctant. I, like early life, knew it was a bad move but I didn't really have much choice in the matter. I couldn't even think about breakfast and any sudden movement sent waves of nausea over me. Not the best condition to be in prior to running the biggest whitewater in the United States.

I somehow manage to rig my boat, Dave does a refresher safety talk and we board our rafts. Nancy is in the same condition as I, though I not quite as bad. Mostly her nerves are getting her—I suspect. She knows what we are getting into. She had seen Cat in high water before as a passenger. I had only seen Cat at low water, where it is more like a kitten. The river had also risen during the night, and flows were conservatively speculated to not be as high as it really was.

Into the swollen river we go. I had to continually dunk my head in the water to cool the throb. The

current was pushy and fast now. Around the first bend we encounter the North Seas, Rapids #6 and #7 combined. From 200 yards the waves look colossal. As we drop down the quickening water into the rapid my huge 18-foot raft is met by waves at 15-foot tall, and some at 20-foot. We are buffeted by walls of water from all sides as waves form, explode and dissipate unpredictably. It is a wonderful sensation, like being on a sea-going vessel in heavy surf! Despite the force and power of the rapid, we emerge wet, but upright and intact. Rapids #9 and #10 are washed out and only quick water remains, tugging our craft onward until the slack water of Lake Cataract, 2½ miles of calm water.

Here we meet up with another SGRE trip that also has along a training boat. Sarah Klinger is rowing the big gnarly for the first time as well. We combine trips for safety as we approach the Mile Long Rapids. We decide to not scout for some reason and elect to, "Read and run baby!" Around the bend, we enter Rapid #13, then immediately Rapids #14 and #15 (aka Capsize or Hell to Pay).

Rapids #13 and #14 are just big waves but Capsize has a few surprises waiting for us. I had only seen Cat previously in a kayak at 8-10,000 cfs, so nothing looked the same. Coming into Capsize I tell Nancy, "I see a big hole in the center." She reply's, "Well don't run it, ok?," so I go right of the huge hole and ride the standing waves to the bottom. Sarah doesn't see the same hole in time and takes the big ride. She emerged at the bottom full of water and full of adrenaline, but no worse for the wear. Still fighting the hangover, I feel quite calm and continue on in ignorant bliss into Rapid #16 with more huge waves and then Rapid #17. All I had been told about the Button at Rapid #18 was, "Don't go center because there is a huge boat eating hole there." I pull with all my might through and across 15-foot tall wave towards the left, but am hit by a crashing wave that surfs Nancy and I for a few seconds and denies access to the left. We are forcefully pushed center into the maelstrom of waves and white froth. All I can see are brown walls of water and don't know the water level is too high for the hole, but I still fight my way towards the left. Next up is Ben Hurt Rapid, which is simply fast water, so I row into the eddy above Big Drop #1 at Big Drop Beach so that all the rafts can regroup. Normal protocol is to scout the next 1-mile of rapids from there, but for reasons I never found out we elected to try to eddy out at Big Drop #2 to scout.

Down the tongue of Big Drop #1 I go to be once again buffeted by monstrous brown waves and savage currents of confused water. I see Dave's raft in the scout eddy above Big Drop #2 and pull with all my might into the slack water, and make the safety of the calm pool by luck and determination alone. Sarah's raft misses the eddy and enters Big Drop #2 in the wrong spot (Little Niagara) and is instantly overturned like a leaf in the wind. I want to scout but Dave has high water jitters, and the fortunate knowledge of the run, and wants to

go. I hop on shore for a moment to look, but can only see whitewater and spray being thrust skyward.

The only knowledge passed on to me is "Hit the marker hole high and pull right." "If I only knew where the marker hole is, I'd feel better," I think to myself. So I watch Dave go and he quickly disappears into the rapid. I think I see the route so I enter the current with my heart thumping like a rabbit on meth. I hit the marker hole and the boat pivots bow first downstream. "This is just like the move at Skull, only right to left," I think. Little did I know that after hitting the marker you are supposed to pull like Hell to the right. After the pivot I start to push calmly, thinking I was in the right spot. I see a 30-foot wall of water, the Red Wall, right in my path. The river Gods are smiling on me though, because the wall isn't breaking as I go up and over the top of the biggest wave I have ever seen. Then chaos! I begin to get hit from all sides by compression waves. Nancy is punching and highsiding her full 120 lbs. We get knocked sideways, and I drop the oars and high side right, then left, and then right again. Now the raft is completely on it's side and stalls, so I put my full 180 lbs on the tube and for some reason we don't flip. Now the waves are getting smaller but I realize we're on the left on the Purgatory eddy line directly above Satan's Gut. I regain my oars and begin to pull with all my might towards the right, but the raft is filled with water to the tube tops and my oars bend almost to the point of breaking without moving the raft. Visions of the 1997 high water video race through my head and I tell Nancy as calmly as possible, "We're fucked." She gives me a blank unbelieving look and I say, "Well, Nancy, it was nice knowing you."

She yells to me in a panicked voice, "Don't stop pulling, Don't give up!! Never give up!!" The fear in her voice snaps me back to reality and I pull harder and harder, my grip on the oars slipping as fatigue takes over. We're losing the battle and The Gut is looming just feet from us; all I see is a spot where the river disappears and a mist is rising. We can hear where a lion is roaring down below. We can't possibly avoid The Gut so I square up and yell for Nancy to hold on. As we start over the edge of the drop, all I hear from Myself and Nancy is "Please God, Please God, Please God!!!" The raft drops off The Gut falling about six feet into the froth and I dig in the oars with the adrenalized strength of Hercules. We stall momentarily and slowly, the raft slips from the clutches of The Gut. We continue downstream as I pull with my body stretched out horizontally, every muscle straining, my unconscious wishing to yet exist another day to sort out all the neuroses pent up in my mind. As we emerge from the froth and pull out into the tail waves of Big Drop #3, we do a high five, and yell victory cheers. I look Nancy square in the eyes and calmly say, "Well Nancy, this would be a good time to bail."

That was my first raft trip down High Water Cataract Canyon—but not my last!