



Rafting group enjoying the
Grand Canyon scenery

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RIVER LUXE

THESE EPICUREAN RAFTING VACATIONS
WILL LEAVE YOU HUNGRY FOR ADVENTURE.

~ BY CARI GRAY ~

Soaring over deep blue glaciers, a chartered plane from Vancouver flew nine of us north to the headwaters of Chilko Lake. This was the start of my rafting trip: a high-end whitewater ride down the remote Chilko, Chilcotin and Fraser Rivers. By day, we experienced British Columbia's majestic old-growth alpine forests, paddling through narrow hoodoo rock-lined canyons and relaxing on beaches. At night, we enjoyed a glass or two of Okanagan Valley's finest wine or a local Kokanee beer while tucking into such delicacies as marinated grilled salmon fillet and rotini primavera, followed by chocolate fondue with fresh fruit.

I quickly began to understand the cheeky raft-vacation reference "float and bloat"—but my waistline didn't turn out to be a concern. As the week progressed, we always had active options to paddle, hike and explore. I later took a private rafting trip in Utah, on the Colorado River's spectacular Cataract Canyon, indulging in equally sophisticated riverside food and wine. The chefs were quick to share their campfire techniques, and they encouraged my voluntary "student" participation.

Thanks to a handful of savvy rafting companies, you can now experience many of North America's remote wilderness sanctuaries—even the iconic Grand Canyon—in comfort and with real culinary style.

TRIP PLANNING

To get started rafting, try a day trip: They're available on rivers in more than 20 states, including Pennsylvania, Oregon, Alaska and Utah. Sign up with an outfitter that's properly accredited by such organizations as British Columbia's BCROA and Idaho's IOGA. The outfitter should provide you with the right gear for the river:

a lifejacket, a dry bag or a locker for your personal gear, and a wetsuit if the water is cold. Depending on the river, you may opt for a more stable dory boat or an inflatable raft. Experienced rafters avoid wearing cotton clothing in favor of synthetic fleece or wool. Don't forget sunglasses and sunscreen. A mellow, flat-water Class I trip requires very little activity, whereas a raging Class V river can require paddling, so make sure you pick the trip that's right for you. All rafting trips involve great opportunities to soak up wilderness scenery.

Multiday trips are a terrific way to get away from it all—chances are your BlackBerry or iPhone won't work on the remote Salmon or Colorado Rivers. Top companies feature gourmet cuisine (most can accommodate special dietary

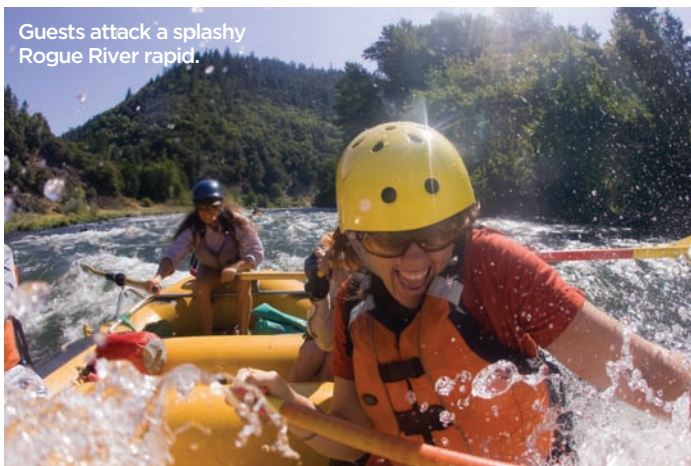
needs with advance notice), as well as very high guide-to-guest ratios (1:3 or 4). You'll either camp comfortably, with tents set up and sleeping bags on inflatable pads all laid out for you, or stay in a wilderness lodge. And don't worry: You can also rent a satellite phone if you really must stay in touch.

Filet mignon
prepared shoreside





Heirloom tomato salad



Guests attack a splashy Rogue River rapid.



Riverside dining

On a three- to six-day rafting trip, you'll soon fall into an easy rhythm, delighting in the absolute best of Mother Nature combined with serious creature comforts. Idyllic days on the river start off with a hearty campfire breakfast: plenty of fresh fruit and eggs cooked to order. A few hours on the river are followed by a tasty shore lunch, then a hike, a swim or time with a good book. Then comes a multicourse dinner, most often prepared by the expert oarsmen guides but sometimes by actual chefs. After dessert, the star-filled skies will put on a terrific show.

WHERE TO HEAD

North America offers many rivers to eat along, especially out west. The most popular is the Colorado River, since it winds through the heart of the Grand Canyon. This trip involves exciting whitewater rafting, hikes to waterfalls, Native American rock art and stunning rock formations. The best windows for

it are April and October: Daytime temperatures stay cool, the desert is in bloom, campfires are permitted and motorized boats aren't allowed on the river. Waitlists for the 19-day journey to raft or dory the entire Grand Canyon are long—sign up at least 12 to 18 months in advance. The shorter Cataract Canyon trip through Canyonlands National Park is best accessed from Moab, Utah, and the longer, more comprehensive Grand Canyon trip via Flagstaff, Ariz.

In Idaho, the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, near Stanley, features crystal-clear water and more than 100 rapids in 100 miles of the largest wilderness area in the lower 48. Rafters can experience hot springs, trout fishing and a range of wildlife sightings, including eagles, bighorn sheep and river otters. July is the best time to go, when the water and air are warm. Parts of the Middle Fork are especially fun to explore by inflatable kayak. The Snake River forms the border between Idaho and Oregon and offers a ride down through Hell's Canyon, the deepest river

FOODIE FLOATS

If you're ready to raft your way through the wilderness without sacrificing the luxury of a hotel stay, these outfitters have just the trip for you.



Kayaking on the Rogue River

gorge in North America. Families love Idaho's Green River, through the Gates of Lodore, best accessed via Salt Lake City, Utah. This moderate whitewater trip involves Grand Canyon-like scenery and sandy beaches.

Just outside Yosemite National Park and close to San Francisco, you can take a short two- or

From Fiji to Yosemite

Since 1969, outfitter **O.A.R.S.** has offered the most trip options in North America, including along all of the most celebrated rivers, plus the Upper Navua River in Fiji. Energetic owner George Wendt and his team have been the driving forces behind the luxury rafting industry's high standards of cuisine. Most O.A.R.S. guides have more than 10 years of experience as both oarsmen and camp chefs. For more than four years, the company has offered special Wilderness Gourmet wine and culinary trips, offering specialties like filet mignon in a Jack Daniels reduction paired with porcini risotto. Summer options included Tuolumne and Rogue River adventures, as well as the Middle Fork of the Salmon Wine Trip with chef James Lehman, from Ironstone Vineyards. Chefs are also available for custom or private trips. Wine on the River Middle Fork Trip **from \$2,482 for 6 days**; oars.com

North by northwest

Started by pioneer Brian McCutcheon in 1986, **ROAM** specializes in river rafting in remote British Columbia, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Alaska; the company also plans to expand to Chile to raft the legendary Futalefu. A foodie at heart, McCutcheon centers all his trips around excellent cuisine, fine wines, specialty microbeers and signature margaritas. In July, British Columbia wine star John Langille joined the Wine on the River trip down the Chilko with musician Chris Rayburn. In August, Nelson, B.C.-based chef Jamie Hertz of Fusion 301 Tapas Lounge cooked along the Chilko River, accompanied by musician Lindsay Ferguson. Chilko-Chilcotin-Fraser Rivers **from \$3,295 for 7 days** (includes charter flights to and from Vancouver); iroamtheworld.com

Your own private Idaho

Kenny Rudolph, one of Sun Valley's finest chefs and recognized by the James Beard Foundation, develops all of **Far and Away Adventures'** menus with fresh, seasonal, organic ingredients on customized Middle Fork of the Salmon, Owyhee and Bruneau/Jarbridge River trips. Owner of the boutique rafting company for more than 30 years, Steve Lentz makes sure that riverside dining tables are set with linen, chairs, china, stemmed glassware and candlelight. Meals feature such dishes as spinach salad with seared prawns and sesame vinaigrette, paired with high-end wines and great local microbrews. Contact the company for dates and prices; far-away.com

Dutch-oven gourmet

On the **ROW Adventures** Culinary Whitewater Rafting Series, guides and chefs profile the best of the Northwest, with a focus on use of the Dutch Oven—great for sourdough, wild salmon, Pacific oysters, huckleberries and Idaho potatoes. Meals are paired with the best Oregon and Washington pinot noirs, chardonnays and more. In July and August, ROW gourmands headed to Idaho's Salmon River. In September, the company highlights the famous Snake River through Hells Canyon. **From \$1,070 from 4 to 6 days**; rowadventures.com

Going rogue

White Water Warehouse offers trips in Oregon on the Rogue River. On the company's Gourmet Food & Wine lodge trip, Chef Matt Morse prepares Italian and Oregon-based delicacies with wine pairings, while the Gourmet Food & Martini Madness trip in August includes southern Oregon's own Organic Nation Spirits microdistilled gin and vodka. Both trips cost **\$1,040 for 3 days**; whitewaterwarehouse.com

three-day remote rafting adventure in thrilling Class IV rapids in the Tuolumne River. In May, the Sierra wildflowers bloom and the river runs rapidly.

In Southern Oregon, near Ashland/Medford, the Rogue, Grand Ronde and Owyhee Rivers offer great whitewater, canyons, prolific wildlife and beaches.

In Western Canada, the fast-moving Chilko River, outside Vancouver, features the longest stretch of commercially navigable whitewater in America. North of Whitehorse, Yukon, near Alaska, the more tundra-based Tatshenshini and Alsek Rivers have slower-moving water, snowy mountain peaks, grizzlies and glaciers. Even farther up in Canada's Yukon, the Firth River has been dubbed the Serengeti of the North, due to the migrating caribou. Part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, it has views of icebergs floating in the Arctic Ocean and the unique muskox.

To find the rafting trip of your gourmet dreams, visit rafting.com, raftingamerica.com, adventurelink.com or virtuoso.com, or contact any of the top companies directly (see sidebar for details). **ET**

CARI GRAY is a Toronto-based writer who has negotiated her share of rapids and gourmet meals under the open skies.