

# Rafting the Upper Salt River

This is the Log Ride at Knotts Berry Farm on steroids, or maybe Disneyland's ultimate E-ticket ride, only we're off the rails.

At Rob Bond's command, five comrades and I paddle. "Hard!" Bond shouts, and we do our best to obey. Churning across the rapids on the upper Salt River in a six-person inflatable raft is a bit like trying to row through a pot at full boil. That is, it would be, if the water weren't so cold. It comes at me in intermittent waves and sprays, pasting strands of hair to my face while my heart thumps against my ribcage like a Mexican jumping bean in a tiny souvenir box. Sometimes, the raft skitters over a surge of water, and my paddle pushes only air; sometimes it makes contact with the maelstrom below. Strange sounds escape my lips. This is the Log Ride at Knotts Berry Farm on steroids, or maybe Disneyland's ultimate E-ticket ride, only we're off the rails.

In briefing us on safety procedures before we set out, Bond, our guide, said, "We have a word for people who don't paddle; they're called swimmers. The key to staying in the raft is to paddle." So I paddle — blindly and with all my heart. No matter that I can't see where we're going. No matter that my efforts feel as effective as trying to stop a rushing tide with a few grains of sand.

If anyone goes overboard, Bond said, we are to grab the swimmer by the life vest and pull him or her back onboard. If we can't reach the swimmer's vest, we are supposed to extend a paddle, with the handle side out. "Don't try to give them your paddle end," he said. "There's nothing to grab a hold of." Everyone laughed. Of course not. Who would do that?

So far, we've cleared rapids with names like Kiss & Tell and Bump & Grind, and avoided the spin cycle of the infamous Maytag. Each time our raft thwaps past a rapid in a spray of foam and glides into calmer water, we triumphantly raise our paddles

and click them together in a river salute, our whoops echoing off sheer canyon walls. Any minute now, we'll be clicking paddles, I think. Then it happens.

The rear of the raft strains and bucks, ejecting its cargo like a pea from a spoon. I click heads with the person sitting in front of me, and hear "man overboard." That's worrisome enough, then I realize the "man" is my friend, Sally. Naturally, she had taken that particular seat — at the very back, next to the guide — because Bond said it was the safest place on the boat, and anyone nervous about "going for a swim" should sit there.

Instantly, the three people on Sally's side hold out their paddles — not the handle end, as they are supposed to, of course, but the paddle end. But before Sally's face can fully register her disgust, Bond grabs her by the back of the lifejacket, plucks her out of the water like a puppy by the scruff of the neck, and deposits her, shivering and wet, on the floor of the raft. My raftmates and I grow quiet and watch Sally expectantly. Finally, she grins, and we all release a collective sigh, me particularly, having been relieved of explaining an untimely demise — or at least a really bad day — to her family.

That bit of drama behind us, we settle in for the balance of an otherwise uneventful day on one of the prettiest

rafting rivers in Arizona. The water may be cold, but the sun is warm and it dries our wetsuits as we surrender to the still of the canyon for a moment, listening to the trill of a canyon wren and the rush of rapids growing fainter as we float downriver.

The upper Salt River offers the earliest whitewater rafting in the West, usually beginning in March and lasting through May, depending on the amount of snowfall in the surrounding mountains the previous winter. The river, formed at the con-





## The Gila River

About the time the Salt River rafting season winds down, Blue Sky Whitewater gears up on the Gila. The Gila River is more forgiving than the Salt. With Class I and II rapids, it's a good choice for people who want to try rafting, but prefer a bit less exhilaration, or for families with younger children.

Blue Sky's Gila River trips involve a one-day, 11-mile ride along a gentle stretch of water lined with salt cedar, Arizona willow and cottonwoods, surrounded by cliffs covered with

saguaro, cholla and barrelhead cactus. Aside from some nesting blue herons and a river swallow or two, the wildest thing rafters are likely to see on this trip are cows.

The Gila River is not as well-known for rafting as the Salt, so rafting parties are much smaller. On my trip, the group consists of a total of 14 people, a generous proportion of them kids, in two boats that we name "The Yellow Sub" and "The Blue Heron." The temperature is just a few degrees cooler than Phoenix, so we receive life vests, but not wetsuits. The uniform *du jour* is swimsuits, and plenty of sunscreen.

We also receive the same safety instructions as we did on the Salt, but before we have ventured far, it's apparent that the hazards of this river are minimal. The only "men overboard" are the kids who have jostled each other out of the inflatable rafts, and they happily splash after us in the shallow, slow-moving water. In fact, the most formidable hazard we encounter is the "Tree of Death," a cottonwood with an overhanging tangle of limbs and leaves just low enough to cause us some grief when we fail to paddle ambitiously enough to clear it.

While the Gila offers less excitement in the form of rapids, entertainment is provided by supersoaker water cannons. These become artillery as our boats take turns ambushing one another. At closer range, we resort to paddle splashing combat, as well as bucket warfare. Aside from entertainment value, the water wars keep us cool in the triple-digit heat.

The guides make a couple of stops in the course of the day. The first is to examine the remnants of some former Gila River rats, namely the Rio Salado Indians, who wore grinding bowls into the boulders along the banks before they were killed off by the Apaches. The second is for a lunch of cold barbecued chicken, cole slaw and potato salad, with cookies and watermelon for dessert.

While the guides set up lunch, rafters sun themselves on shore or body-surf the "Rapid of Doom," which is about as appropriately named as the "Tree of Death." That is to say its bark is worse than its bite, so to speak.

— *Kathy Khoury*

fluence of the White and Black rivers, carves its route along the Salt River Canyon beginning in the White Mountains. At the put-in for the rafting trips, near the Highway 60 bridge north of Globe, the river forms the border that separates the White Mountain Apache and San Carlos Apache reservations, its eastern bank eventually giving way to Tonto National Forest.

Several outfitters run commercial rafting trips on this undammed portion of the river. By far, the most popular are the 10-mile, single-day excursions, like the one I've signed up for with Blue Sky Whitewater. But a multitude of options are available, including overnight, two-day, three-day and five-day packages. "Bridge to bridge" trips, for example, generally take three to five days and run an additional 43 miles, all the way from the Highway 60 bridge to the bridge near Roosevelt Dam. These trips pass through a pristine, restricted-access wilderness area in the Tonto National Forest and often include a number of side hikes into the surrounding canyons.

River rapids are classified according to an international scale from Class I to Class VI. The gentle rapids on the lower Salt, below the Roosevelt Dam, are Class I. At the other end of the spectrum, Class VI rapids — Niagara Falls, for example — are considered unrunnable. The intermittent rapids on the upper Salt fall somewhere in between, from Class II (few obstructions and easy maneuvering) to Class III, with an occasional IV (powerful waves with numerous obstacles) in years following heavy snowfall.

In between rapids, the river flows as gently as a bathtub, but with a much finer view. The canyon is stunning, with towering walls of quartzite topped by thick red layers of Grand Canyon-esque limestone. Juniper and piñon pine dot the landscape at the higher elevations near the put-in. But by the end of the day trip, they give way to spiky stands of saguaro, fuzzy cholla and fire-tipped ocotillo, often punctuated by emerging desert wildflowers.

As we wend our way down the river, Bond — who owns Blue Sky with his wife, Michelle Simas — points out the geological features of the canyon as well as

its plant and animal inhabitants. At one location, we drift directly beneath the clay, jug-like nests of a colony of cliff swallows who have attached their homes to the undersides of the rock ledges. Later, Bond points out an abandoned eagle's nest, a large woody fortress perched on the dead snag of a tree wedged high on a canyon wall.

By afternoon, all the paddling has caught up with us, and we're starving. Fortunately, the company cook has preceded us to our lunch spot, so the smell of hamburgers grilling wafts up the river, prodding us on. It's all the motivation we need. On command, we paddle to the sandy bank, pulling our rafts to shore and peeling off our life jackets and wetsuits. We eat unhurriedly, basking in the sun, then walk upstream and release ourselves on a current that acts like a natural water slide, and whisks us back downriver, depositing us at the boats.

Having washed out our dishes in a series of plastic tubs, we pile back into our rafts for the last, and shortest, part of the journey. Before it seems we've properly gotten underway, we're already bracing ourselves for the day's last challenge, Mescal Rapid. Mescal can be a bit tricky, we're told. So, with memories of Sally's unscheduled swim still vivid in my mind, I grip my paddle a little more tightly and shove my feet a little farther under the tube of the raft while Bond lines up our shot. By now, we're veteran paddlers, though, and we slide through so effortlessly that I begin to wonder if the rapid's reputation is not just a little overstated.

Indeed, the ride back to the put-in seems rougher. Jouncing shoulder to shoulder as we wind our way along a narrow ribbon of dirt that edges the canyon rim, we get a bird's eye view of all the rapids we've commanded. The joke the river guides like to make at this point is that while the river may be Class IV, the road is Class V. And it *is* a bit harrowing in a yellow schoolbus that is nearly as wide as the road. But before long, we're deposited safely at our vehicles and sorry to be leaving. There is a comradely feeling among us now. A kind of river-water-is-thicker-than-blood kind of thing. So we all exchange addresses to make plans for a rendezvous, same time, same place, next year.

PM

## SALT RIVER

These outfitters offer single- and multiple-day commercial rafting trips on the upper Salt River:

- Blue Sky Whitewater, 888-425-5253 or [www.gobluesky.com](http://www.gobluesky.com)
- Far Flung Adventures, 800-231-7238 or [www.farflung.com](http://www.farflung.com)
- Mild to Wild Rafting, 800-567-6745 or [www.mild2wildrafting.com](http://www.mild2wildrafting.com)

Multiple-day trips are limited because a controlled number of permits for the wilderness area are issued. For that reason, outfitters recommend making reservations as far in advance as possible, usually two months. Less notice is required for day trips. The day trips can be crowded on weekends, but are generally less so during the week.

Price structures vary, but expect to pay around \$100 per person for single-day trips, with Saturdays costing \$5 to \$15 more. Mild to Wild rafting offers an express trip that runs from noon to 4 p.m. for \$85. Expect to pay as much as \$750 for a five-day excursion. Prices do not include gratuities.

### DIRECTIONS:

Trips depart from the Salt River Canyon bridge, on Highway 60 north of Globe, about a two-hour drive from Phoenix. Take Highway 60 (Superstition Freeway) east to Globe. Turn left at the intersection of Highways 60 and 70 in Globe, and head north (toward Show Low, still on Highway 60) for 38 miles to the Salt River Canyon Bridge.



## GILA RIVER

Blue Sky Whitewater offers commercial rafting excursions on the Gila River from May through September. Expect to pay around \$60 per person, plus gratuity.

### DIRECTIONS:

Rafters meet guides at the Winkleman City Park, about a 90-minute drive from Phoenix, and take a short bus ride to the put-in. To get there, take Highway 60 to Superior, and Highway 177 to Winkleman. The park is at the junction of Highways 177 and 77.