

Lloyd Furniss

We found a river that's big and fun and demands respect...

The Troll that provides some fickle high speed surfing, followed by *Knuckles* and an excellent play wave on the left (at medium flows —9,000 to 12,000 c.f.s.) The pool below provides a convenient spot to regroup and scout or photograph *Mabeline*, a long class IV that at some levels develops a nasty hole in its initial drop.

Other rapids follow one after the other. In fact, in the next 15 miles, there are 13 major drops. After about eight miles of floating through the steep basalt canyon on large entertaining class III water, two rock islands on the right herald the start of the Murtaugh's larger drops. One of the rock islands

Kayaker plunges through Knuckles Rapid on the Murtaugh.

The Notorious Murtaugh

by Tom Whittaker and Jerry Johnson

The Snake writhes, barely alive, through the northern reaches of the Great Basin Desert. The snowcapped mountains of Wyoming and southeast Idaho are now far behind it. No longer the awesome river of its youth, when it flowed at over 100,000 c.f.s., it is now a luke-warm puddle. Algae-ridden from phosphates, it dribbles between man-made pools. The reason there are twelve dams on the Snake's 989 miles has something to do with hungry mouths, and everything to do with socioeconomic: *natural resources + exploitation = money.*

A Mexican migrant worker curses as he

struggles to pull his boot from the sucking mud. He curses the burning sun. He curses the fickle section of irrigation pipe that carries a bit of the Snake River. He curses the gringo who robs him of a decent wage. He moans his aching back. Oh, to be legal!

We, the inheritors of this noble country, drive past the worker in the mud. We welcome the sun, and cherish the river. Lurking ahead in the canyon is a ghost of what the Snake was before power companies and irrigators defiled it—the notorious "Murtaugh."

The stretch of river that has come to be known as "The Murtaugh" is actually a 15 mile section of the Snake River located east of Twin Falls, Idaho, not far from where Evel Knievel made his highly publicized canyon jump by motorcycle. After the river is released from Milner Dam, it makes its way through a 700-foot deep basalt canyon towards Twin Falls, providing possibly the best big water day trip in the country.

From the very start, the rapids come fast and hard. Almost before you get warmed up, *Amnesia* is just a hazy recollection, and you are bracing yourself for *Basalt Falls*. At over 9,000 c.f.s., both of these rapids assume Grand Canyon proportions. To get to these rapids, you have to follow dirt roads a short distance upstream from the more convenient put-in at a bridge. But one of the advantages of doing this is that these rapids set the tone for the rest of the trip: if you have problems in these, you can't always take out at the bridge; otherwise, you are committed to the next 15 miles.

Directly under the bridge is a wave we call



Kayaks and rafts are mere dots in the expanse of the Snake River Canyon.

actually has a hole through its center that is large enough to paddle through! Waiting below is *Misty*. On a windy day the spray from this drop is visible for a quarter of a mile upstream. Although the waves and hydraulics are awe-inspiring, *Misty* does not hold any really nasty surprises.

More class III and IV water follows: *Junkyard*, *Horseshoe*, and *Sine Waves*, the longest rapid on the river. A long, bouncy ride with an abundance of surfing waves and some classic play holes leaves your appetite whetted.

Kayakers explore rock islands above Misty Rapid.

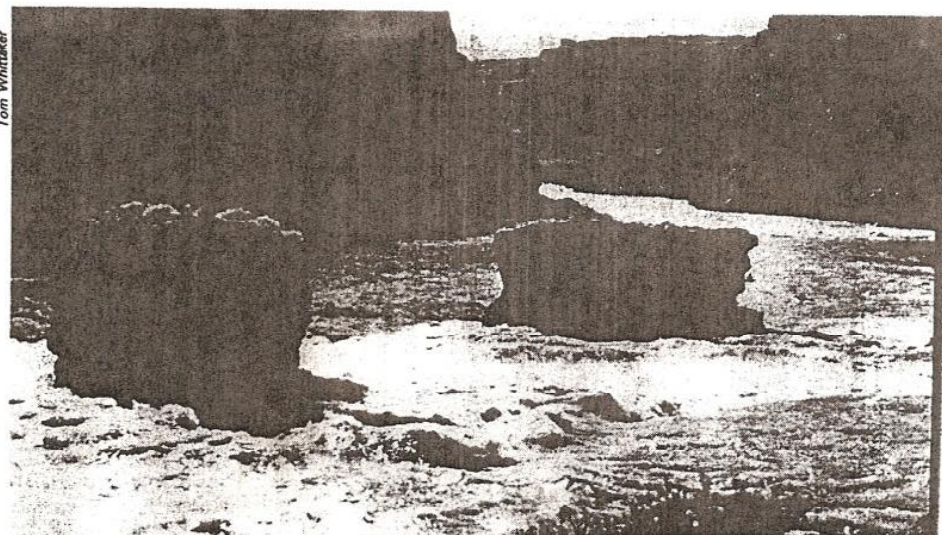


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*and it flows early
in the season!*

When the Hansen Bridge comes into view it is time to switch off your "play button," and be alert. As you approach some rock islands, it is advisable to work your way through class II/III water towards the left bank. After reaching a reed-choked indeterminate eddy on the left, you can then ferry out to the middle island and land. Although not a difficult undertaking, the consequences of a slip-up could prove dire. By going to the island you avoid the poison ivy on the bank, and you have a nice place to eat lunch and scout this serious class V drop. Rafts can be lowered off the rock island on the downstream side. Kayakers not wishing to gamble running the rapid can be launched off the island with a helpful push.

After the bridge, the river takes a brief respite from its head-long charge, forming a long tranquil pool. Below, *The Hooker* waits with riverwide shelf holes (the further to the right you go, the more she likes it and so will you!) Once the charms of *The Hooker* have been endured, land on the upstream side of *Fantasy Island* and scramble up 12 feet over rocks to its grassy top. From there you can scout *Let's Make a Deal*, which presents a series of "doors". Counting from the left, doors 1 through 3 have all been run, with the most popular and enjoyable being door 2. Doors 4 and 5 are a dubious prospect and should be scouted from the right-hand



Tom Whitaker

Let's Make a Deal rapid as seen from *Fantasy Island*.

shore. Immediately below is *Redshank*, *Duckblind*, and the final rapid, *The Idaho Connection*. This rapid is pure delight, and is a fitting culmination of what ranks as one of the West's most enjoyable day trips. The rock island on the left of the Connection creates a large returning eddy with a diagonal breaking wave, but you need good momentum and perfect trim to gain access. Then, like Alice, once through the looking glass you are in for a magical mystery tour. The diagonal can be ridden sideways or used to move onto increasingly larger waves in the center of the river. On a good run, three separate waves can be surfed and used to return the boater to the starting place in the eddy, breathless for more!

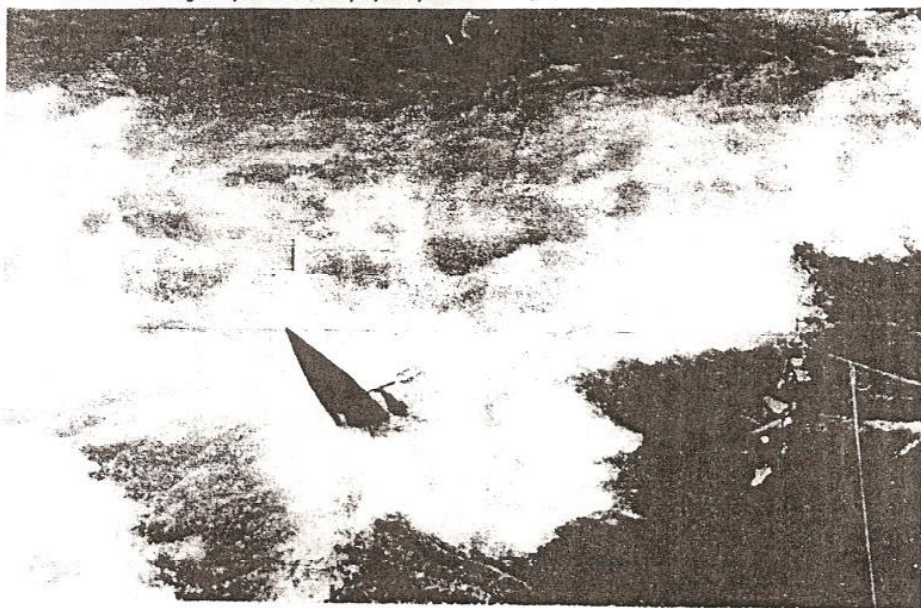
The season on the Murtaugh run is early for this part of the country—April to June—and the flows vary from a barely runnable 3,500 c.f.s. to over 20,000 c.f.s., with favored

levels between 8,000 and 16,000 c.f.s. As soon as there is a demand for irrigation water, the river flows taper off to about 50 c.f.s.

The Murtaugh offers many things: it's big, it's fun, and it demands respect. It's an engaging deep canyon experience, and has mild spring temperatures. All of this is making the Murtaugh a classic run in Idaho. Boaters need to be aware of this section in order to help preserve it against the voracious, never-ending appetite of the power companies. One construction proposal is already in the works. If you're on your way to the Payette country, Salmon, Jackson, or other points in the region, drop by to run the Murtaugh. You can top it off with the best pie and coffee in the area at Connor's Cafe just off the Burley/Rupert exit (#208), where you can talk over that line you fancy taking through *Twin Falls*, a little further down the Snake, where the entire river drops over an 80-foot vertical ledge! ●

Cameras hang from ropes to film kayakers playing in a breaking wave on the Snake River in southern Idaho. The filming was part of a recent project by British

film-maker Leo Dickinson, who made *Canoeing Down Everest*, about an expedition on the Dudh Kosi River in Nepal, and other films.



Jerry Johnson

How to Get There:

Between Twin Falls and Burley, Idaho, lies the small town of Murtaugh. Take the Hazelton Exit (#194) off the interstate and follow the frontage road west, on the south side of the freeway, until you reach a "T" junction. Turn south (left) and follow this road to where it crosses the Snake at the Murtaugh Bridge.

One can launch at this bridge, but the run we described in this article starts a little upstream. To get there, backtrack three-quarters of a mile until the first road on the right. Follow this dirt road for about 1 1/2 miles. From there, a dirt road (irrigation lane) leads to the edge of the canyon. Without four-wheel drive it is advisable to carry the boats from here. Just be sure not to put in above *Star Falls*!

For more information check with the Idaho State University Outdoor Program, (208) 236-3912. These people keep an eye on most rivers in the state and surrounding areas. For water flow information call "Water District #1," (208) 525-7172, and ask for the flow below Milner Dam. ●