

Unknown Snake River canyon provides thrills

By PETE ZIMOWSKY
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TWIN FALLS — "Hold on!"

River outfitter Olin Gardner didn't really have to tell his passengers that as they stared at towering Snake River whitewater about to splash over the inflatable raft.

Their faces bore a look of astonishment as they gripped the boat's lines and braced themselves for the wildest whitewater adventure of their lives.

Giant waves smashed over the raft as the canyon greeted the newcomers with an icy tonic that awoke even the sleepiest river runner.

That was only five minutes into the trip through one of Idaho's most spectacular river runs, The Murtaugh, a section of the Snake River near the town of the same name.

From then on it was one set of rapids after another for 14 miles be-

tween the Murtaugh Bridge and Twin Falls Park. This stretch of the Snake River packs more whitewater than many other big rivers in the Northwest, yet it is relatively unknown for being in the back yard of the town of Twin Falls.

"It's the funnest trip," said Gardner, who operates Idaho Guide Service in Sun Valley and Riggins, and was the first state-licensed outfitter to get a Bureau of Land Management permit to take guests on The Murtaugh.

"This section of the Snake drops 30 feet per mile. The overall gradient is 10 or 12 (feet per mile) throughout the Snake River system," Gardner said, as he prepared his boats — and customers — for the wild ride.

"It's a pretty major drop for this big of a river," he said. "Everybody I've ever brought down here has been awe-struck."

It was easy to see why. The Snake cuts a canyon more than 300 feet deep through this area and it looks like a journey to the center of the earth. The canyon becomes narrow and acts like a funnel squeezing swollen runoff into a chute.

The canyon does have its quiet moments, even though few and far between. When river runners get a chance to take their eyes off the whitewater, they can see silvery waterfalls spurting from gray skyscraper canyon walls. Eagles and other birds of prey can be seen gliding over the canyon, searching for their next meal. Ducks and geese fly inches over the whitewater.

Boaters on this isolated river can't believe that less than a mile from the canyon's rim is Interstate-84. Farms and homes line the rim in some areas. It is a paradox to have such remoteness so close to civilization.

"This is probably one of the most spectacular sections (of the Snake)," Gardner said, as he checked the oars on the 16-foot Campways raft.

Aside from its reputation as one of the wildest rivers around, The Murtaugh is noteworthy among whitewater enthusiasts because it is an early-season river.

While many of Idaho's rivers are still snowbound or in the high country where the weather is too cold for river-running, The Murtaugh is a welcome place. The season is from March to June, depending on water conditions.

This year it looks like the season will be longer because of good water conditions, according to Gardner.

The BLM, which administers this section of river, says it is for expert boaters only.

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It has 10 Class 4 rapids, one Class 5 and one Class 6, depending on the flows, according to Gardner. Class 4 is considered very difficult, while Class 5 is exceedingly difficult.

A Class 6 rapid is only negotiable at favorable water levels. It cannot be attempted without risk of life.

Needless to say, our party portaged Pair of Dice Rapids, which is labeled Class 6 at certain flows. It can be seen just upstream from the Hansen Bridge.

Expert boaters shouldn't run this stretch of the Snake River without doing their homework. The method

a boater uses to run a certain rapid can change at different flows.

At high flows most boaters wouldn't attempt Pair of Dice Rapids, which is two giant rocks in the middle of the river. It is definitely a place to take the boats out of the water and carry them around the obstacle.

In fact, there's a nice flat area on the south side of the river for a relaxing lunch and a chance to reflect on the immensity of the rapids.

Gardner had the party dismantle the rafts and carry the equipment a short way below Pair of Dice.

Another set of rapids, nicknamed Let's Make a Deal, gives the boater a choice to make. But the wrong

choice could mean a swamped or overturned boat.

Building-size rocks are situated in the middle of the river with water pouring through slots.

During the boating season, the flow of the Snake River at Murtaugh can range from 3,000 to 30,000 cubic feet per second. Gardner says it's runnable from 3,500 to 25,000 cfs, but he prefers 6,000 to 15,000 cfs as ideal.

When the river is too low, it's one big rock garden — a whitewater term for rocks everywhere.

Boaters should get a taste of the canyon before trying it themselves. They, and nonboaters, can make the trip with licensed outfitters who have permits for the river, advises

Jeff Jarvis, recreation officer with the Shoshone BLM District.

The Idaho Guide Service, for example, charges \$50 per person for the day trip, which includes lunch and transportation. More information is available by calling 726-3358.

More information on the Murtaugh section of the Snake River can be obtained from the Jeff Jarvis at the Shoshone BLM District, P.O. Box 2-B, Shoshone, ID 83352.

After experiencing the 15-foot waves of The Murtaugh, it's easy to see why this part of the Snake River is rated as one of the best whitewater day trips in the country.

"Hang on!" Here comes another giant Murtaugh wave.