

Riding the Snake's rapids

Very few locals aware of stretch on rushing river

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TWIN FALLS — During the summer the Snake River runs from puddle to puddle across the state, an average flow of 1,000 cubic feet per second which sometimes sinks to zero.

During the spring, however, the river reach from Star Falls to Twin Falls is one of the best whitewater rafting areas in the country.

"It is considered one of the best big-water day runs in the West," said Jeff Jarvis with the Bureau of Land Management in Shoshone. "It's often compared to the Grand Canyon," he added.

In the Grand Canyon rafters may pass through 24 difficult rapids on a 22 day float trip, Jarvis said. "On the Murtaugh stretch (the Snake River from Star Falls to Twin Falls) you go through 19 major rapids in a day."

From vantage points like the Hansen Bridge, it is difficult to get an perception of just how big the river's "big-water" is in the spring.

Running the river with Olin Gardner's Idaho Guide Service two weeks ago was a quick education. Gardner, whose guide service operates out of Ketchum and Riggins, runs the Salmon River during the summer and fall, is one of two outfitters licensed by the BLM to run the Murtaugh stretch of the Snake River.

It is not a trip for the uninitiated or the inexperienced. Two of the rapids, "Pair of Dice" and "Let's Make a Deal," are classified as dangerous. "It's a good trip for intermediate and advanced rafters," Gardner said.

Ten of us made the trip — a group from Ketchum and Boise and Jarvis from the BLM. The put-in point was at the bottom of the Murtaugh grade. It took about half an hour to inflate the rafts and sort out equipment — putting together the metal frames for the boats, oars, dry boxes, and coolers. For those riding, there were also wet suits and life preservers

to put on.

The temperature that day was about 50, but the water was about 40. Even if the sun came out later, it was not a good day for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

It took about two minutes to reach the first set of rapids. Bucking through the three and four foot high walls of water, it only took a few seconds to get 10 inches of water in the bottom of the boat.

That started what became a steady routine for the day: bailing between rapids until the last possible moment and then clutching onto something solid while Gardner pulled and tugged at the oars guiding the raft through the rapids.

With 19 major rapids in 13.75 miles of river the bailing had to be fast. "Usually the boatman takes care of the bailing," Gardner said, "but on this river there just isn't the time."

The river that day was running at 16,000 cfs — a far cry from the near-still water of summer. While the high water flooded some rapids that pose a major technical challenge when flows are slightly lower, that much water presented its own special problems.

Instead of rocks and channels there are "holes" where the rush of water cascading over a ridge creates a suction that can trap and eventually flip a raft. There are also standing waves — literal walls of water four, five or even six feet tall — created by the high flows. Other waves break and roll with the current, filling rafts with water and dousing passengers.

Even so, there are a few quiet stretches. On the river the canyon presents sights not seen by many area residents, even though it cuts right through the center of the Magic Valley. Bluewater springs, pairs of nesting golden eagles, and Indian ruins left by the valley's first inhabitants provide plenty of diversions for side-trips and short hikes from the twisting, rolling raft ride on the river.

"It's always an exciting trip," said Gardner, who runs 20 to 40 trips down the river per season. "I never get tired of the Murtaugh stretch."

For classified dangerous rapids like "Let's Make a Deal," we landed the boat at the head of one of the lava islands and spent several minutes scouting the rapids and the four or five possible routes between groups of lava islands making up the rapids.

At "Pair of Dice," which can be seen just upstream from the Hansen Bridge, the water was still too high for a safe run-through — even with two experienced guides and well-equipped rates.

Beaching the boats just a few yards ahead of the

rapid, we portaged them around the rapids. Boats were disassembled as far as possible, removing oars, frames and dry boxes. Six or seven of the riders then balanced the rafts on heads and shoulders to push through the willows on shore, carrying the boats around the rapids.

Six hours after its start, the trip came to a close in the slack water above the Twin Falls at Idaho Power's public park.

The BLM's Shoshone District, which controls most of the land bordering the canyon in the Murtaugh stretch, currently controls permits for professional rafting guides operating on the river. Only two guides, Gardner's Idaho Guide Service in Ketchum and Whitewater Shop River Tours in Boise, are licensed to run the Murtaugh rapids.

Private rafters and kayakers also run the section, but Jarvis stressed that at this time of year the river is dangerous and is a trip only for the experienced and well-equipped.

While the BLM would like to make the river more accessible through improving the put-in site outside of Murtaugh and installing restrooms, Jarvis said, "We also want people to know that it's dangerous. We don't want to have anybody try to do it in a rubber duck."

As for the other aspects of the area, Jarvis said "We don't have to do a lot of management. The river pretty well takes care of itself."

Growing in popularity, the Murtaugh stretch was only recently discovered by whitewater rafters and kayakers, Jarvis said. Although it is almost unknown by local residents, the Murtaugh stretch has been attracting boaters to the area from all of Idaho's neighboring states. Some, he said, come to the area to run the Murtaugh stretch while traveling to other better-known rivers in the state. A number of rafters from the Salt Lake City area have been coming to the Magic Valley specifically to run the Star Falls/Twin Falls stretch, Jarvis said.

The prime time for running the river is in spring and early summer, Jarvis said. "Generally it's runnable from 3,500 to 20,000 cfs, and at its best between 8,000 to 16,000 cfs."

Gardner said he will be running trips on the Murtaugh stretch through June, including several paddle boat trips and an overnight trip. "Over the past two years or so a lot more people have been calling me, its reputation is growing," he said.

One of the best things about the river is its accessibility to Southern Idaho residents, Gardner said. "It's right there in front of their noses and nobody knows about it."