

River Report

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GETTING TO KNOW THE GREAT UNKNOWN: A Personal Look at White Water Boating on the Colorado River

"We are three-quarters of a mile in the depths of the earth, and the great river shrinks into insignificance, as it dashes its angry waves against the walls and cliffs, that rise to the world above; they are but puny ripples and we but pygmies, running up and down the sands, or lost among the boulders... We are now ready to start our way on down the Great Unknown." – J.W. Powell, August 1869.

One might think there is nothing unknown about the Colorado River; after all, this is the Information Age. The Internet gives us access to countless reams of information, and thousands of reports are made for our disposal by numerous agencies and businesses. It seems as though every aspect of the river has been covered to some degree, sometimes written about 100 times over. All of the "laws" that have redefined how we see the river, all of the physical alterations that have reshaped it, and all of the interests competing continuously for the water flowing in its channel are elements that help to move the Colorado into the abstract. The river is easily adapted into a language filled with legal jargon, laundry lists of do's and don'ts, formulas and numbers and, in general, an overwhelming sense of over-management. With this gargantuan quantity of information, it's oftentimes easy to lose sight of what the Colorado River is: a river.

I am as guilty of the above as any. For the past six years I have spent my time huddled in an office with an ever-increasing mound of paper, all describing a plethora of aspects of the Colorado. I must confess I have contributed to this seemingly insurmountable pile of information. One thing is for certain: as that mountain of information has grown, the Colorado River has become a more complex and challenging puzzle for me to comprehend.

When one spends such a lengthy amount of time on a particular subject, one thinks he understands. But during all this time reading, writing, and studying about the Colorado River, I came to realize that I had actually never touched the river itself. I stood on top of Hoover Dam and saw the river pooled behind it. I stood on a bridge overlooking the Colorado River and saw where the river crosses the international boundary into Mexico. I stood on an alfalfa field in the Imperial Valley being irrigated with its water. I drank tap water in San Diego, Phoenix, and Denver. I have seen thousands of images of the river in pictures, read a thousand descriptions and etched in my mind the cartographical points of its geographical course from headwaters to ocean. But I had never dunked my head beneath its frigid waters, felt its undulations beneath me, or heard its chatter as it coursed along its 1,400-mile route to the sea. In fact, I realized that I had never experienced the Colorado River as a river.

So how does one gain that experience of getting as close to the river as possible, of feeling its gravitational pull? While there are those thrill-seekers who have, in fact, swum great distances *in* the white-capped rapids of the Colorado River, I was convinced that trying to float *on* the water might be a better course of action.

The most popular white water boating trip of this river (and possibly in the entire U.S.) is the section of the Colorado River that flows through the Grand Canyon. Here the river follows a

channel right through the 277-milelong, 18-mile-wide Grand Canyon – one of the great natural wonders on Earth. Most boaters “put in” at Lee’s Ferry – just upstream from the dividing point of the Upper and Lower Basins (Lee Ferry), float down the river, and “take out” at one of several locations before the river enters Lake Mead. Most trips run by commercial outfitters can cost between \$1,200 and \$2,000 per person, depending on the company and other factors such as the duration of the trip (partial trips tend to cost less money). To my good fortune, the Grand Canyon River Guides – a non-profit association composed of people from the river boating community dedicated to protecting the Grand Canyon and supporting the boating community – was having its annual training session and I was invited to join. I accepted.

And thus it was decided by my benefactors and the Foundation that I would be sent floating into the great unknown to write an article on the recreational white water boating industry for this issue of *River Report*.