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Blood Is Thicker Than White Water

by Lisa Schnellinger

The young mule deer grazed delicately at the edge of the river, its back to the vast stone walls of the canyon rising above it. A dozen pairs of hands fumbled with cameras as our raft slowed down.

Our driver revved the motor to force the raft upstream for a closer shot. Thirty-five feet of inflated rubber pushed against the water wall of the Colorado River. It took all 30 horsepower to overcome the river's force, and I flinched at the loudness of that ugly, artificial roar in the midst of the idyllic scene.

But the little deer didn't flinch. Didn't stop grazing. Didn't even turn its head at the sound. Only when we were directly opposite, shutters whirring, voices exclaiming, did it lift its head and stare at us. In a moment we moved on, and it went back to munching the greens.

I've scorned group tours, preferring to travel back roads of developing countries on my own. And I've considered myself an environmentalist since I was old enough to spell the word, a self-image bolstered by years of recycling, backpacking and forgoing car ownership. In other words, I was a purist snob.

The Grand Canyon tops my list of most magnificent unspoiled scenery on earth. So I was chagrined to be taking a weeklong trip in a group of 27 tourists and five crew members on two hulking, motorized rafts. The kicker was that the itinerary required being flown out of the canyon - in a helicopter.

But I was doing the trip with my father. He'd wanted to run America's biggest white water for 15 years, and I'd promised to go with him, since Mom found it too scary.

By the time we got around to making the trip, Dad was 78 years old. He's in great shape - but his knees are giving out from years of construction work.

Hiking the steep 9.5 miles in or out of the canyon, as the shorter paddle trips require, was out of the question. The hike and chopper aren't necessary if you do the entire length of the canyon, from one car-accessible point to another, but to do that without a motorized raft takes at least 12 days. Dad didn't think he could endure that many nights sleeping on the ground.

So, reminding myself of the thousands of sacrifices, great and small, that my father has made for me, I sent in the deposit.

A good omen

I was assured that Arizona River Runners was an environmentally sensitive outfit. And by taking the seven-day trip instead of the six-day, we'd be less rushed and get more "float" time, without the motor.

As we started out from Lee's Ferry that first morning, my raft's driver, Casey Lott, saw a California condor circling far overhead. Only 15 of them are known to be alive in the wild in Arizona, and Casey was thrilled.

I took it as a good omen. And I noticed that, when I sat at the front of the raft, the wind and water filled my ears much more than the motor. Dad wasn't bothered by it at all - but, then, he wasn't wearing his hearing aids.

That day we saw a cormorant, a blue heron, Bighorn rams, mergansers, scores of swifts and swallows, and the mule deer. All seemed to regard our rafts as harmless, oversized animals.

Casey said the species diversity in the canyon has actually increased since the Glen Canyon Dam was built in 1963, mostly because it eliminated flooding and slowed the flows. That means more algae, for example, which means more food for the swallows and swifts, which means more prey for the peregrine falcons.

The canyon and the river are religion as well as livelihood for the raft guides. Teresa Yates, our trip leader and philosophical guru, continually reminded us, "Go with the flow of the river. Appreciate what is around you instead of worrying about what's to come."

The scale of the canyon itself enforces this rule of mind: Our puny human demands and desires were continually silenced by the billion-year-old, mile-high stone towering around us. That raft's-eye perspective is a prime reason to run the river through the Grand Canyon.

But for me this made it all the more annoying when the motors started up. But to ban motors, Teresa answered, would be to put the canyon's beauty out of the reach of many. More than two-thirds of the 22,000 people a year who run the Grand Canyon choose motorized rafts. For most, it's an issue of time - they want to see the whole canyon but can't take 14 days to do it in a muscle-powered raft. And the longer trips are much more expensive.

My knee-jerk response was: "Then they should take the shorter trip." But even as I spoke, I realized I was passing sentence on my father, who - if not for those

environmentally incorrect motors - would have died without experiencing one of his dearest dreams.

Like little kids, we'd anticipated the trip for months. Our phone conversations had involved planning, worrying and fantasizing. Now, in Dad's hearty laughter and his earnest assessments of each thrilling rapid, I could hear him stocking up tales to regale his buddies with for the next two decades.

He didn't even seem to mind, really, when a major wave hit his face and knocked one of the lenses of his trifocals into the river.

Later, Teresa told me about how great it's been to see disabled people enjoy the canyon. She's taken quadriplegics on her rafts, setting up ramps for them to get out of the boat and around the campsites. She's escorted blind people, describing for them the colors and shapes of the river scenery and guiding them to feel the stone.

And she's seen, in all her clients, a change: a piece of the canyon goes out with them when they leave.

That wordless evangelism keeps Teresa on the water, working 24-hour days. She and Casey sometimes wear earplugs or shooting-range ear protectors to dampen the motor's drone as they drive.

The trend is for rafting outfits to use newer types of motors that are less than half as loud as the old ones. The quiet Honda motors now are on all of Arizona River Runners' rafts for 1999, although they're expensive, much heavier and harder to heft and handle. And the company is experimenting with electric motors.

A father's smile

I'd imagined all the paddlers glaring at us, Jet Skiers of the Colorado. But mostly they waved. Still, I felt a twinge of guilt and envied their slower pace.

I also found myself longing for the thrill of paddling through the rapids, battling white water with my own arms. All we had to do was hang onto a rope and enjoy it, like an amusement park ride.

But with one look at Dad's face, boyish with excitement, I broke into smiles myself. Often I rode the pontoon like a bronco, whooping it up, as he yelled from the padded seat beside me under the water's cold splash.

Luckily, our group was ambitious about getting up and on the river every morning by 7 a.m. Dad, of course, was up earlier than anyone. So, instead of

lingering over coffee on the beach, we had more time to float in silence or hike farther into side canyons at our regular stops.

Best were the moments when we tied the two rafts together, cut the motors and laid back to float in great speechless circles - sometimes with classical music in the background, sometimes with only the water for accompaniment.

We all had grown closer by confiding secrets, sharing platefuls of grilled salmon and bathing together in the river. But our wordless communions created the sense of camaraderie as much as our baptism in the waves.

He's the man

Sharing these meditations, as well as the chores of setting up camp and cooking, the group bonded.

I was delightedly proud to watch Dad as he trudged and scrambled over boulders better than some hikers decades younger.

"How old is your dad?" people kept asking. They'd shake their heads and say, "I sure hope I can do this when I'm his age." More than one said, "He's my hero." The highlight for me came at the hike in Elves Chasm, when we stopped for a swim. At the sound of the group chanting, "Walter! Walter! He's the man!" I looked up from my journal-writing just in time to see him take a leap from a mossy ledge into a swimming hole. The group burst into applause.

When at 8 a.m. sharp that last morning we heard the incoming chopper, the sound strafed like bullets. The four teenage girls began to weep inconsolably, the adults hugged and clutched, all of us struck with grief at having to leave the canyon and each other.

The chopper's blades beat against the air, beat against us, unexpectedly creating the most appropriate possible accompaniment to our trauma. Its abrupt vertical pull away from the river was an exact replica of the emotional wrench I felt. After dreading for months that 7-minute ride in man's most obnoxious conveyance, it turned out to be the perfect way, the only way for me to leave the Grand Canyon.

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