

# Chesapeake Paddler



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**Canyonlands** photo by Yvonne Thayer

## Green River, Canyonlands National Park, Utah

By Yvonne Thayer

When Rick Wiebush, veteran paddler of Baja, Greenland and Australia, proposes a trip, you don't hesitate - you sign right up. This time his plan was a 100-mile paddle down the Green River through Canyonlands National Park, with plenty of time for exploring the renowned hiking and biking trails.

The Green River cuts deeply through Utah's majestic Labyrinth and Stillwater Canyons. Full of switchbacks, it is flanked by sheer ocher-red walls that rise as much as 400 feet above the river's edge in spots. The cliffs, towering rock formations, and surrounding desert are dotted with Anasazi ruins, petroglyphs/rock paintings, and abandoned mines.

So, early this May, eight of us flew to Salt Lake City and drove three hours to the adventure capital of Utah - Moab. There we rented five kayaks, two canoes and our trusty "groover" - a large metal box with a twist-on toilet seat for our leave-no-trace week in the desert. We did the requisite shop-

ping for fuel--canisters and gas for the stoves, tequila and chocolate for us. And we began filling water bags, a gallon per person for each of the six days.

Our timing was ideal. The Green River was near its spring crest, running 3-4 knots, so paddling was almost optional. Spring storms and snowmelt had muddied the swift-moving river, carrying down twisted branches, logs and the occasional bloated carcass of a large animal, often with a feasting raven perched on top. The weather was sunny, high 80's during the day and pleasantly cool at night, with a brilliant full moon. Some days were cloudless and calm, others brought strong winds and gray-tinged clouds barreling across the sky. One day we were buzzed by some prop planes that dropped down between the canyon walls to skim the river. The cool river water was perfect for a late afternoon dip, though we were careful to swim with our pfd's tethered to a line so as not to be swept into the fast current.

Descending the Green River is a visual journey through time as successive layers of geological strata reveal themselves: sculpted Navajo and Kayenta sandstone, the Wingate sandstone canyons dripping with desert varnish, the crumbly, greenish Chinle formation, the dramatic White Rim, and the chocolatey-brown Elephant Canyon. Every twist and turn of the river brings another stunning scene into view. Long sandbars, overhanging rock ledges, sandstone arches, dramatic side canyons and rock slides dot the route. Impenetrable thickets of tamarisk flank the river, backed by the occasional pinyon pine. Desert cactus and spring flowers sport brilliant orange, fuchsia, purple, yellow and white blossoms. Herons, egrets, ravens, crows and the occasional eagle fly overhead. Whirlpools and eddies provide plenty of places of play.

We quickly settled into a companionable routine. Ken Quagliana supplied laminated maps and Indian spices. (Fortunately he brought a few extra maps as several flipped off our decks during high winds and disappeared instantly into the opaque brown waters of the Green.) Chip Walsh bought an out-of-print guidebook by Michael Kelsey for \$50, and kept us in stitches with spiced-up



**Kayak and Canoe** photo by Marc Webster

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tales of river explorers, miners and cowboys. Chip also brought along a striped pole in a ski bag, so he could pole his canoe gondolier-style, standing, when the mood struck. Rick studied his charts and topo-maps and shepherded us to the best camping and hiking spots. Kim Neutzling led us each morning in yoga. Marc Webster managed the tequila and limes. Bob Huber navigated the hikes, when he wasn't off getting in a run. Bunny Wagner spotted for the faint of heart on the steeper climbs.

Our campsites varied with the terrain. Our first night under the stars was on a grassy flat in Ten Mile Canyon. The next day we hiked up into Hey Joe Canyon to an old mine. The site was littered with abandoned appliances and vehicles, rusting and riddled with bullet holes. We pressed on late that afternoon until we reached a 200-yard sandbar dubbed the "aircraft carrier" where we spread out camp.

The next day we reached Fort Bottom, noted for its steep cliffs topped by a circular stone Anasazi lookout hut and, down below, a log "outlaw cabin" dating to the late 1880s. Fort Bottom lies at the end of the White Rim trail which runs several miles along the ridge-line of connecting hills, linking to mountain bike trails. Several park rangers showed us around. At camp that night, we set up cooking on a massive stone ledge jutting 50 feet over the river.



One of the campsites photo by Yvonne Thayer

At Dead Horse Canyon, we paddled well up into the canyon stream before pitching tents on rock ledges under a steep wall with more stunning Anasazi petroglyphs. We fanned out to explore the canyon before settling down to dinner. We always ate well, and that night brought more new treats to share: pesto couscous, spinach paneer, dried ginger and hibiscus flowers. Although we usually had the river to ourselves, occasionally we met up with other paddlers: a couple from Belgium, two guys in a canoe. Then there was the "party barge", eight kids in four canoes lashed together, with screeching boomboxes, 20 cases of beer and plenty of vodka. Sometimes we'd see them ambling through the canyon floor, sunburned, gripping beer cans.



Hiking the canyons photo by Yvonne Thayer

Our last two nights we camped at Water Canyon. Our plan was a daylong 14-mile hike up and across Water and Shot Canyons to the convoluted Maze District of Canyonlands. We were so enthralled with the dramatic striated rock formations, gigantic natural amphitheater, hidden coves and pools, and eye-popping views from the Water-Shot saddle that we lingered along the way and only made it halfway before reluctantly turning back.

Our last day on the river was a short but exciting paddle through the increasingly agitated waters of the Green River as they met the even faster-moving Colorado River at Confluence. Below Confluence is Cataract Canyon, leading the Colorado on down into the Grand Canyon and its eventual meander into Mexico and the [Sea of Cortez](#). We navigated turbulent class 2 waters before pulling up onto the flats at Spanish Bottom to await our Tag-A-Long charter boat for the return trip up the Colorado to Moab.

No sooner had we neatly loaded our gear and boats onto the charter boat than the party barge belatedly rammed up onto the beach. Suddenly the beach was piled high with boxes and bottles and trash and dry bags. As the kids rushed to toss things onto the charter boat, it began to sink. Some overflow safety mechanism had been mis-installed and the boat nearly went down with our boats and all our gear. We watched aghast as Rick and Bob masterminded a bailing system, and disaster was averted.

For five hours the boat battered its way up the Colorado, past orange-red canyons and rock towers and arches and caves. It was bittersweet to be smashing upriver through mesmerizing terrain that we had just paddled lazily and wondrously down on its sister river, the Green, for a week. Give me a kayak, any time.

How to: Flights to Salt Lake cost about \$400 r/t. Renting a car in Salt Lake is the least expensive and most convenient way to get to/from Moab (even though the car will end up sitting unused for a week.)

Our vendors in Moab were Canyon Voyages for kayak/canoe rentals (\$25 and \$28/day respectively), Tag-A-Long Expeditions for charter bus and pick-up boat (\$150 p/p), Big Horn Lodge (\$95/room) for first and last night stays, and a hot shower. Both Tag and Canyon Voyages rent toilets (about \$50/week). You need to get permits from both BLM and Canyonlands National Park.

Edited by Lynn Erwin