

Cataract '95 - "It's All Good!"

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There is a strong chill in the air from the rains of a few hours ago. When it rains in a dry, desert environment like Canyonlands in Utah, the water evaporates very quickly and things cool off fast. From 80 degrees and sunny this afternoon to a 45 and clear, moonless night. The glow of the coals against the black dutch oven make a checkerboard pattern and the warmth they give off feels great. My companions on this trip are an eclectic group. Janice and Wyatt, a mother and grown son combo, and two friends, Mark and Kathi, all from Tulsa, Oklahoma and all on their first river trip. The most experienced boaters on the trip are David, Lori and Woody, all from California. Woody is 15, has boated all over the Americas and is a budding folk guitarist. David is a contractor and professional outdoorsman, and Lori is his girlfriend. These are great people. The river strips away the facade of "civilization" and the real folks show through. This was a good crew, eight of us warming over a charcoal fire, quietly laughing and anticipating the rum cake that was starting to smell like cake inside the dutch oven. Lasagna cooked in the same DO had been the main course, it was gone so fast I'm not sure it was really there.

The chill, the dark sky, the quiet laughing, all of these things belie the events of the last 36 hours. The chill in the air sends chills down my spine when I think about, not what was, but what could have been. We're camped on a sandy beach. All of us are warm, well fed and happy. Last night five of our party were separated into groups of two and three, spending the night unsheltered, unfed and un-watered on the banks of the Colorado river, just below Cataract Canyon.

Cataract, frequently called just "Cat", was named by famed American explorer John Wesley Powell in 1869. It was (and still is) full of precipitous drops (cataracts). You can miss them (go around them) most of the time, but they are all over the place. It is a narrow spot in the Colorado river just below the confluence with the Green. The combined flow of these two mighty rivers forms one of the world's greatest rivers, and Cat is one of the most exciting runs on an exciting river system. Particularly when the spring thaw is in progress and the river is at flood stage, as it is now.

The Tulsa party has been out eight days now, seven on the river. The folks from California put on 22-days ago, 250 miles up-river from here. In the seven days the entire party has been together we've driven narrow switchback roads; floated the Green River through some of the most beautiful desert canyons in America, if not the world; camped on rock ledges under a starlight canopy; and eaten some of the best food I've ever had. Linguine with red clam sauce; steaks with baked potatoes, salad and garlic bread; gingerbread with fresh whipped cream; huevos rancheros for breakfast; and fresh fruit and vegetables until we could eat no more. This is typical of river trips, sometimes called "Float and Bloat" trips. Even so, our food costs on this private trip were in the \$12/person/day range, not bad considering how well we ate.

And we've lost weight. Hiking the side canyons to view the natural and manmade artifacts the desert has to offer is really the reason you come on these trips . . . the rapids provide the

punctuation, but on a long expedition trip like this one, the natural surroundings really provide for the tapestry of the memory, the background on which everything depends for its power. Flowers, a desert in bloom . . . and every one of them brilliant, regardless of the color. Brilliant green, brilliant red, brilliant purple, yellow, white . . . a celebration of life allowed by the sparse spring rains . . . but a celebration so brilliant, so beautiful, it is worthy of honoring the entire year.

And then three days ago we turned the corner from the placid Green. We passed the confluence with the Colorado and things picked up immediately. The Colorado was running much higher than the Green. We weren't sure what the total flow was. Park Service estimates were projecting flows in the range of 45,000 cfs, but with peaks possible up to 60,000 cfs (60,000 cubic feet per second - cfs - is the volume of four (4)-2,000 square foot houses going by every second). My stomach had hurt since we had arrived in Moab on our way to the put-in. Snow pack was well over 100% in the Rockies this year, a cool spring had delayed the run-off and now, as we prepared to navigate some of the world's biggest runnable rapids, we had no clue what the water level was. A hot spell upstream could swell the river to enormous proportions, unbelievable proportions. I had run Cat at a variety of water levels, the highest being 65,000 cfs, and there is no way to explain to someone how big the rapids are. Even videos don't do them justice. There is an old saying, "You won't know until you go," and it is too true. Ya' gotta' see it to believe it. At high-water the Big Drops can have waves 20+ feet from peak-to-trough, and not just one but a raging 3/4 of a mile of these rascals, waiting to grab your boat and send you plunging into the 45-50 degree waters of the snowmelt. I demand wetsuits of all the folks on my trips. Wetsuits, a good life jacket, and plenty of water - these are the essentials for survival in Cat. And survival is not a preordained thing down here. A tragic death punctuated that for us on our arrival. A guide had died in Big Drop 2 just a couple of days before.

Reality down here is stark and hard and unforgiving. Good guides, good equipment and proper preparation reduce the risk of injury or death dramatically, but the edge is always near, it is always in your thoughts as you boat down toward high-water Cat. Brown Betty, #2, The North Sea, Mile Long, Marty's Hole . . . any of these rapids could flip a boat or dislodge an unwary boatman. But the real threat, the gut-wrenching obstacle, the thing that makes breakfast taste flat and unappetizing, no matter how good it is, is a series of three rapids called "The Big Drops." at high water these three rapids nearly run together, creating a mile long maelstrom that survives in the memory of every Boatman who has run it, for as long as they live . . .

Big Drop 1 is a wave train that can be easily negotiated, but you can't predict exactly where you will end up in the river when you're done. And this is important because Big Drop 2 is waiting for you. A huge wave guards the middle of the river and a raging, foaming drop fittingly called Little Niagra blocks the right 1/3 of the river. To greet you, almost like a welcome mat, is the marker hole. From the bank the marker hole looks big, but not too threatening compared with the other things that lurk in Big Drop 2. Up close, however, the marker hole is probably 10-15 feet deep and perfectly willing to embrace you and your boat and all that is yours if you dare enter. Doing Big Drop 2 correctly means a hair-raising, heart-pounding run through a narrow slot left of the marker hole and right of Little Niagra. If you do it right you can actually look down into

both of them as you go by, marker hole to river left of you, Little Niagra to river-right. A run to the left of the marker hole is also possible and a run to the right of Little Neagra is something only a demented person would try, although I have heard stories.

Well, so what, you say? So you flip in Big Drop 2? What's the Big deal? Well, Big drop 3 is just downstream. Nothing like BD2, except that the left 1/3 of the river is a rock garden that reminds me of a pinball machine, reminds me of the little mushroom shaped cushions (you can only see the mushroom-shape at low water, but once you see them you know what's there) . . . it's called Satan's Gut to scare the billy hell out of innocent passengers . . . as well as experienced boatmen. If you look at it you imagine, probably quite rightly, that you might never come out. And maybe even then you could ignore Satan's Gut, except that most of the water in the river runs right toward it. So if you make a mistake in BD2 you may end up swimming Satan's Gut . . . and this is the Big Deal, this is what makes Big Drop 2 an unforgettable event for even the most jaded river runner.

To avoid conflict and disappointment the Park Service maintains a camp site sign-up box beside the "Dangerous Rapids Ahead" sign just below the Confluence. We got lucky on camps at the sign up. We got our choice of camps in Cataract - Brown Betty and Big Drop 1. Brown Betty is the first rapid, named after the cook boat on the Brown-Stanton expedition in 1889. From Brown Betty you can hike to a glorious place called the Doll House, a fairy land of enormous red rock spires and delicate vegetation that stirs the soul and evokes a truly spiritual response. No church, no cathedral is as grand, as awe-inspiring, or a glorifying to our creator as places like the Doll House. And Canyonlands is full of such places.

We met a commercial trip at Brown Betty, they pulled in just as we were pulling out. They said the water level was about 42,000 cfs, the Park service had been right on with their estimate. We had headed out into the river not knowing what was really ahead, every water level is different. Huge roller waves in #8 account for it being called "The North Sea." You don't know how the boats keep from flipping, but everything turns out OK . . . most of the time.

"Mile Long" is literally a mile of individual rapids that run together at high-water. It can flip you, but the real threat is that if you flip in Mile Long, you will almost certainly swim the Big Drops.

Then, toward the end of Mile Long, you start looking for "The Button," a huge rock cylinder high on the right-side canyon wall. This marks rapid #20, but more important, it marks the end of Mile Long and the beginning of the Big Drops. We camped just above Big Drop 1.

I ask everyone who plans to run the Big Drops to look at them before hand, to scout them. This gives them a chance to see what they are getting into and make up their own minds whether they want to run them or walk them. Running the rapids has its obvious risks, but walking them is not without risk as well. Part of the walk is a trail, but most of it is boulder hopping, or worse, hiking along unconsolidated rock and talus slopes that give-way under foot and send large rocks and boulders hurtling toward calf bones and foot bones. Not without risk by any means. The other

reason for having folks look at rapids is that if they do swim, they know where to swim to avoid things like Satan's Gut. Good to know.

We had a good dinner that night at BD1. The party was subdued, everyone was in bed early. The next morning was quiet, nobody seemed too interested in breakfast. We had dried soup cups, the kind you just add boiling water to, along with coffee and bagels.

Woody had decided not to row The Drops, he felt the power of the water was too great for his 15-year-old arms and back, probably a responsible call. Lori elected to walk. David was going to run his boat through with Janice, pull over and walk back up and run Woody's boat through with Wyatt. I had trained Mark and Kathi as bow paddlers on the flat water we had come over upstream. I had confidence in their ability and was feeling reasonably good, but still very nervous. The hikers took off on river left (left as you look downstream) with the video camera and we waited until they were probably in position. Dave and I discussed it and decided I would go first, fine with me. I was so nervous I really didn't want to see anybody else's run anyway. Dave was planning to go left of the marker hole. I wanted to go between the marker hole and Little Niagra, but I had options. I would wait to decide until I saw where Big Drop 1 left me in the river.

So, after we had carefully decided just what we would do, that I would go first, Dave rowed out of the eddy at camp and went first. Oh, well, so much for risk management plans. I pulled out, but by this time Dave's big blue boat was well ahead of me. We entered Big drop 1, my bow paddlers did well, we came out of the wave train in the middle of the river. I looked ahead and saw the rise of the river where it went over the marker hole rock and, lower and to the right, where it formed Little Niagra. Good position, a little mid-course correction and we were looking good. I never hear the rapids, at least not the big ones, adrenaline is a powerful drug. I looked ahead, saw a small blue line in the river, "I think Dave is over," nothing else to do or say at this point, we were entering Big drop 2.

We floated on glass slick water, just ahead of the raging brown foam from the rapids. Just to the right of the marker hole, "Forward Paddle, Hard!", Mark and Kathi did good, they dug in and our little 14' boat surged forward into the wave coming off the right-side of the marker hole. A huge wave hit us head on, we were through it and, suddenly as if by magic, we were in relatively calm water below Little Niagra. A perfect run! Good karma, good luck! As we would learn later, Dave had hit the marker hole head on, just one boat width to the left of where we entered, and that distance, seven small feet in a 1/4 mile wide river, made the difference between smooth boating and a life-threatening adventure.

On down through BD2, dealing with the problems as they arose, then Big Drop 3, well to the right of Satan's Gut. Fairly big waves, nothing to ignore, but very navigable. I looked ahead, saw Dave's boat, but no Dave, no Janice. Suddenly I saw Janice on the right bank, standing, out of the water. I tried to make the shore but the heavy current took our boat 1/2 mile downstream before we landed. Mark grabbed a water bottle from the deck and jumped on the shore to get Janice and hike downstream, while Kathi and I pulled back into the current to catch David. We

all expected to meet up just a little ways downstream.

6-1/2 miles downstream we caught David. He had climbed up on his boat and was using an oar to pull himself out of the current. He had been in the water for over 30 minutes. Despite his wetsuit and the midday sun he was cold, probably in the early stages of hypothermia. He was slurring his words and, fortunately, shivering violently, all while telling me he was fine. He was only worried about Janice. It was about 3:00 p.m. now. 3-hours later we had his boat upright and Dave was feeling better.

We had 3-hours of daylight left. Kathi and I hiked upstream for 1-1/2 hours over some horrible terrain - large rocks coming loose from the steep slope, footing dropping out and a lethargic snake, totally unimpressed with the human who appeared in front of him. I was carrying 2-gallons of water plus some food, clothing and a lantern-light combo with extra batteries, all in a day pack. It seemed futile, but we persisted until a good spot presented itself, a rock actually in the river (easily accessible from shore) with a nice depression on the top to put the gear. I opened the lantern-light combo to lantern configuration, turned it on and pointed it so it would be visible from upstream. I hoped they would find it, I knew they would be thirsty. I felt good about where the light and gear was left, I didn't see how they could miss it.

I was very tired, making mistakes and getting close to serious injury, a common result of late afternoon hikes and fatigue. Luckily, I made it back to where Kathi had stopped, we continued on back to camp, arriving about 10 minutes before it was too dark to hike . . . cutting it a little thin.

The evening was very subdued, Dave ate hardly anything. Kathi and I had a gourmet meal of red wine and Pringles, then everyone hit their sleeping bags covered with dirt and dried-sweat.

The next day was sunny and hot. Dave rowed his boat to the left bank and hiked up to recover Woody's boat which was still at the Big Drop 1 camp. I flagged down a boat coming upstream from Lake Powell and asked them to look out for our passengers on the right bank.

A scant 45 minutes later we heard the sound of a motor coming from upstream. The motor boatman we had talked to had gotten not only our right bank hikers, but the group that had hiked the left bank as well! We were elated. 7 of the 8 people in the group were back together, and Dave was a skilled outdoorsman who, although I'd worry about him, was able to take care of himself.

We got out what food we could, poured fluids down the hikers and broke our impromptu camp. I rowed my boat laden with all 7 folks over to the left bank where Dave's boat was waiting, Woody grabbed Dave's oars and we boated down to the first good camp, Palmer Canyon.

Tents pitched on the sandy beach and a bright, hot afternoon sun bearing down on us warmed the happy group while we waited for news of Dave. Stories started to fly. The power of the river had ripped both of Janice's zip-up wet suit booties off her feet. She had found one of them, and then

lucked into a derelict sandal to cover her other foot. Mark and Janice had hiked to within 200 yards of the light (and food and clothing and water) that we had placed on the rock. They saw it but didn't go for it. They thought it was a Park Service marker. So much for picking really good spots for leaving markers for your stranded friends. They did a great job of surviving, making a bed out of branches and sleeping in their wetsuits to keep warm. Lori, Wyatt, and Woody had built a fire and warmed rocks to sleep on. For the first 15 minutes they were too hot, then for about 10 minutes they were just right, then too cold, then they'd do it over. Except for giving them something to do while they waited for daylight, it sounded like minimal help. The story of trying to purify river water for drinking by boiling it in a sardine can over an open fire seemed particularly funny today, but last night it was deadly serious.

Dave showed up in Woody's boat just about the time that a 3-hour torrential rain storm started. Lightning, wind, and more rain that I thought a desert got in a year. And it ended as quickly as it started. And a double rainbow appeared between two points of the cliff behind us, a beautiful 3-dimensional, brilliant rainbow that brought back the reality of the intense beauty of this place.

And that was about 5-hours ago. We've eaten dinner, we're working on dessert and all seems right with the world. The heat of the charcoal feels really good. I'm glad it wasn't this cold last night, no telling . . .

And all we have to worry about now is whether the rum glaze for the cake comes out OK, or more important, whether there will be any left after Dave gets done tasting it. We have a 26-mile row out over flat water with minimal current looking at us tomorrow, but as bad as that sounded when we planned the trip, it doesn't seem very important right now.

Despite the sweat and the dirt, and the concern for the safety of the crew members, and burning muscles, and the anxiety about the rapids, I've just had the best Cat trip I've ever been on, and one of the best experiences of my life. Lori set the tone for the trip when she said, very early on, "It's all good!" I wonder how the other folks on the trip feel.

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