

They Won't Know Until They Go

LaDore Canyon, Green River, Dinosaur N.P. Colorado and Utah

The week before Labor Day 1996

Images swirl in my brain, images of a reality recently experienced . . . Hours of windshield time, bugs splattering in the middle of my view, overwhelming fatigue, wondering if I can make the next rest stop “shiny side up.” Images of a brilliant moon, blindingly brilliant because of the dry air and altitude, shifting from mottled silver to surreal red when the smoke from not-too-distant forest fires comes between us. First sun, shining on multi-colored cliffs, red and black and brown, here and there with a lone tree seemingly growing out of a sheer face, more often covered with coniferous trees to create a soft sea of green in a semi-arid desert. Mountain sheep ewes with their young, not too worried about the boaters, looking watchfully, ambling off the beaches and rising as if by magic up the steep, rock-strewn slopes. A ram, watching intently, not moving . . . does he imagine invisibility? Who knows, but the next generation will behave this way, they watch and learn. Look! A bird of prey with a fish! But not overwhelmed with wonder there, not ‘til I get back here and reflect on what I did, where I was just a few hours ago.

Who are all these people? Will I enjoy their company? I only know three out of seventeen, I wonder a lot on the way out if I'll have a good time, even a world-class river and canyon can't overcome interpersonal bummers . . . but luckily that doesn't happen very often, and it certainly didn't this time . . . geologists, attorneys, aerospace engineers, lobbyists, addiction counselors, software producers, Chinese-to-English language interpreter program writers, property managers, Chinese medicine/Message therapists, steel fabrication designers, teachers, Brazilian exchange students . . . an eclectic group of friendly people, most of whom had boated together for years. Kayaks, a canoe, a “ducky” and a few boats made up the party. Good cooks, spicy southwestern beef served in tortillas, Chicken Marsala, beef stew and chocolate brownies “Death By Brownies” rich.

Reuniting with friends I hadn't seen for years, friends I feel good about having at my back in tight situations, friends worth reinforcing the bridge to. Almost deciding to not do the trip, no warm clothes after an earlier boat wreck, but a quick trip to a thrift store replaces \$300 worth of lost Yuppie Pile with \$27 worth of cast off wool of comparable warmth and utility, a paradigm shift to be sure!

Waking early to see the sky lighten with the first light of day, seeing the sun illuminate the “hatch” of millions of insects above me, not interested in my blood, only in socializing on the gentle currents of early morning breeze, rising and falling . . . brilliantly back-lit from the barely risen sun, looking like a million winged diamonds, reminding me of insect-air mixtures I've seen before, but these were preoccupied with their own social life - good.

Watching as a commercial boat sits pinned on a rock in the middle of a rapid, aptly named by Powell “Hell's Half-Mile”, renamed by one of our party “Hell's Half-Day” because of how long it took the commercial to get their boat off the rock . . . I empathized with the boatman (a young lady), how awful, in front of all these people. Feeling my own stomach knot as time passes, this rapid could easily be negotiated correctly, but, as evidenced by the boat-wreck that was holding up our own passage, it could also be screwed up, and I didn't want that. Then, it was finally time, rowing across the flat, glassy pool above the rapid, sighting my “landmarks”, small rocks on which to line up my run, drifting into the top of the rapid. Yes!, I feel the water I wanted to touch as I went by, dropping into the tongue, lined up where I wanted to be, Oh Shit! Having to pull on the oars a little harder than I anticipated to avoid being the second boat accident of the day, then clear, past the point this rapid can harm me . . . relief,

relaxation for the moment. A good, clean run, I'm pleased with myself.

Looking up not often enough to see, how high up . . . 200 feet? . . . 500 feet? . . . 800 feet? . . . I can't judge, but "Towering" and "Sheer" and "Awesome" are words that spring into my brain . . . looking up not often enough, to see little trees perched on the rim of the canyon. Seeing the earth folded into crazy shapes by unimaginable forces, turned from a horizontal rock looking for all the world like a hugely overgrown steamboat into folded layers of rock rising at an almost vertical angle, all within the space of maybe a half-mile . . . there is so much we don't understand. Sitting with my butt stuck down in a smooth groove cut into a rock cliff by eons of flowing water, damming the cold flow with my then-cold butt and jumping up to let it cascade down over the head of one of my fellow boaters, listening to them squeal, trading places, feeling good, laughing and yelling.

Standing in front of an image drawn on a rock wall how long ago? 1000 years? 1500 years? The Park Service sign says the rock art is in a spot where artifacts have been found, in the only spot in the canyon that remains dry during the infrequent downpours that this side canyon gets. Who drew those pictures? Looks like a sheep to me, and maybe a coyote, eh? The sheep almost for sure, the coyote I don't know. Was there a family that lived here? Could I meet some of their genes on the street in Farmington or Page or Green River? Or did they die out here, the end of the line, from the harshness of the elements or perhaps the predation of large carnivores or, more likely, the predation of their cousins? Nothing I've done will last that long, I'm honored to have seen it, I think I'll go sit in the creek, the cold, clear, fast running creek, and cool off. Ummmm!

Rodents, little chipmunks, stealing my snacks, the little buggers. Cute though. Cheating a rapid called "School Boy" a little to the right to avoid a wave possibly big enough to flip the little 12 foot boat I'm rowing. Not likely, but it's a lot easier to forget you cheated a totally runnable wave than it is to forget that you took a little too much of something and flipped your boat. I guess I'm a little too conservative this year, but once burned, twice shy . . . I had a little too much fun earlier in the year.

Sitting on the shitter, waving to a commercial boat trip, they didn't mind, neither did I. Turning my back to the same trip when they came past camp while I was bathing in the river, they didn't seem to mind, neither did I. Clean felt so good, and the Chicken Marsala over polenta was so good . . . this is tough duty, but somebody has to do it.

And the take-out, and the loaded van, and the good-byes and the 1000 mile road trip back, and sleeping in the Interstate rest-stops and now home . . . "depressed" isn't really the word, but "letdown" probably qualifies . . . a few short hours ago I was looking at the wave in Schoolboy, wondering how much of it I should take, now I'm home with my dog, in my house, a world away from that other reality . . . in a world where it's hard to even tell somebody how wonderful the experience was, because they have nothing to compare it to, no intellectual framework on which to hang the words you use to try to describe a totally wonderful event . . . so they say, "Oh, that sounds like fun, I've done the water park at Six Flags, that was pretty exciting!" . . . and they're smiling and you like them, so you say, "Ya', cool" and let it go . . . but just a little sad that you can't really tell them how good it really was . . . they won't know until they go.

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