



Riding the waves down the American River in California. Photo: Hotshot Imaging

WET & WILD

On The American River

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(Central California)

As we whooped and thrust our paddles in the air to celebrate yet another successful run through the roaring rapids, our raft snagged on an underwater rock sending me flying into the water.

I bounced off the river bottom, popped to the surface and grabbed the rope on the side of the raft before I was pulled out of the water to safety.

Since we were quickly approaching the next rapid, I didn't have time to resume my paddling position in the front of the raft and just laid down in the bow. I wish I had a movie camera or a Go Pro to capture the action.



From my perspective sprawled on the floor of the raft looking back, I felt like I was watching one of those action documentaries with water spraying, arms flying and determined faces screwed into looks of concentration and concern.

In just a few seconds, though it seemed an eternity, we were through the rapid. I crawled out of the bottom of the raft and onto the side, grabbed my paddle, braced and prepared to follow our guide's directions through the next stretch of churning white water.

I expected something tamer when I signed up for this trip with my cousin Dan, his 40-something son Matt and 30-something daughter Alissa, and myself for what has become an annual family adventure.

Dan and I have been taking these trips for several years now. Dan, in his early 70s and a relative newcomer to adventure travel, is dealing with a serious movement-related health issue by testing his limits in paddle rafts on whitewater rivers and kayaks on windy, rolling seas. Matt

and Alissa decided to join us for this year's adventure and share this special experience with their dad.

In deference to our age and his kids' relative lack of adventure experience, I recommended what I thought would be an easy but fun two-day whitewater rafting trip on the American River in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in central California.

The tour operator and my host for the trip was OARS, one of the first whitewater rafting companies in North America (www.oars.com).

Several aspects of the trip made it especially appealing — easy to get to, easy camping and easy paddling. The reality was pretty close, save for a couple of significant exceptions.

It was easy to get to, with the start/end point less than 150 miles from San Francisco airport, most of it on highways and interstates. The camping was also easy. The OARS campsite was just off the highway and featured flush toilets, showers and an outdoor dining area.

Most important, it was also adjacent to a small shopping center where we could buy beer and frozen yogurt. Dan and I shared a large fixed tent with beds. Alissa and Matt set up a tent and slept on the ground. Age does have its privileges.

The "easy" rafting was anything but. One of the attractions of the trip was that all the rafts were paddle rafts. That is, we paddled, sometimes frenetically, under the direction and verbal commands of our excellent guide ("right, forward two strokes," "left, back one stroke," etc.). This was definitely a plus. All four of us wanted something more challenging and active than just kicking back while the guide used oars to steer us through the rapids.

What I didn't realize is that the South Fork of the American River features one Class 3 rapid after another, usually in rapid (pun intended) succession. At times it seemed as if we were in one continuous stretch of white water. I have been on trips with bigger rapids but I have never been on a river with such a density of white water, especially whitewater where it was up to us to get through the rapids upright and relatively dry.

We usually had just enough time to catch our breath before getting set for the next run. This was the most exciting whitewater rafting I have ever experienced.

My biggest takeaway from the trip, besides the rapidly spreading purple bruise covering my ample right buttock was the family connection. For most of our lives, Dan and I have been pretty close. Our mothers were sisters, our families lived near to each other when we were young and we are close in age. Neither Dan nor I had brothers so we grew up like brothers. These adventure trips have been a way to renew that bond over the years.

While his kids were growing up, I was like Uncle Tonoose from the Old Danny Thomas show, occasionally passing through with tales of distant, exotic places like upstate Pennsylvania and California. I thought they were cute. With this trip, I now see them as adults, funny and smart with personalities, opinions and well-developed senses of humor.

Not as cute, though, but given the choice, I prefer the adult version, especially when it means pulling me out of a churning rapid.

For more information on the Adventure Geezer and his travels go to www.adventuretransformations.com.