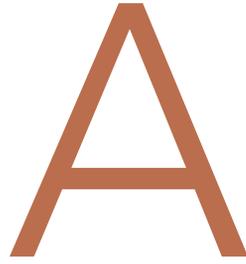




Ruby Horsethief Canyon

A Beginner's First Run on the Colorado River

STORY & PHOTOS BY MICHAELA KORETKO



AN UNINFLATED RED KAYAK SITS ON THE TAN SAND of the Loma beach at eight in the morning under a cerulean sky. Two loaded, mismatched canoes and a hard-shell kayak sit nearby, evidence of the scrounging done by six friends to find watercraft for this trip. Dip your feet in the cool mud of the Colorado River, watching other groups put their rafts in as you wait for the rest of the group to return.

Other groups have guides who know the Ruby Horsethief Canyon well and tell about their annual raft trip tradition. You've done your research, but as friends come down the steep slope of the boat launch ramp, you wonder if you're prepared at all. None of you has ever done this trip before. There will be three days on the river, but first...you have to figure out how to inflate that red kayak.

I grew up on the front range (Fort Collins), and although I consider myself an adventurous spirit, I feel this, at age 20, was my first true outdoor adventure. When five friends and I decided we wanted to go on a kayaking trip, we took a recommendation from Thomas Martin, an experienced Ruby Canyoneer. We even borrowed equipment — including one of the canoes — from him. "The first time I did that trip was in 2006 but I'd heard about it many years earlier," Tom said.

The day before the journey began, we met up to sort through supplies and then drove to Rabbit Valley. We packed our clothes and sleeping bags into dry bags, double bagging things in trash bags. On the first day of the trip, we learned that trash bags are leaky, and when (not if) water gets into the canoe, your sleeping bag will get wet. Although this was irksome, at least we arrived at our campsite in time to let the sleeping bags dry in the sun. Our most important things we put in the dry bag. Nothing in that bag got wet.

The Ruby Horsethief Canyon route runs from Loma, Colorado to Westwater, Utah, a trip of 25 miles. This stretch of the Colorado River is popular not only because it is mild (Class I and II rapids only), but also because access to the river itself is free. It can be done in one intense day if you are so inclined but two or three days are better. If you plan on camping, permits are available based on the number of days and are specific to campsites.

We made a two-night trip of the canyon, staying one night at the Mee 3 campsite and one at Black Rock 5. When we arrived early afternoon at the first campsite, we hiked to the base of the canyon and discovered a beautiful natural amphitheater. The sun was scorching, so we were grateful for the shade. We lay against the red rock, enjoying the silence of the canyon and watching an eagle soar overhead.

Our favorite campsite, however, was Black Rock. If you are going to do the trip in three days, I recommend stopping at Black Rock when you have most of a day left because it was an interesting, fun site. The only downside was that the stretch between Mee and Black Rock was only about three miles. We hooked all the crafts together and floated, detaching only on narrow stretches, and arrived at Black Rock in about two hours. The map we brought cut off the route at the Utah border, so it was difficult to estimate distances. The maps provided give you campsite distances, usually with the Loma boat ramp at mile 0.

On either side of the river are the namesake tall, black faces of rock. The rocks are harsh on barefoot travelers midday, so good sandals are beneficial. When we went, the water between Black Rock 4 and 5 campsites was deep enough for cliff

diving. We checked the water levels and did several test swims before jumping. Between the two cliff faces were some fairly strong rapids with eddies that trailed to the right of the canyon opposite the campsite. We wanted to swim across the river from one crevice in the rock to another across the way.

I dove off the dark, hot rock and into the cool river without a life jacket. I began swimming across the river, swimming with all my might. I've never been a truly strong swimmer, but the rapids looked deceptively calm. In the center of the river, I hit a rough patch and swam harder, but I went nowhere. I was not making progress across the river. I began drifting down river, until I was caught in a smaller whirlpool, truly going nowhere. I started to panic and lost energy; I was caught in an eddy. I looked at the opposing shore at two of my friends sitting on the beach. I mouthed the word "HELP," and I put my arms, legs, stomach, and chest up, floating. As panicked and uncomfortable as I was, I knew I wouldn't die. My friend Karl used the inflatable kayak to bring me safely back to shore. I felt like a damsel in distress from an awful C-list movie. This is not recommended. These escapades resulted in a good life lesson and a deserved lecture from Karl: Know your limits and always wear a life jacket.

The highlight of Black Rock came at night. The super-moon shone brightly above the canyons, highlighting the plum-colored lines in the tall cliff faces on either side. The moon was reflected in the gently flowing river. We lay on a large, flat rock that stuck out of the water and decided

that the warm, quiet night invited us to sleep outdoors. We slept on the large rock surrounded by water, which was more comfortable than the sand we had slept on the night before at Mee.

The last stretch, which we completed on our third and final day, we underestimated. We expected it to be just a few miles, which, like the second day, would take us a couple of hours. It was actually nine miles and took us about six hours, paddling hard the whole way. This last stretch of river was wider, flatter, and slower than the rest and the wind was blowing against us. Additionally there were more shallow parts of the route, including rocks and sandbars, which meant we had to scout for deeper sections for the canoes to pass.

When we finally arrived at Westwater station, we were hungry and exhausted but happy as we loaded up. We stopped at a favorite restaurant in Grand Junction and ordered a full meal with extra sides. There was not a single bite of food left on the table when we were done.

The river, which we had never been on before, became the spring that temporarily slaked the adventurous spirit's thirst. We're still thirsty though and this adventure will definitely have its sequel next summer.

Our sole regret was that it made the rest of life seem mundane and incomplete. It was an altogether peaceful trip with a hue of danger and vast, awe-inspiring beauty. For first-timers, it went smoothly. So give it a try and have an adventure. You won't regret a second of it. I know I don't. ❖





The group prepares the kayaks and canoes for launch: (L to R) Karl Schakel, Jasmine Throckmorton, Kaylee Wiczorek, and (in the back) Nate Zbacnik.

Things to remember

- A groover and a fire pan are required by the BLM (we rented ours from RimRock Adventures in Fruita).
- Each boater must have a life vest and a whistle within reach.
- Campsites must be reserved.
- A boating permit is required to go beyond Westwater.
- Check rates and river conditions before setting out.

Make sure you have

- Plenty of water. There is no drinking water available on the route.
- Sandals that can be fully submerged and stay on when swimming.
- A cell phone that holds a charge. Reserve one to turn off and keep stowed for emergencies.
- A map that includes the whole route with campsites and mile markers.
- Granola bars, trail mix, and other “while you raft” snacks.
- Plenty of dry bags including extra trash bags and self-sealing plastic bags.
- Preplanned and pre-packed meals. We had macaroni and cheese, breakfast burritos, canned soup, pre-made sandwiches, and pancakes.

More

Ruby Horsethief Boating Information Webpage
blm.gov/co